

Getting to Know the Mountain



LAURIE BARNSKI

In July 2005, two brothers, Mike and Steve, embarked on a once-in-a-lifetime trip: completing the 93-mile Wonderland Trail around Mount Rainier. Above: Steve at Narada Falls. Right: hikers near Carbon River Glacier.

A Wonderland Trail Journal

By "Mike in Tac"

Thursday, July 7, 2005, 10:22 p.m.
Mowich Lake Campground,
5,000 feet

Overcast, fogged in, 74 degrees in
tent, 60 degrees outside

Slept in a bit and said good-bye to Jane at 8:00 a.m. Steve and I then packed for a couple of hours before having lunch and

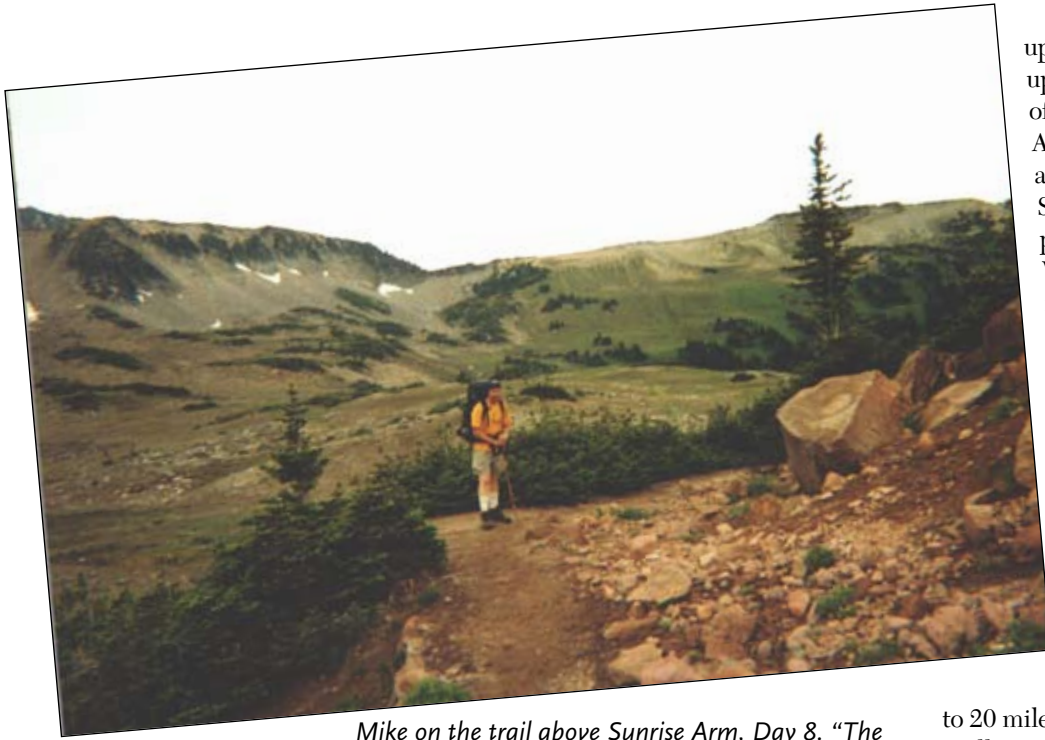
hitting the road. After a couple of stops for errands and phone calls, we got our permit and arrived here.

We wandered up to Eunice Lake and fished a bit—no views, clouds totally socked us in. I had terrible luck, lost a lure (Steve's) on the first cast. Steve had much better luck with his \$7.50 rod and reel. On the way back, we ran in to a couple of one-year-old bucks—no fear whatsoever. We were 10 feet from

them and shared their space for 5 or 10 minutes. They never ran off—we finally left them!

Back to the tent at 7:00 p.m. and we raided the "free pile" of food at the ranger cabin for dinner. Lots of cocoa too. Met Tim—another guy (with two friends—Joan and Todd, I think)—who will start the Wonderland tomorrow as well. They're doing an 8-day trip.

A fine day—overcast with some peek-



Mike on the trail above Sunrise Arm, Day 8. "The gal (in the couple) is wearing a bear bell. Kind of hurts our chances of seeing a bear here."

aboo views before the evening fog hit. Expecting rain soon.

I heard from another hiker of a guy who started the WT tonight with the intention of finishing it in 4 days. Wow. Not my cup of tea.

I do wish Jane were here.

