

On Trail

In Pictures »

Sahale Arm

A walk amongst the sea of peaks

Sahale Arm draws me like a beacon.

In his classic tome *Hiking the Great Northwest*, Havey Manning describes the views here as “the most extensive and impressive of any trail in the West.” When I read that, many years ago, I knew that I had to go.

And guess what: Harvey was right.

Mountains upon mountains, fading into the distance: the proverbial sea of peaks. There are many dramatic vistas in these northern mountains, but Sahale Arm is transcendent. Sure, the hike is a major grunt: 4,000 feet in 5.5 miles, but once aloft, that effort is forgotten, replaced by a sense of wonder and awe. Johannesburg is close at hand and its north face is pure mountain poetry, serrated ridges slicing the sky. Beyond it a world of icy summits stretches to the horizon, culminating in the majestic massif of Glacier Peak. Turn around and contemplate the Sahale Glacier—all that separates you from the summit of Sahale Peak.

John D'Onofrio

A writer/photographer/multimedia artist living in Bellingham, John's essays have appeared in *Adventures Northwest*, *Cascadia Weekly* and other publications. His photography has been exhibited in galleries in Washington, New York and California. Visit his website at www.jdonofrio.com.



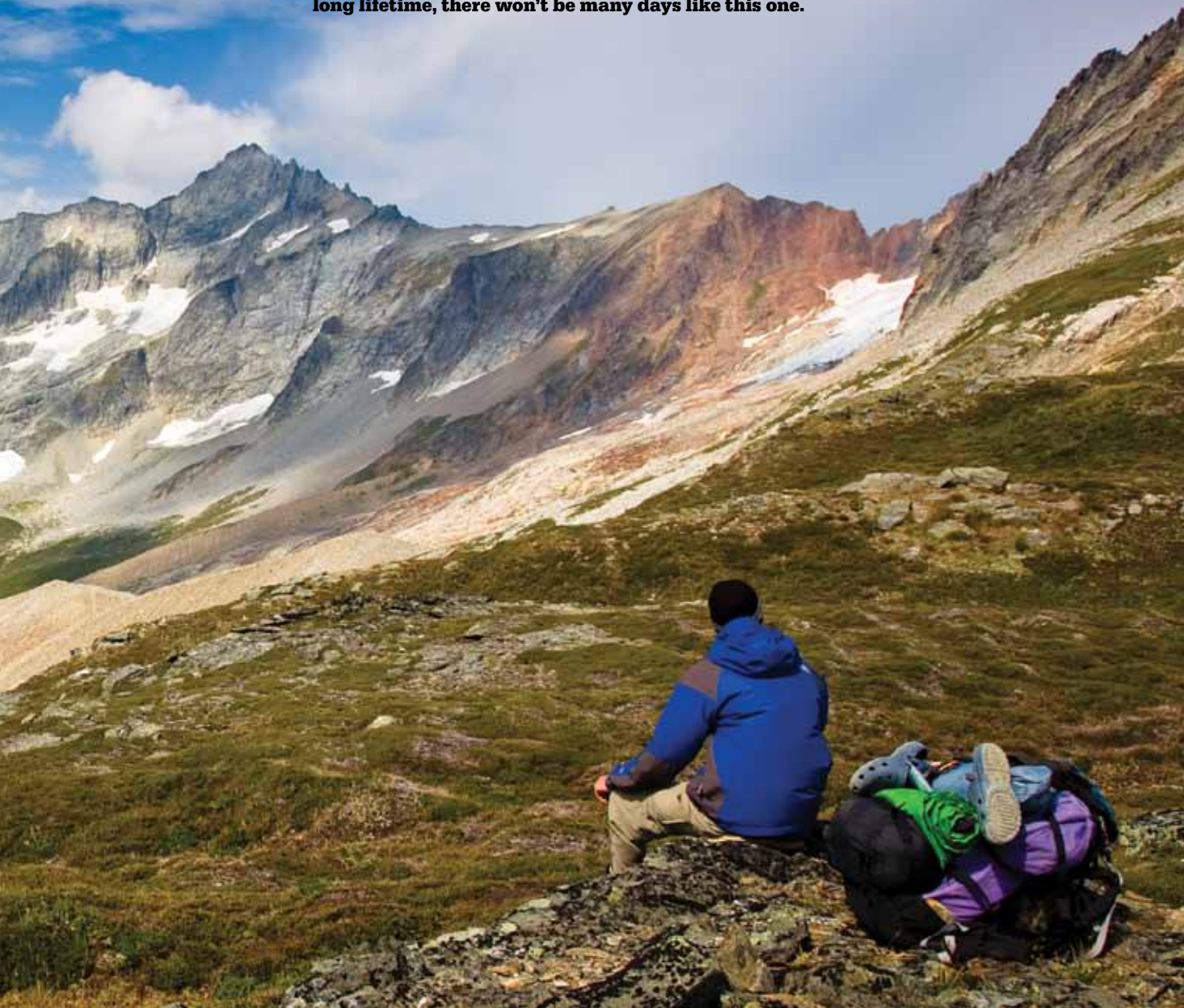
Hike It»

Sahale Arm

North Cascades National Park

Distance: 12 miles round trip. Elevation Gain: 2,200 feet. High Point: 7,200 feet. Map: Green Trails Cascade Pass 80. More Info: *Day Hiking: North Cascades* (Craig Romano, The Mountaineers Books).

