

On Trail

Northwest Explorer »

Trips worth sharing in Washington's backcountry

Backpacking Favorites

Backpacking offers a tremendous, hard-to-replicate opportunity: the chance to bask in your companions' undivided attention for 24 hours (or more) at a stretch. When else can you do that? When else would you want to do that?

In this feature, we offer three backpacking tales that are as much about the companions as they are about the terrain, plus 11 more suggestions for where to go on your next overnight adventure.

Nightfall in the Goat Rocks.
Photo by Paul Raymaker.



Unlimited Options, Unending Views: Glacier Peak Wilderness



It was the third week of July and I hadn't seen my best friend Ryan since early May. I usually see old "Rye-pye" once or twice a month; however, due to busy schedules, it had suddenly been over three months since we had the opportunity to enjoy each other's company. Time to hit the trail!

Now, Ryan may live in Portland, but he can't help but admit that he loves the mountains in Washington even more than those in his home state of Oregon. He is particularly fond of the lush and open high alpine meadows of the central and northern Cascades. With this in mind, I decided it would be a travesty if I didn't take him into the Glacier Peak Wilderness for a weekend backpacking adventure.

The skies are crystal clear and the summer sun is still quite high overhead when we depart on a Friday afternoon and enter the vast river valley. In our first 4 miles, we gain and lose small amounts of elevation as the Little Wenatchee Trail runs its course parallel to the Little Wenatchee River. It beckons us with unfettered winks as the water of the river gurgles and rushes past us. Birds chirp and chase each other in the head-high brush. Insects



buzz and whirl as we make quick work of the easy terrain. At times, we're traveling through meadows of lush, bright green ferns and purple lupine. At other points, we're hiking in and out of stretches of tall, shaded conifer forests.

"I wonder where Bambi and Flower are?" I joke to Ryan.

This trip has a magical feel, partly because of the twenty-five years of friendship we share, but also because of the sheer beauty that surrounds us. We cross many small streams, gaze at passing waterfalls, and revel in the fact that we're completely alone. We begin to ascend and gradually our trail starts to veer farther and farther away from the Little Wenatchee River. The next 2 miles gain 1,300 feet in elevation, and, as we ascend, the enormity of the valley becomes apparent. We gawk at the ever-increasing mountain views as we look back on the ground we've covered. Soon enough, we find ourselves descending into a beautiful basin, appropriately named Meander Meadow.

The camping in Meander Meadow is fabulous. I quickly notice that a few things have changed since my previous trips here. The original trail that used to hug the west meadow ridge and lead up to the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) junction is now closed; a new trail, hugging the east meadow ridge, has replaced it.

Patrick M. Leahy

Patrick is a frequent backpacker and an instructor with Washington Alpine Club.

With lush valleys, wildflower-filled slopes and stupendous views of Glacier Peak, a backpacking tour of Meander Meadow, Kodak Peak and White Pass is one scenic weekend. Photos by Patrick Leahy.



Apparently, and thankfully so, WTA trail crews have helped to restore the trails in this area. Ryan and I set up camp at a designated site near the south end of the meadow overlooking the valley. We lay out our damp shirts and socks to dry, cook a delicious dinner and try to catch up on life. True to form, as soon as that Pacific Northwest sun drops out of sight, the temperature quickly follows. With a big day ahead of us, we crawl into our bags early for some much-needed sleep.

On Saturday, we are up relatively early, and once again, there is not a cloud to be seen. We eat breakfast quickly and pack up the necessities for the day's mission. We make our way down to the tributary that "meanders" all over the meadow to refill our water. Just pumping water in these surroundings gets your heart absolutely pounding with excitement! As Ryan finishes filling the bladders, I strategically cover a few canned craft beers in the dwindling snow to chill and we head out. It's a quick mile and 650 feet to the ridge crest and the junction with the PCT. Our senses are filled with a definitive energy. We're ready and willing to hike north on the PCT as far as daylight will allow.