*Day 1, 9:08 p.m.
Golden Lakes, 5,000 feet
Barometer 24.95, 60 degrees*

It is raining like hell right now! Water is leaking through the tent and is dripping on me and this paper. It's to the point that I won't write much. Last night things cleared up, but a light rain started as we left Mowich Lake at 10 a.m. (got up at 7:30 a.m.). It was a steady, fairly heavy rain from South Fork Mowich River to Golden Lakes. Sucked, really. Rain, rain, rain, stupid rain. Hung out on the porch of the ranger cabin for three to four hours with other hikers. A real nice group overall—four parties here tonight (one solo, Steve and I, and two threesomes).

Covered about 10 miles today. Got here at 4:30 p.m. Good dinner—Jane

hooked us up.

Saw avalanche lilies and bear grass at Eunice Lake yesterday. Lots of bear grass today.

*Day 2, 9:21 p.m.
South Puyallup River Camp,
4,190 feet
Barometer 25.65, overcast,
68 degrees*

What a turn in the weather! Got pelted with rain all night last night and woke to a sunrise at 5:30 with mostly clear skies. The Mountain was up close and visible from the campsite too.

I got up for good before 6:00 a.m. while Steve returned to bed. I met three hikers at the cabin who'd given up on their tarp at about 3 a.m. and just decided to keep on hiking.

Steve and I hung around Golden Lakes until 10:20, mostly drying out our stuff on a makeshift clothesline.

Walked through the "burn area" with some views, and down to the North Puyallup River Camp where we had a one-hour break. It was nice, 80 degrees, but then clouds came in.

From there, it was a tough hike up to Klapatche Park—3 miles up, up, up. Lots of memories of getting sick there in 2004. Aurora Lake was fogged in, and after a break we moved on to St. Andrews Lake and the (approximately) 6,000-foot pass. Wildflowers were incredible in these high areas! Then it was down, down, down to this camp. Got here at about 7:00 p.m.

Twelve long, slow miles for us. We've got to get going earlier in the morning to avoid rushing dinner, etc. At least we're both slow—not like one of us is faster than the other. Still, I'm glad that I'm not a "racer" like most of the other hikers we've met: 15 to 20 miles per day on average. Can you really enjoy The Mountain that way? I'd prefer to "sip" The Mountain at this pace versus "guzzling" it in a week.

Saw two deer at Aurora Lake, a marmot just north of the high point, and some bear scat on the trail.

Time to go to bed. I'm sitting outside waiting for the patch on my mattress to dry (thanks to my cat Max for the holes).

S'mores for dessert tonight. Thanks Jane.

*Day 3
Longmire Inn, 2,700 feet
Barometer 27.15, overcast, 71
degrees (room temperature)*

What a day. A good one overall, but it didn't start out that way!

We got up at 7:30 (along with everyone else at camp), but it still took us three hours to get going. Too much time. I'd rather kill time at a viewpoint during midday, not at my tent in the morning! We'll have to fix that.

It rained all last night and all the way to about 4:30 p.m. today. Crazy. I had my raincoat on all day long.

We headed up Emerald Ridge—great, relatively gentle grade with killer views down to glaciers and moraines. It was

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a big drop-off a few feet from the trail, but it was way cool. I even spotted about thirty mountain goats across the way on the ridge to the north of us. Tiny dots. They were just below the cloud ceiling.

Continued in the rain around the ridge towards the Tahoma Creek suspension bridge. Way high! It was scary, but I made it across. From there we continued up to Indian Henry's Hunting Grounds in the rain—nonstop rain. I'd hoped for clear skies, as I'd been here before on an overcast day. Not so.

However, our fortunes changed for the better as we stopped at the ranger cabin (looking for a dry porch to rest on) and met Sheryl, a volunteer ranger. She gave us (and three other hikers) hot tea and cocoa as well as the Mariner's game on the radio. Visiting with her really lifted my spirits. Her cabin was like an oasis, and the day started anew once we continued on our way (after visiting for about an hour).

Shortly after venturing through the Indian Henry meadows (the brightest yet), Steve and I decided to push on to Longmire Inn rather than get soaked another night. So, we plowed on another 7 miles (past our scheduled campsite at Devil's Dream) and arrived here after

8:00 p.m.

Of course, just as we arrived, the clouds broke open and The Mountain came in full view!

Day 4, 8:35 p.m.

