

Hiking “Round the Mountain”

Exploring the slopes of the forgotten volcano—Mount Adams



DAVE JETTE

Mount Adams from a lake past Killen Creek. Even though it's Washington's second-highest peak, (12,276 feet) Adams isn't nearly as well-visited as Baker, St. Helens, or Rainier. The Round the Mountain Trail on the slopes of Mount Adams is a bit of a misnomer—in 34 miles it takes hikers alongside the western half of the mountain.

BY MOUNTAIN MAN DAVE

Cecile and I had never been to the Mount Adams Wilderness, so we decided to try it out with a 5-day, 20-mile backpack on the Round the Mountain Trail from the South Climb Trail to Killen Creek. We started on September 11, 2005 and were accompanied by our good friends Priscilla Ancheta, Bill Etnyre, Elizabeth Rothman and Mo Swanson. After a difficult start, it turned out to be a beautiful, exciting trip.

Mount Adams is quite a way from Seattle, so we camped the night before starting the backpack at Takhlakh Lake Campground. It took us 2.5 hours to drive to Randle, and then another hour to go 31 miles on Forest Service Road 23 (with the last 7 miles a good gravel road) and then 1.5 miles on FS Road 2329 to Takhlakh Lake (well signed). This is quite a nice campground, although it may be wise to camp in the “tents only” area rather than right on the lake, to

avoid noisy RVs.

The next day, after leaving one car at the Killen Creek trailhead, we drove to the South Climb trailhead. This is reached by continuing on mostly paved FS Road 23 almost to Trout Lake, and then doubling back on FS Road 80—a total drive of 1.25 hours. We started at an elevation of 5,560 feet and immediately climbed 700 feet to intersect the Round the Mountain Trail and have lunch. It had been snowing on Mount

Adams, and unfortunately, the snowline was a couple of hundred feet below the Round the Mountain Trail, which stays between 5,900 feet and 6,300 feet of elevation as it circles Mount Adams. So, walking through annoyingly deep snow and slush, we continued on to Dry Lake Camp, 7 miles from the start. It was mostly snow-covered there, but we found sufficient bare space for our tents, and Bill managed to locate our only source of water, a half-frozen pond across a large meadow not far from camp.

After a cold night, we awoke to welcome sunshine and decided to continue on—the forecast was for several days of sunny weather. Very shortly the Pacific Crest Trail joins the Round the Mountain Trail. We passed a nice campsite at Sheep Lake in 3.6 miles, and a small one on dry Mutton Creek in lava fields 1.3 miles further. However, our day's objective was the meadowlands above Lewis Creek, as described in *100 Hikes in Washington's South Cascades and Olympics* ("Mount Adams Highline" trip). Unfortunately, there was still plenty of snow around, so we camped instead in a large flat area just off the trail, shortly after crossing Lewis Creek. The day's backpacking distance was 6.8 miles.

The next day was a layover day for exploration and drying our boots. There is a campsite at the edge of a dropoff just to the west of where we had camped, with great views from Mount St. Helens to Mount Rainier, although Mount Adams is unfortunately blocked by trees there. Cecile did watercolor painting while I read, and the others went exploring up high, reporting easy walking and excellent views. They found the camping area described in the book; it is reached by a path which takes off just before Lewis Creek is crossed. Later, in camp, Bill, Cecile, and Elizabeth did paintings of Mount Adams, which rose enormously above us. We had conversations with a fair number of PCT thru-hikers who came by. They all had interesting trail names like Whuppin' Stick; they were planning to reach Canada by early October, and we couldn't believe that they average 25 miles a day. But that seems to be the norm.



DAVE JETTE

Cecile Disenhouse and Bill Etnyre practice watercolor painting at a high camp, with Mount Rainier in the distance. Excellent camps dot the Round the Mountain Trail, which ranges in elevation from 5,900 to 6,300 feet.

On day 4 of the trip we continued 2.5 miles to Killen Creek, passing Divide Camp Trail (descending to FS Road 2329) in 0.3 mile and the Killen Creek Trail in another 1.4 miles. There is excellent camping at Killen Creek, and, arriving there first, we took the best campsite, right on the creek below a waterfall. After lunch we backtracked 0.8 mile to the Killen Creek Trail and climbed 760 feet up to High Camp at 6,840 feet (as described in "Adams Creek Meadows" in the *100 Hikes* guidebook). This beautiful

area is a huge, mostly open plateau, and there is very good camping up to the left as you walk along a watercourse (which was dry at this time). The three painters busied themselves with a distant view of Mount Rainier while Mo and I read, and then we started down. Towards the end of the climb the trail had become rather steep, so we decided to try taking a sketchy path (with a few cairns) down a scree slope and then talus to Killen Creek. This we were able to do, although it was slow going to intersect



Mount Adams from the Round the Mountain Trail near Killen Creek. High lakes, abundant wildflower meadows, and postcard views are all reasons not to ignore this forgotten gem. Try it in September for good doses of solitude.

with the Round the Mountain Trail, so we really didn't save any time with this "shortcut."

The next morning I explored the area near camp, while the three painters painted Mount Adams. A short distance beyond Killen Creek, the PCT leaves the Round the Mountain Trail, and, continuing on the latter, I very quickly reached a small lake with a great view of Mount Adams from its north end, and mediocre camping in an open area at its south end. A larger lake, Lake 5846, is easily reached on good paths from the Killen Creek campsites, and it also sports a great view of Mount Adams from its far end, but there is no decent camping here. Finally, right after Killen Creek is crossed, before the main trail descends to the campsites, a well-beaten path goes off to the right through a sandy horse camp and to a large waterfall; a faint path continues on up just before the waterfall. The country up there looks like it would provide interesting exploring. This is what is so nice about this whole area; it is fairly open and reasonably level.

After lunch we went back to the Killen

Creek Trail and descended 1,500 feet in 3 miles to our car. We ferried everyone to Takhlakh Lake Campground where Bill oversaw the preparation of a delicious dinner, and the next morning we quickly packed up and drove to Randle for a great breakfast at the diner at the intersection of U.S. Highway 12 and FS Road 23. It was a fitting end to a wonderful trip.

Most of this route is covered by the "Mount Adams West" USGS topo, and the north and south ends are covered by the "Green Mountain" and "Mount Adams East" quads, respectively. The whole route is well worth doing, but perhaps this August we'll make a shorter trip of it by coming in on the Killen Creek Trail and going out on the Divide Camp Trail, staying at Killen Creek, High Camp and the meadow above the Lewis River crossing. We'll likely have 12 people on that trip, so don't camp at these suggested campsites unless you're prepared to share! ♦

Mountain Man Dave, aka Dave Jette, is a WTA member from Seattle.

Trip Essentials

Round the Mountain Trail from South Climb Trailhead to Killen Creek Trailhead

Hikable: mid-July–September

One-way (park cars at each trailhead): 20 miles

Elevation gain: approx. 4,000 feet

Map: Green Trails 367S Mount Adams

To get there: To reach Killen Creek Trailhead, drive FS Road 23 south from Randle for 31 miles. Turn left on FSR 2329 and reach the trailhead after 6 miles.

To reach South Climb Trailhead, continue on FSR 23 and turn left on FSR 80, 1.3 miles before Trout Lake. Turn left on FSR 8040 and then right on FSR (8040)500 to road's end.