This is the amazing part about this hike: for the next 8 miles (or more), your options are unlimited and the views are endless. We start with an easy scramble up Kodak Peak to get the blood flowing. The boot path up the east ridge offers us a crystal-clear, 360-degree photo opportunity of Glacier Peak, Mount Rainier and many other notable Cascade peaks. On our descent, we opt for a winter fix by "foot glissading" down the snowfield on the north face. As we continue on to Indian Pass and Lower White Pass, we're greeted by fields upon fields of sweet-smelling purple, pink and yellow wildflowers. Though climbing Indian Head Peak is extremely tempting, there's not enough time to even ponder the possibility, so we push forth. The grade of the trail is perfect for covering a lot of ground quickly and the views of Glacier Peak keep getting better as it appears and then disappears behind velvety green ridges dressed in vibrant new growth. We wind through high alpine meadows transfixed by the possibility of climbing White Mountain, but if we're going to make it to Red Pass, we need to keep truckin'. We reach White Pass. As we ascend the ridgeline trail to Red Pass, Sloan Peak, Bedal Peak, and row after row

More Backpacking Picks for FRIENDS

The Enchantments, Leavenworth Ranger District.
20 miles oneway. 5,400 feet gain. 7,100-foot high point.

Securing a permit months in advance helps to set expectations high for an adventure in the wilderness. When your weekend finally comes and your tents are pitched on slabs of granite, the many mountain goats you'll meet are great for encouraging camaraderie. This sublime setting in the uppermost reaches of the Alpine Lakes Wilderness calls for gourmet backpacking food.

The Hoh River Trail to Glacier Meadows, Olympic National Park. 37 miles round trip. 3,700 feet gain. 4,200-foot high point.

Need to catch up on happenings or want to relive the past? This straightforward trail, rolling along at an easy grade for miles and miles, is a great place to have a long, lazy chat. Pick a rendezvous point at the start of each day so that everyone in the group can just hike along at their own pace until they come to that predetermined site. This plan will keep both faster and slower parties happy.

Ipsut Creek-Spray Park Loop, Mount Rainier National Park. 15 mile loop. 1,500 feet gain. 6,400-foot high point.

Nervous about keeping everyone in the group happy on a backpacking trip? Distract them with amazing scenery. This loop trip in Mount Rainier National Park offers masses of wildflowers and dramatic glacier views, and, if that's not good enough, there are also plenty of oh-so-cute marmots. Be sure your party is comfortable with navigation, as a cloudy day here can leave you without a line of sight.

Ice Lakes, Entiat Ranger District. 28 miles round trip. 4,200 feet elevation. 6,900-foot high point.

With a trailhead off the Entiat River Road, this backpacking trip is less popular than our other picks here, but just as beautiful. You'll spend a day or two hiking through ponderosa pines until you reach an alpine dreamscape made of pumice. If you've got time, Upper Ice Lake is another mile and 400 feet higher than Lower Ice Lake. If you've really got time, two of Washington's 100 highest peaks, South Spectacle Butte and Mount Maude, are both in the neighborhood.



A field of fawn lilies in the foreground, with Glacier Peak in the background

of jagged mountains stare us down to the west.

It's hard not to stop every 50 feet to capture more memories, but when we reach Red Pass we realize that pushing on was definitely worth it. Glacier Peak is so close, but the view is slightly obstructed by the ridge between Portal Peak and White Chuck Cinder Cone. Clearly, the only acceptable thing to do is scramble up 6,999-foot Portal Peak. Not even ten minutes tick by and we're both standing atop Portal and there it is, unobstructed, in all its glory, Glacier Peak! (Or "Glah-see-air Pique" if you're inclined to pronounce it in a very thick French accent as we were.) Exhausted and quite hungry, we drop our packs, rest and refuel. The energy in the air is intoxicating, and we soak up our fill in preparation for the return.