Maple Creek Camp, 2,830 feet

Barometer 27.10, partly cloudy,

69 degrees

Probably the best hiking day yet—and we're in bed relatively early. Woke up to sunnyskies at Longmire at 7:30. I'd had a rough time sleeping (sore body) and was tired all morning. Went to the ranger station to make itinerary changes and pick up the food cache, and then Steve and I sat down to a huge breakfast. Then we sorted food, donated some to the ranger station's "hungry hiker cache," and I re-cached about 10 pounds of "stuff" that I decided not to carry anymore—SLR camera, long johns, Yak Trax, etc.

We didn't get going until 11:30 a.m., but my pack felt great. I think I've learned a lesson in how to pack a bag responsibly. On the way out, we crossed paths with an old-timer and two younger guys we met at Golden Lakes. They were spending the night at the Inn. I was jealous!

Steve and I moseyed along the easy, wide trail to Nisqually Crossing, with

a great Mountain view, and on up the Paradise River. On through the woods to Paradise Camp with bridges under construction—and beyond to Narada Falls.

We got to Reflection Lakes at about 2:30 p.m. and chilled out for quite a while. Chatted with two college-aged National Park Service volunteers—one from Pennsylvania and the other from Ohio. The government is lucky to have them, but how long can the park last on the backs of free help without the opportunity for a career?

Headed past Louise Lake and dropped into this canyon, Stevens Canyon, to arrive at camp. Looking back to The Mountain, we could see Fairy Falls in the high country at the head of Stevens Creek. That would make a great bush-whack trip someday. I'd never seen the falls before.

This campsite is great. Dry, which is priority #1. But it also has a view to a peak to the south and a wide open glade below us. Can hear Maple Creek nearby. Only one other group here. Oh yeah, they have urinals for both men and women. Yeah right. Where's the nearest bush?

To Indian Bar tomorrow. Will be a tough walk, but it should be beautiful if the weather cooperates. I want to be



DAVE SCHIEBELDEN

A hiker passes through meadows of lupine at Indian Bar. "This place is really cool."



Cataract Falls, below Seattle Park. "I slowed down. My neck stopped hurting. I ate oatmeal almost every day. And the time just whizzed by. Most of the pictures we took with the throwaway cameras came out crappy, but I don't even care."

on the trail by 9:30. No lollygagging in camp—we do enough of that on the trail.

Saw tiger lilies, red columbine and elephant's head pedicularis today (we got a flower chart at Longmire) among others.

Day 5, 6:45 p.m.

Indian Bar Camp, 5,000 feet

Barometer 25.00, mostly cloudy,

73 degrees

This place is really cool. We're sitting on a slope by our campsite, overlooking flower meadows and the creek. We can see the ridge that encircles us, but the highest snowfields are in the clouds. The sun appears to be setting behind the ridge (in clouds).

We arrived here at 4:30 p.m. to find someone else in our campsite. They shooed off as we came along. Poaching, I think. There are about a dozen goats across the valley—they're high up and have been there as long as we've been

here. Earlier, as I was glassing the valley I saw two bears, but they were in a hurry and vanished by the time I got a second look. Maybe elk, but I think bears. Nothing new since dinner.

Steve and I broke camp at 8:45 a.m.—by far a record for us. Made quick time up to Box Canyon for a tap water and bathroom break. We then went through the woods at a quick but comfortable pace (for us) up to Cowlitz Ridge. From there, we lollygagged 4 miles to this camp.

Despite the clouds that obscured The Mountain all day, the views were jaw-dropping—Shriner Peak Lookout, points east, Double Peak, the Tatoosh Range, Goat Rocks, Mount Adams and even Mount Hood. Not to mention luscious flower fields the likes of which we haven't seen since Indian Henry's—and this time we had sunshine to enjoy them in.

Met a couple of folks who stayed here last night and said they saw two mountain lions this morning and heard one last night. Also, a lot of bear sign (scratched trees) and elk sign (poop and prints all over) and cougar poop.

This place is cool.

Day 6, 7:12 p.m.

Summerland Camp, 5,720 feet

*Barometer 24.35, clear and sunny,
77 degrees*

A great afternoon—finally, after six days! I'm sitting on a log by the Wonderland Trail watching the sunset over Steamboat Prow. Only a few wispy clouds. The Mountain and Little Tahoma dominate the scene. The sun is warm on my face.

It was a day for lollygagging. Got up at 7 a.m. and scanned the Indian Bar area—no big animals. While Steve stayed in bed I went down to the river and sat on a rock. Nice. I think I was the only person in camp who was awake.

