



On Trail

Northwest Explorer »

Seeking Flowers

A plant geek's trek to the high meadows of Olympic National Park

Cedar Lake, above Gray Wolf Pass. An eight-day, 57-mile trek across the Olympics leads to magnificent wildflower meadows.

Photo © Josh McCullough

Organizing a backpacking trip is easy if it's just you who's heading out. Throw the same batch of clothes that was lining the floor of the bedroom into a bag, grab your gear and go, right?

It's a little more complicated to plan a trip with another hiker. Suddenly there are multiple agendas to pursue, multiple goals, interests and aspirations. Not even mentioning the menu. And if one of the parties has, say, a special interest?

Toughest of all? When that party with the special interest is you. Much to the occasional chagrin of my partner, I am an unabashed plant geek and this complicates our trip planning a bit.

I am willing to admit that being a plant fanatic has some drawbacks. Like when your

neighbor makes uncloaked inquiries into your mental health—just because you talk to the plants. And the sarcastic way people compliment your “fashionable” knee-high rubber boots. But what really gets to me is the necessity to make each and every excursion into the wilds feel like a campaign in search of the holy grail. Imagine you're hiking into a gorgeous meadow with a whole panorama of snow-capped peaks emerging through the canopy, and your companion drops to his knees and gasps, “My God, it's *Conocephalum conicum!*” and starts babbling about the largest thallus. When it's not some stranger but your hiking partner who's focusing these idolatrous energies on a small green smear of a plant...well, I'm sure that can be tough.

I grew up on the Olympic Peninsula, within

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Top: Black bear feasting on blueberries at Home Sweet Home, Olympic National Park.

Above: Wildflowers such as *Penstemon davidsonii* are among the many varieties of blooms you'll see in the alpine country of the Olympics.

Photos © Josh McCullough

walking distance of Olympic National Park. As a child, our family spent a good amount of time in the wilds. And yet it was not until my late twenties that I made longer treks into the mountains. Since then my (plant-patient) partner and I have made annual pilgrimages to this most northwest part of the continental U.S. each summer, completing traverses from various points. Over the last two years we completed our longest, an 8-day unsupported hike through the less well-traveled eastern portions of the peninsula, and last summer our first into the realm of Mount Olympus itself.

In our particular hiking partnership we divide up the preparation tasks. Once a route is chosen, the food, maps, mileage calculations, medical kit and other essential supplies are removed from my sphere of influence. I am left

in charge of the camera gear, plant guides and a few favorite clothing items plucked from the bedroom floor. By weight, at least, I get the short end of the stick.

Riding up the old Forest Service roads in late August past Dungeness Forks to the edge of the Buckhorn Wilderness, I looked forward to the 10-mile hike up the river valley to Gray Wolf camp. The next day, we planned to crest what is certainly one of the more impressive passes in the Olympics, 6,200-foot Gray Wolf Pass. Visions of lupine and tiger lily filled my head. We hiked along the river past abundant vine maple and marveled at the tiny twayblade and candy stripe orchids. We lunched amid the violet, sweet smelling *Lupinus latifolius*.

I was once accused of being like Edward Abbey in my zeal for preserving land. In my mind, the Buckhorn Wilderness reigns supreme. Little trail maintenance has been performed in recent decades, other than by users themselves. Rather than leveled park superhighways where two may walk abreast, expect muddy tunnels through brush, frequent blowdown across the trail and bridges washed out long ago. At one of these crossings over the Gray Wolf River in late morning we encountered just that—the trail ended abruptly at rushing white waters deep in a steep, wooded valley. Seeking a ford, I set off through thickets of salmonberry along the river. Fifty yards downstream there was a sizable tree bridging a section of rapids. I headed that way only to feel a hot stinging sensation in my ankle, and then my arm, and my neck. Yellow-jackets!

In an instant, I was running with full pack through the thorny salmonberries as only a man being followed by a swarm of stinging insects can run. A dozen stings later, I used the adrenaline rush to carry my pack across the slick log bridge, return for my compatriot and cross a third time over white water to give her a hand. Quite a start to a week in the wild. Luckily for me the well-stocked first aid kit included antihistamines.

Perhaps it was the venom in my system but sleep that night reminded me of Tolkien's Mirkwood. But the next morning's climb to the pass soon cleared the cobwebs from my head, and a dip in one of the ice-cold cirques washed away any sensation except the awe of a view stretching north across the Strait of Juan de Fuca all the way to Vancouver Island. And, ah!—the alpine blueberries, perfectly ripe this late in the season.

After a night along the Dosewallips, mindful of our pick-up time, we resigned ourselves to the fact that there wasn't time for a quick excursion into Enchanted Valley nor the hoped-for side trip to Thousand Acre Meadow, so we headed south. After a stay at Honeymoon Meadows, we reached the summit of La Crosse Pass amid craggy peaks. We then submitted to the steep 3,000-foot descent to the Ducka-

bush River below. Over dinner we realized that during the day we had munched on at least a dozen species of berry, including salmonberries, huckleberries, thimbleberries, Himalayan, trailing and cutleaf blackberries, blackcaps, two species of blueberry, wild currant, bunchberry dogwood and my favorite: *Rubus pedatus*, a tiny plant with a delicious, tiny fruit similar to a raspberry. At least both of us find that part of plant exploration fruitful.

I also counted among the precious botanical finds the endemic bellflower *Campanula piperi*, lovely *Eriogonum ovalifolium var. niveum* and fine colonies of low growing, purple throated *Penstemon davidsonii*.

Day seven found us fording the icy river and starting through big trees up and over the third pass of the trip, though this time to a more gentle elevation. The need to savor the experience seems to increase as a good trip comes closer to the end, and we took the opportunity to do just that at the aptly named Home Sweet Home. We lingered in the meadow, taking in the last shafts of late-summer sun. We set up

camp, well practiced at this point, and ate a last lovely dinner of freeze-dried foods supplemented with good miso and green onions. The next morning a bear surprised one of us lingering on the potty (I was in the meadow looking at plants, of course). From a vantage point downwind of the bear and above the valley, we spent a good part of the morning watching the big female work her way across the meadow and slopes, feeding on plentiful blueberries.

Having set an agenda to complete 15 mostly downhill miles along the Skokomish River that day to meet our pick-up, we settled into a well-practiced gait with backpacks deliciously light. There was more than a little feeling of culture shock when the glint of metal and glass from the parking lot greeted us. We were treated to a beautiful boat ride across Lake Cushman and showers and a big meal, but part of me was still lingering in the rarified environments high above, aware of the wind in the treetops and trying to hold on to the sensation of treading through silent meadows swelling with the scent of sweet lupine. ♦

***Eriogonum ovalifolium var. nivale* (left) and *Campanula piperi* are some of the botanical wonders of the high Olympics. *Campanula* is an endemic—native to the Olympics and found nowhere else in the world.**

Photos © Josh McCullough



Hike Details

Gray Wolf–Staircase

Mileage: 58 miles

Elevation Gain: 9,800 feet

This strenuous cross-Olympic route follows the Gray Wolf Trail to Gray Wolf Pass (elevation 6,200 feet) then descends the Dosewallips Trail, and ascends the West Fork Dosewallips Trail. Reaching Honeymoon Meadows, the route then goes over La Crosse Pass (elevation 6,500 feet) and descends 3,000 feet to the Duckabush River Trail. It then ascends again to Home Sweet Home and a pass (elevation 4,500 feet). The route then follows the North Fork Skokomish River Trail to Staircase. Allow at least 8 days for this hike.