There aren't too many three-day backcountry weekends that can beat this one. When you return after 16-plus miles of day hiking (if you go all the way to Red Pass and back), you still

have your solid spot from the night before. When you leave the following day to go home, you have an entirely different and unexplored route to take. You still ascend out of the meadow basin to the PCT, but now you take it south-southwest (instead of north-northeast) for 8.5 miles—over Sauk Pass—through Dishpan Gap—and eventually onto Cady Ridge which is covered in glorious alpine flower gardens.

If you want to make the trip home a little longer, don't take Cady Ridge, but go up and over Cady Pass and then descend to follow Cady Creek back. The choice is really a personal preference because you can't go wrong on this hike. Apparently Ryan shares my feelings. A few months after our trip, he told me that this trip to the Glacier Peak Wilderness had been the best weekend of the summer.

Cheers to that, old friend—cheers to that! ♦

Hike It»

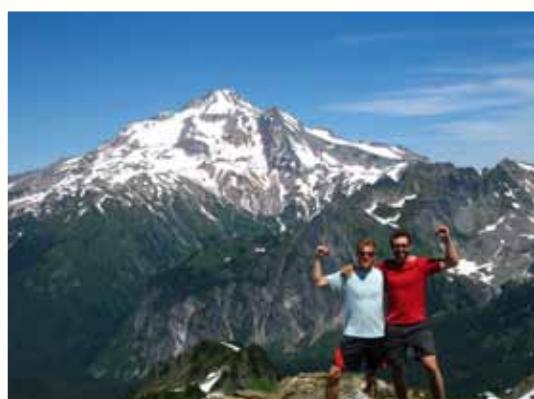
Meander Meadow/Kodak Peak/White Pass Loop

Glacier Peak Wilderness, Wenatchee National Forest

Distance: 24 miles round trip.* **Elevation Gain:** 3,600 feet in, 500 feet out.

Highest Point: 6,121 feet. **Map(s):** Green Trails 144, 112. **More Info:** 100 Classic Hikes in Washington (Ira Spring and Harvey Manning, The Mountaineers Books).

Permit: Northwest Forest Pass required. *Add 3.6 miles if you include Red Pass.



Reach Into the Goat Rocks

All the guidebooks will tell you to allow two days to hike into Goat Lake. It took me thirty years, but it was worth it.

This story really begins in the late 1970s when my dad took us kids camping at Walupt Lake on the southern edge of the Goat Rocks Wilderness. In the evening, I cast a line for trout while gazing at the lonely mountains in the distance, mountains that called out to be explored.

Over the campfire, my dad and I talked about buying backpacks and exploring those lonely peaks, but once the weekend was over, the pressures of climbing the corporate ladder and raising a family put our wilderness-backpacking dream on the back burner, where it eventually dried up and faded away.

Fast forward to the present. Now, I have a family of my own and some hard-earned wisdom—if you don't make time for your dreams, they'll pass you by. Fortunately I could still hear the call of the Goat Rocks. It was time to answer the call.

The first step to planning a grand adventure is to find someone to go with you. My hiking buddy, Noel, and my son, AJ, were both easy sells, and soon we had a weekend marked on the calendar for late August. We made a simple plan: wake up very early on Saturday morning, make the three-hour-plus drive to the trailhead at Chambers Lake, hike to Goat Lake on the Goat Ridge Trail and spend the night. Sunday, we'd hike out via Snowgrass Flat Trail.

As we plotted out the best driving route to the trailhead from the main highway, my wife, Cheryl, casually suggested I check and make sure the roads were open. Sure enough, the most direct route, Forest Road 21 between Packwood and the Chambers Lake Trailhead, was closed due to flood damage. We found a different route via Forest Road 23 at Randle. At the trailhead, we learned from another hiking group that it was a nearly three-hour detour if you found out about the road washout the hard way. Thank you, Cheryl!