I went to take a poop, and upon my return to the tent saw that Steve had spotted a bear in the meadow 50 to 100 feet below our camp. We watched "him" wander and eat flowers for 30 minutes. And I never took a photo! (Duh!)

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Weather this morning was foggy—socked in, so the trip to Panhandle Gap was in clouds all the way with zero views to the west and a minor view of Ohanapecosh Glacier on the way up. Also saw a lone goat (about 200 feet away) and a mom, pop, and baby marmot. Route through the Gap was wanded in places and otherwise easy to find.

At the pass, skies were clear to the north (except for Rainier, of course) but stayed socked in to the south.

Nice trip down to Summerland—taking lots of time and stopping to soak in views of glaciers, falls, Mount Ruth and Goat Island Mountain. Visited with other hikers quite a bit too.

I've tried to tell myself every day of this trip to treasure each and every footstep. (Just heard rockfall.) I doubt I'll ever go on another trip as long or strenuous as this one—not with a family to tend to. If hiking is my hobby, then this is my Honus Wagner rookie card.

Enjoy it, love it, and remember it. Sure, I may do it again. But you never know. I seriously doubt Steve and I will spend time like this together again. Not because we don't want to, but because "that's life."

Tomorrow is a speed trip—down to the White River and up to Sunrise before the Ranger Station closes so we can get our food!

Looks like we might walk out on Day 9 (instead of 10)—do one 13-mile day instead of two 6.5-mile days. Especially if the weather sucks.

Late Note: we saw three deer (no bucks) in the meadow before bed last night.

Day 7, 7:14 p.m.

Sunrise Walk-In Camp, 6,250 feet

Barometer 23.95, clear skies,

81 degrees

Best weather day of the trip so far—sunny, hot and summer! Great views at Summerland—even saw nine climbers on The Mountain. Looking north we saw four elk on Goat Island Mountain.

We wanted to get to Sunrise ranger station with plenty of time to pick up our food cache and eat a burger at the restaurant, so we were out of camp by 9:00 and hustled through the woods to White River Campground. Still, I tried to pay attention to the sounds and smells of the woods while I moved along. That's two things I've neglected to mention so far—sounds and smells. You could be here with eyes closed and still feel the life around you—trees, flowers, birds, water. I think that is the one quality that I will take home with me the most.

I also forgot to mention Tim, Doobie, and the Guitar-Playing Hippie. We met Tim the night before we left—he's kind of a geek hiker who talks a lot. We were

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along the trail with him and his two buds for the first four days. No idea if they continued past Longmire as planned. Doobie is a guy we met at Panhandle Gap. He was out for the day, climbing here and there. Talked a lot about his climbs. I thought he was a stoner (hence the name)—Steve liked him. He took our photo at Panhandle Gap for us. The Guitar-Playing Hippie is a hiker from Evergreen who passed us on Day 3 (his Day 1) at Devil's Dream. He has a packable guitar. We met up with him again today at the Sunrise ranger station, and he's here in camp playing his guitar and singing. Seems like a nice kid.

We've met a lot of nice folks on the trail—most strike me as Seattle-type lefties, but nice folks. Even a couple of (preppy) folks who went to Middlebury College in Vermont (Steve and I are both born-and-bred Vermonters). A few folks have been less than social, and a couple

of guys blasted past us on Emerald Ridge listening to music—totally tuned out as far as I'm concerned. Different strokes for different folks, I guess.

The White River, like Mowich, was raging. We crossed it and rested at a picnic table for a bit before heading 2,000 feet uphill to Sunrise. Ninety minutes later we were getting our food cache at the ranger station, where we met the Guitar-Playing Hippie again.

After that, a KIRO-7 camera crew doing a show about hikes in Washington interviewed Steve and me about our experiences and thoughts on the Wonderland Trail. It was cool, and I hammed it up on camera for a while. I wish I'd mentioned the sounds and smells of the park though.

After that, we split up our food, gave a lot to the hungry hiker cache and had some burgers and soda. Yummy! I also called Rob and Jane and chatted with them.

Steve and I will spend one more night on the trail and head out to Mowich in a 13-mile final day.

Treasure every footstep and breath here. Remember this is for the rest of your life.

And, come again.

Day 8, 7:01 p.m.