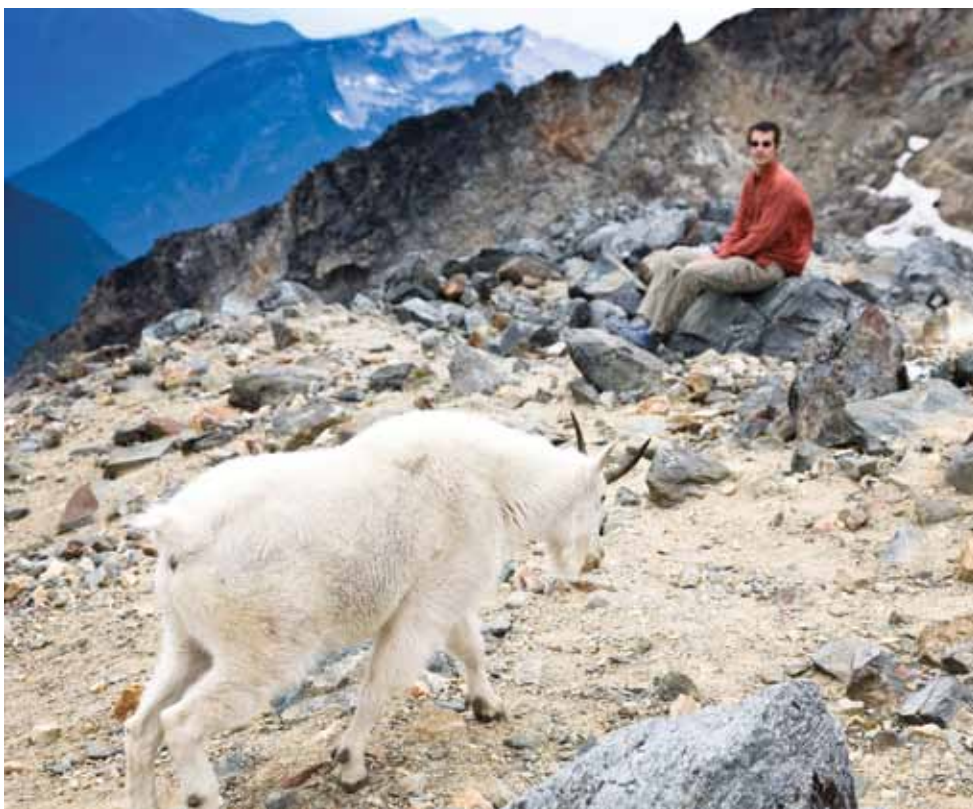
As the old adage goes, it's not the destination that matters—it's the journey. On a visit to Sahale Arm, it's both. The trail to Cascade Pass is beautiful, easy—and usually crowded. Cascade Pass well deserves its status as a holy place for thousands of pilgrims who come to experience the majesty of the North Cascades. But impossible as it seems when you're at the pass, the best is yet to come. Beyond the pass, a stiff grade will have you huffing and puffing—all the more reason to stop and smell the flowers. The view down to the austere basin of Doubtful Lake is classic. In autumn, the meadows are ablaze with the rich colors of fall. Don't hurry. Linger in the meadows, sharpening your senses so that you can absorb both the tiny details and the grand panorama. In a long lifetime, there won't be many days like this one.





The campsites here, ringed with rocks against the sometimes ferocious wind, are the highest trail-accessible camps in North Cascades National Park—and for my money, the most scenic. If at all possible, plan to spend a few days in this throne room of the mountain gods. After the toil of the ascent, it would be a shame to leave too soon. If so inclined and properly equipped, climb the glacier to the penultimate catbird seat of Sahale Peak. Or wander the colorful moraines below the glacier. Tiny rock-scoured tarns invite a dip. Feast your eyes on the splendor of sunrise and sunset. Savor the rarified air of this high and wild place. Count the stars—and your blessings.





A welcoming committee of mountain goats, eager to share your dinner, may come to visit. Resist their entreaties. If the sun's out, bask in it. Count the peaks. If not, contemplate the mystery of what is hidden by cloud. Between the distant thunderings of unseen avalanches, the only sounds are a thousand melodious variations on falling water, punctuated by occasional rockfall as the mountains rearrange themselves. The constant here (like everywhere else) is change. Endless, relentless, inescapable change.

When people ask you why you take the time and suffer the effort to climb into the mountains, sometimes it's hard to find words that express the peace and joyousness of the high places. A few days on Sahale Arm might not help you articulate this idea any better, but they will fill your sensory cup to overflowing. And maybe, when all is said and done, the experience is the only answer. ♦