Goat Lake is a popular overnight hike, especially on the weekends, and the parking lot at the trailhead was nearly full when we arrived a little before ten in the morning. However, once we got on the trail we saw very few people.

Dave Kilhefner

Dave is an award-winning outdoors writer and photographer and the past president of the Northwest Outdoor Writers Association. Ultralight backpacking with his children is his latest outdoor pursuit.



Like most hikes into the high country, the trail started out with a long climb. The first 2 miles went steadily up through old-growth forest with occasional breaks that offered views of the distant foothills. It took two solid hours to cover the first 2 miles, so I was glad we had left early. An easy, steady pace is the best way to begin; wear yourself out early and the altitude will get you later!

At the top of Goat Ridge, we enjoyed our first view of the Goat Rocks in the distance. We soon found a shady spot with some fallen trees to rest our bones and take a well-deserved lunch break featuring panini that my wife had made special for our trip. As Noel and I munched away, we tried to check on AJ, who is just eleven years old, to ask him how he felt after that long climb carrying his pack. He didn't respond to any of our questions. We started to get a little worried. Finally, he looked up and said, "I'm so into this sandwich I can't think straight." That gave us a chuckle, and we knew all was well.

Along Goat Ridge, the trail alternately passed through patches of evergreen trees and wildflower meadows. The trail continued like this for another mile until we popped out into a beautiful open valley.

Jordan Creek Valley has the classic glacial U-shape, featuring open hillsides covered in green grass and wildflowers, with craggy peaks along the skyline. This is what we came to see! Halfway up the valley, we stopped at the first tiny creek, refilled our water supply, ate granola bars and took in the scenery. The trail traversed the south wall, every step in scenic beauty, to the end of the valley, where a short rocky scramble past a tiny waterfall put us into the bowl-shaped Jordan Basin. A cinnamon bear and her cub were out enjoying the summer sunshine a safe distance away. The last campground before Goat Lake is here.

The climb out of the basin to the saddle above does not look difficult, but we had started the day almost at sea level and were now at 6,000 feet. I was beginning to lag and feel the altitude, so I was again glad for our early start as we could hike at an easy pace for this final climb.

The highest point on this hike is the saddle at the top of this basin at 6,800 feet. Reaching this point, we had a "wow moment." The Goat Rocks suddenly came into view, the steep-sided valley colored with wildflowers as Goat



Wildflower-bordered creeks were common along the trail. Photos by Dave Kilhefner.

Creek plunged downward to meander among trees on the valley floor. Mount Adams stood as a sentinel at the end of the valley in the south. I was tired but satisfied. Life was very good.

I could have taken in that view for hours, but it was time to make the final push to Goat Lake. Only then could I take off this pack, set up camp and rest. The last section of trail circled gently down the end of the valley with scenery so beautiful I had to stop every hundred feet or so and take a picture. As the trail suddenly turned left, we got our first view of Goat Lake.

Situated at 6,500 feet, Goat Lake is a grand cirque walled on three sides by steep peaks. Even on this warm afternoon, its aqua-green hue was the color of cold. Ice floated along the far shore, and there were still snow patches here and there. High above, four snow-white goats showed their surefooted grace, moving easily among the cliffs.

We soon found a campsite by the outlet, meaning we found some flat, high ground with rocks to sit on. Goat Lake has very few trees to speak of. Fires are not allowed. As the weather was clear and I love to see the night stars, we opted to set up a bivouac camp, weighting down our sleeping bags with rocks so a gust of wind wouldn't blow them away. AJ sauntered off to explore the creek, and Noel and I decided to put together a happy hour, enjoying a well-earned cigar and a cocktail.

After happy hour AJ took us to the waterfall he had found. The creek flows out of the lake through broken rock substrate for a couple hundred yards then suddenly plunges off a cliff, forming a 100-foot waterfall. AJ found a good place to stand in a grove of gnarled trees just where the creek plunges over the cliff. We watched the water make its way down the valley for some time before we walked back to camp. Our dinner was a simple affair: more panini and the backpacker's staple, Top Ramen.