Mystic Lake Camp,

5,500 feet

Barometer 24.45, cloudy skies,

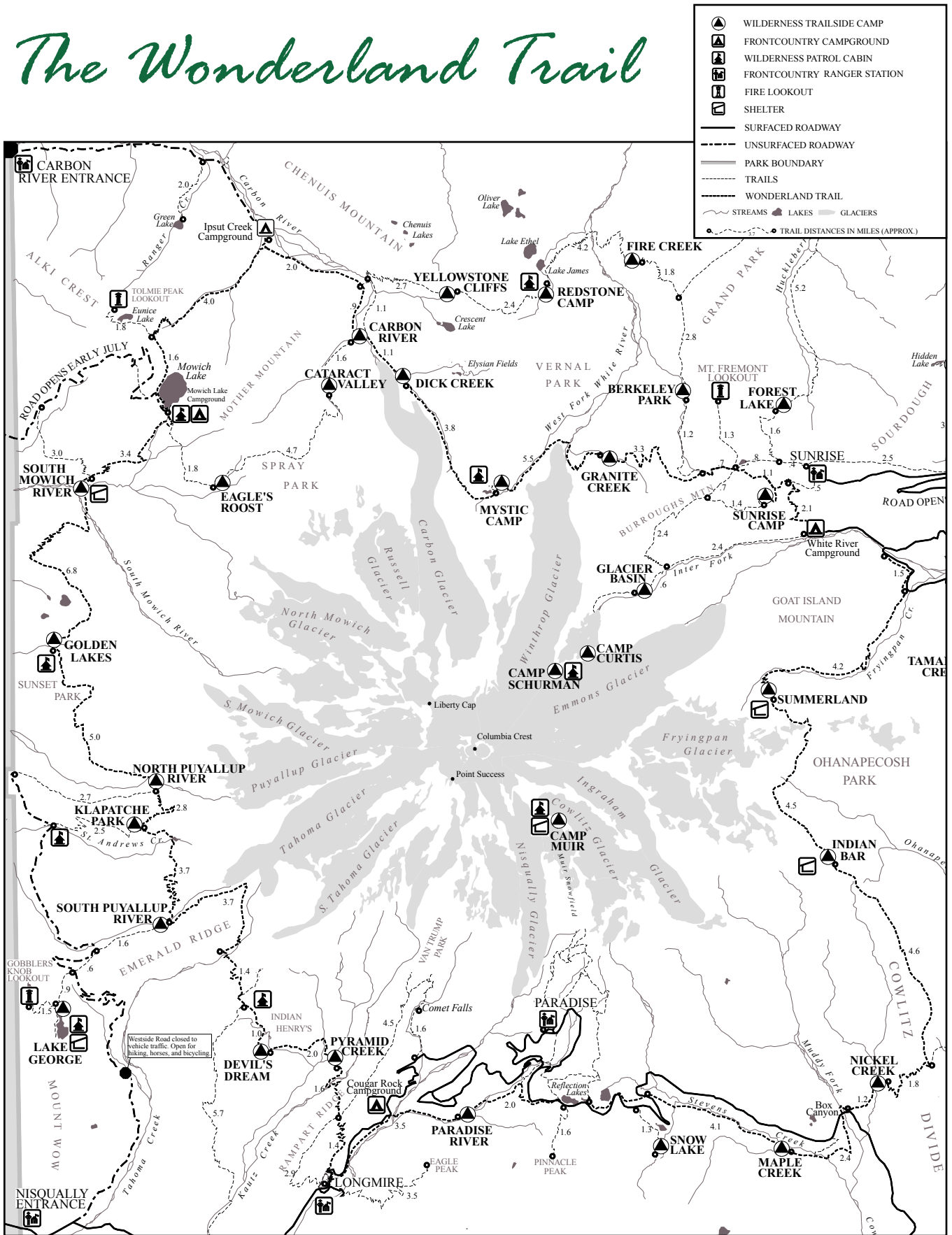
65 degrees

We slept in a bit, as the trip here was supposed to be about 10 miles. A blacktail doe just walked into camp and ate Steve's urine spot about 40 feet away.

We left camp at 10:00 and made our way through overused meadows and up the rocky trail to Skyscraper Pass at about 6,700 feet. There our view of The Mountain clouded up, but we could still see Grand Park (neat) and Mount Stuart and Glacier Peak. Snacked with a couple of friendly day hikers who sang a prayer before lunch and gave us Famous Amos cookies.

It was then a long trip down to the

The Wonderland Trail



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North Fork White River and the Winthrop Glacier (huge!). Walked through moraines for one to two hours (and washed out trail) before returning to older forest. Above a loud rushing creek, I rounded a corner and surprised a big buck (four or five points). He must have been 15 feet from me before he ran up the slope into the trees.