Darkness fell around eight thirty and we turned in early. Off and on during the night we woke and were treated to the most vivid display of stars, meteors and the Milky Way I will likely ever see.

Late at night, the wind came up and the temperature dropped. I later learned from a friend who regularly hikes in this area that a cold mountain wind almost always blows here at night. The top of the valley is a natural wind funnel. Looking back, I'll admit our campsite was too exposed. If it had rained we would have had a miserable night, but fortunately, it did not.



AJ taking a much-needed break after a long hard climb.

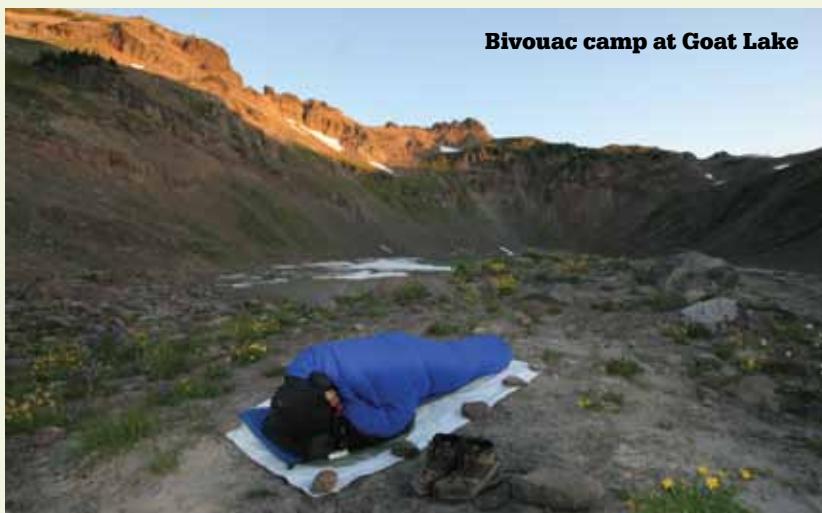
When we awoke at 6 a.m., it was 35 degrees and blowing hard. We packed up fast and hiked down the valley to the shelter of the trees to eat breakfast. On a gradually descending trail, we made good time. After about a mile we found a nice grove of trees with a creek nearby and had a hot oatmeal breakfast.

As we continued down the trail, we kept looking back over our shoulders to see the rugged beauty of the canyon retreating behind us. Along the way we stopped at a muddy watering hole to look for tracks, finding that coyote, cougar and deer had drunk here recently.

Our next major landmark, Snowgrass Flats, lay just ahead. This meadow is famous for its wildflowers. They had bloomed earlier in the summer and were now gone, but the view of Mount Adams was still grand. After this point, the trail descended rapidly, and we were back in the woods with the sound of rushing water from Snowgrass Creek.

At the bottom of the valley the trail passed through a marsh. I had my head net within easy reach, but amazingly, no bugs bothered us. We broke for an early lunch at a cool footbridge that crosses Goat Creek, then finished the last 1.5 miles in the tired silence that usually accompanies the end of a backpacking weekend.

I saw our pickup truck in the parking lot. At the same time, my mind held a lingering image of the lonely mountains beyond the end of Walupt Lake that had called me to the Goat Rocks as a child. I'm glad I finally answered that call. ♦



Bivouac camp at Goat Lake

More Backpacking Picks for FAMILIES

Hole-in-the-Wall, Olympic National Park.

2 miles round trip. No elevation gain. Rating: Easy.

Kids of all ages will love this hike along the rocks and sandy beach as they explore the driftwood strewn about, admire the sea stacks and discover the natural sea arch known as the Hole-in-the-Wall. Remember to take a tide chart.

Anderson and Watson Lakes, Mount Baker Ranger District. 6 miles round trip. 800 feet elevation gain. Rating: Difficult.

Beautiful meadows, peaceful lakes and majestic mountain-peak views are great rewards for this hike. Kids will be astounded at the star-filled sky at night. Keep in mind that these are very popular lakes, so most likely you will not be the only hikers on trail.

Hyas Lake and Upper Hyas Lake, Cle Elum Ranger District. 3 miles and 5 miles round trip. Elevation: 50 feet gain. Rating: Easy.

Discover the pleasure of waking up to the sound of songbirds as you camp near these two tranquil lakes and enjoy the magnificent view of Cathedral Rock. Kids will have fun swimming and looking for frogs in the swampy area spread between Hyas and Upper Hyas lake.

Junction Lake, Mount Adams Ranger District. 5 miles round trip. 700 feet elevation gain. Rating: Moderate.

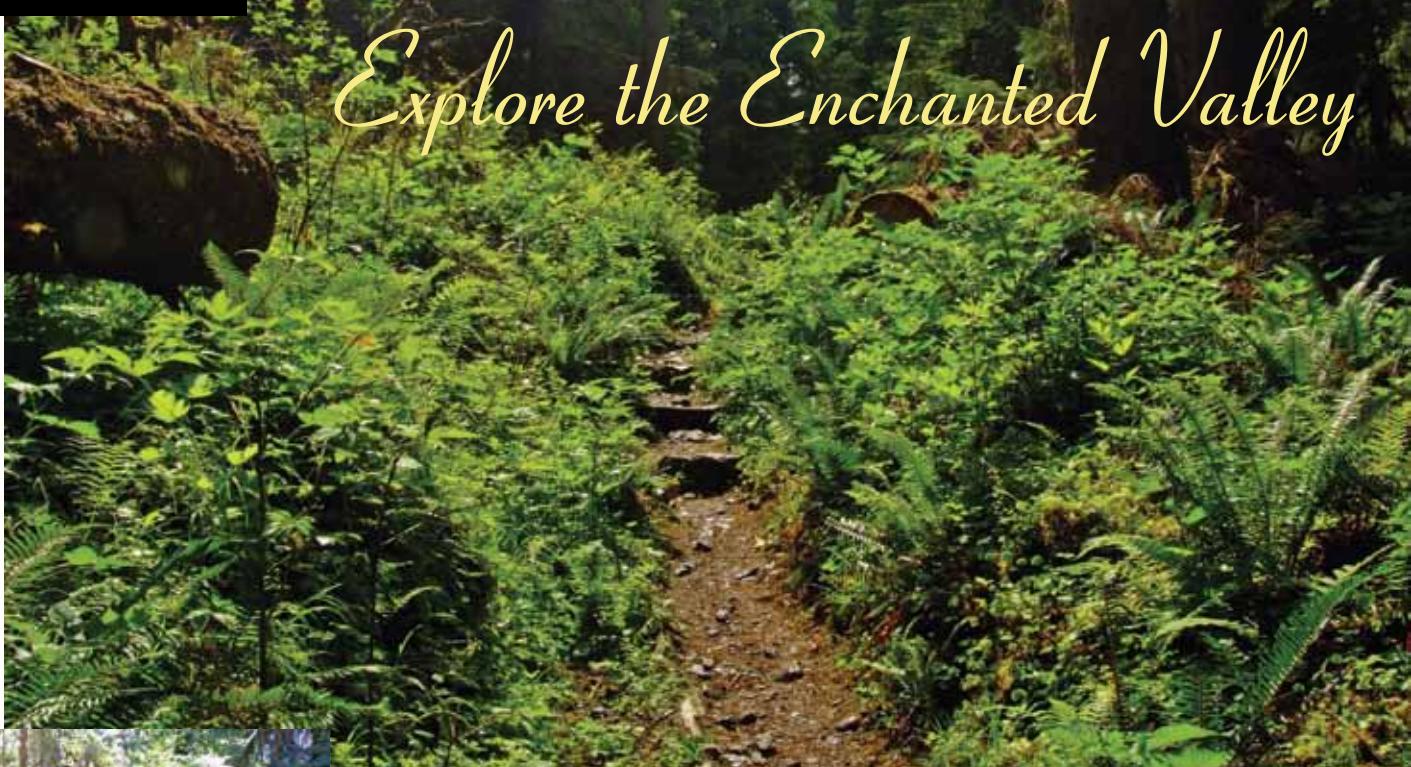
Young hikers will love the warm water of shallow Junction Lake. Once camp is set up, relax and enjoy the surrounding subalpine meadows or walk a little farther and step onto the Pacific Crest Trail.