Then we ran in to a group of climbers that included D.J.—who led the East Bearhead scramble I went on with the Mountaineers in the spring. Visited a little, and then rain began to fall just a bit.

Only one other couple, and one single lady, in camp with us. The gal (in the couple) is wearing a bear bell. Kind of hurts our chances of seeing a bear here. But it probably makes her feel better.

Walked up to the lake—very pretty.

Ate Jane's corn/bean/rice/couscous dinner. Great. Look forward to seeing her tomorrow.

Day 9, 11:24 p.m.

(Saturday - July 16, 2005)

Home

Nice to be home—had a big pizza dinner and a movie with Steve and Jane.

We got off to an early start—8 a.m.—from Mystic Lake. Autumn-like weather and temperatures this morning at the lake. The water was frigid. Early on, The Mountain was visible, but it soon clouded over. We saw some marmots in the meadows above the lake. At the pass, we came within 25 feet of a bear eating plants near the trail. Really cool. Watched it for one or two minutes before it moved away.

On down the trail along the Carbon Glacier in the rain and fog. No views, but we could hear lots of rockfall on the glacier.

We crossed the suspension bridge (easier than Tahoma Creek) and, as it was still raining with no sign of let up, we decided to skip Spray Park in favor of returning to Mowich Lake via Ipsut Creek.

Of course, within one hour the weather improved. Long story short—we made it up the Ipsut headwall (about 1,000 feet

high) in 50 minutes and had a happy walk the last 1.5 miles to the car. Completed 93.5 miles at about 4 p.m.

Shook hands with Steve and got our photo taken.

Hope to return with my child some day.

Tuesday, July 26, 2005, 11:00 p.m.

Home

10 days after completing the trail

Looking back, I see Steve was right. It feels like we stepped out for a 10-day (really 9-day) hike and came out a couple of days later. Time went by for me during this trip like during no other vacation I've had.

We had no barometer for the rest of the world. Other than 1, 2, 3, etc., the days were unnamed. Our only concerns were the weather and where we were going each day. Aside from that, there was only "the walk"—one step at a time.

I feel like I "know" The Mountain now. If not intimately, then certainly better than I did before. I look at it during my drive to work and think to myself, "I've been there." And I really have. I ate,

slept, and crapped The Mountain for ten days. I feel so lucky.

I slowed down. My neck stopped hurting. I ate oatmeal almost every day. And the time just whizzed by. Most of the pictures we took with the throwaway cameras came out crappy, but I don't even care. They serve as a reference for some wonderful memories that I hope will last as long as I do.

I don't know what the best part of the trip was. Sharing time with my brother? Immersing myself in nature? Escaping civilization? Ranking on my sister? Meeting new people every day and answering and asking the great question: "What day are you on?" Watching my answers to that question change? Going from a newbie to being almost done? Was that even something I wanted to look forward to?

All of the above, I guess.

One thing I know for sure: I'll never see, smell, or hear The Mountain the same way again. ♦

"Mike in Tac" is a WTA member from Tacoma.

How to Prepare

The 93-mile Wonderland Trail is the crown jewel of the state's magnificent trail system. You'll need to plan ahead if you're interested in hiking the complete trail in one trip.

You must camp at designated campsites while hiking the Wonderland, so it's important to plan an itinerary and make reservations as soon as possible.

Sixty percent of the campsites are reservable, and the remaining 40 percent are assigned on a first-come-first-served basis.

Reservations are accepted at the Longmire Wilderness Information Center by mail or fax only, beginning April 1 of each year.

Reservation forms for Wonderland campsites are available online at

www.nps.gov/mora/trail/wonder.htm or by calling (360) 569-4453. Completed forms can be faxed to (360) 569-3131.

Campsite reservations can be made in person at the Longmire Wilderness Information center beginning Memorial Day weekend.

For more information visit www.nps.gov/mora/trail/wonder.htm

Guides: *50 Hikes in Mount Rainier National Park* by Ira Spring & Harvey Manning (Mountaineers, \$14.95, 1999) and *Discovering the Wonders of the Wonderland Trail* by Bette Filley (Dunamis, \$13.99, 1998)

Maps: *National Geographic Trails Illustrated: Mount Rainier* and *Green Trails Mount Rainier West #269* and *Mount Rainier East #270*