Hike It»

Goat Lake Goat Rocks Wilderness

Distance: 12 miles round trip. **Elevation Gain:** 2,000 feet gain, 400 feet loss. **Map(s):** Green Trails 302, 303, 304 and 335. **Best Season:** Mid-August through mid-September. **More Info:** *Day Hiking: South Cascades* (Dan Nelson and Alan Bauer, The Mountaineers Books). **Permit:** Northwest Forest Pass required.

Explore the Enchanted Valley



Old growth, a verdant understory and a mysterious chalet are just a few of the charms found in the Enchanted Valley. Photos by Eli Boschetto.

Eli Boschetto

Portland-based Eli enjoys frequent outings in the Olympics.

It happened by fluke late one spring that we came across a guidebook entry for Olympic National Park's Enchanted Valley. At the time, my wife, Mitzi, and I were fairly new to the Northwest so were researching backpacking destinations. We read the description: rainforest, river trail, valley meadow, high cliffs with streaming waterfalls. Best of all, only 1,200 feet of elevation and early season access! It all sounded perfect for a late-spring getaway.

Early on a Friday evening, after cheeseburgers at the Lake Quinault Diner and a long, bumpy ride over an 11-mile gravel road to the Graves Creek Trailhead, we unloaded our gear and began prepping for the hike in. First step: liberally applying bug repellent, as the little suckers were out in force that evening. Shouldering our packs, we set off, the sun slowly sinking in the western sky. The trail into the Enchanted Valley is an undulating 12.5 miles up the East Fork Quinault River; our plan was to hike 3 to 4 miles before dark, camp, then finish the route into the valley the following morning.

As the daylight faded and the puffy clouds took on sunset hues, we were ready to drop our gear and call it a day. We crossed Pony Bridge to the north side of the East Fork, and shortly after happened upon a primitive campsite with water access and a fire ring. Nearby, earlier campers had built a very inventive privy into the remains of a hollowed-out red cedar trunk—complete with paper holder and ornamental deer skull atop. With dinner already in our bellies, we propped up our tent, built a small fire and watched the stars begin to come out. Not a bad way to start a weekend.

The next morning we broke camp early. Long stretches by forest of fir, cedar and hemlock kept the views in check, and we enjoyed only occasional peeks of the river below. We passed additional camps on the way up, most near tributary streams crossing the trail. Beyond Pyrite Creek, the trail began passing through small pocket meadows between dense sections of forest. Upon entering one of the larger meadows, I stopped dead in my tracks, a dark movement to my right catching my attention. An adolescent black bear sat atop a fallen log, casually munching, about 30 yards off. I signaled to Mitzi to approach quietly. Our first bear in the wild!

We stood there for long seconds just watching. The bear looked up at us once and, completely disinterested, resumed munching. It was then that I remembered my camera. As quietly as I could, I opened the flap to get out my camera, but the ripping Velcro broke the silence like a gunshot. The bear decided that was enough of the human gawkers and scampered off into the bushes. We still didn't move or speak for several minutes, both of us standing there with big, silly grins on our faces. (I have since replaced that camera bag with one that has a quieter clip closure.)



Nearing the head of the valley, the forest took on a fantastical appearance: carpets of fern, lichens and mosses clinging to towering cedar and hemlock. We crossed the high, single-rail bridge over the East Fork and arrived in the valley meadow shortly after noon under a bright, sunny sky. The scene before us was breathtaking. The valley was walled in by sheer, towering cliffs, numerous waterfalls and cascades streaming down. The head of the valley was dominated by Mount Anderson with a view of the Anderson Glacier. Gorgeous!

Passing the old chalet at the foot of the meadow, we settled for a camp spot underneath a couple of large trees, pitched our tent, and took our lunch down to the riverside. Following lunch, Mitzi opted for a nap on a fallen log, perfectly contoured like a recliner, while I wandered the riverside and valley floor snapping photos of waterfalls and wildflowers. A bit later, we headed uptrail toward Anderson Pass. We didn't get far before encountering hikers coming down the trail with soggy, wet pants talking of deep snows still clinging to the pass. Sounded like a good reason to head back to camp, make dinner and call it a day.

In the morning, we woke up in another place. The surrounding valley had disappeared in a blanket of thick, wet fog, dark shapes of trees and peaks looming in the mist. With a long hike out and a five-hour drive home ahead, we quickly got to work breaking down and packing up. We passed the old chalet again, leaving the valley meadow and reentering forest. The fog swirled and eddied through the trees and ferns, creating a mystical atmosphere. Approaching the area we had nicknamed "bear meadow," we kept vigilant for another sighting of our furry friend, but it wasn't to happen a second time.

The miles out ticked off quickly. By midmorning, the clouds and fog started to break, and we could make out wisps of blue sky and the sun trying to make an appearance. With the warming day, we shed our layers, ate snacks, and kept recalling our extremely fortunate bear sighting. Before we knew it, we found ourselves back at the trailhead, loading our packs into the car. We drove away that Sunday afternoon tired but refreshed, and completely enchanted with the Olympics. ♦

Hike It»

Enchanted Valley Olympic National Park

Trails: Graves Creek, Quinault River. **Distance:** 27 miles round trip. **Elevation Gain:** 1,050 feet. **Map(s):** Custom Correct Enchanted Valley-Skokomish, Green Trails 166. **More Info:** *Olympic Mountains Trail Guide* (Robert Wood, The Mountaineers Books). **Permit:** Olympic National Park Pass required.

See more photos by Eli Boschetto at <http://boscomountainphoto.com>.

More Backpacking Picks for COUPLES

Pacific Crest Trail, Length and gain vary based on itinerary.

A couple that can thru-hike together is a couple with staying power. Dream about your future together on a multineight backpacking trip along the crest of the Cascade Mountains.

Klapatche Park, Mount Rainier National Park. 21 miles. 2,700 feet elevation gain in, 200 feet elevation gain out. 5,500-foot high point.

After hiking along on an abandoned road, you'll leave the forest and enter an open parkland encircling Aurora Lake. Here, the Mountain provides a dramatic—and totally romantic—backdrop. Be sure to make the side trip (through wildflowers, past big views) to Saint Andrews Lake at 6,000 feet.

Little Beaver-Big Beaver Loop,* Marblemount Ranger District. 34 miles. 3,500 feet gain. 3,620-foot high point.

Whisper and kiss amidst the immense trees that line this route: ancient red cedars one thousand years old. Skirt through marshes teeming with plant and animal life. Spend a night at Luna Camp (lovely!), before you reach the forested saddle at Beaver Pass. From here, you can head up to Whatcom Pass for close-up views of the Pickets or start heading downhill to Ross Lake.

*There are no connecting trails between the Little Beaver landing and Big Beaver landing on Ross Lake. You make this trail into a "loop" by arranging a boat taxi ride (romantic!) from Little Beaver landing back to your starting point.

See WTA's website for many more backpacking suggestions.