



On Trail

Northwest Explorer »

Living in the Northwest, we have no shortage of wilderness locations to escape into for a day—or a week. On any ol' weekend, we could be climbing to the rim of smoldering Mount St. Helens, journeying through lush rain forests in the Olympics or trekking across the jagged ridges of the North Cascades. And while all of these places, and so many more locations, are outstanding, nothing quite compares with the majesty—or sheer immensity—of “The Mountain.”

But when you think about hiking that Mountain, where do you even start? With over 240 miles of hiking trails (not counting mountaineering routes), spread over 378 square miles, there's a lot to choose from. Add to that the incredible amount of scenic features—473 streams and rivers, 292 lakes, 122 waterfalls, 25 named glaciers, and more meadows, valleys, wildflowers, old-growth forest, and mind-numbing views than you can shake a trekking pole at—and the task of choosing a trail can no doubt be daunting.

Thankfully, there are stacks of helpful guidebooks available to get you started. But even as great as most of those guidebooks are—full of inspiring photos and informative elevation profile graphs (a feature I particularly appreciate)—you're still trying to whittle down from 50-plus options. And if you're unfamiliar with The Mountain, what you're really thinking is, “Where do I go to get the really good stuff?”

Well, this month, you're in luck. From shorter starter trails to the granddaddy of round-the-mountain adventures, we'll highlight five—and only five—of the most outstanding hiking opportunities that Rainier has to offer, just in time for you to start making your own summer hiking plans. With some helpful planning tips and permit info thrown in, all you'll have to do is choose and go.

BACKPACKING THE BIG ONE

Five sure-to-wow trails in Mount Rainier National Park. *By Eli Boschetto*

Hike It»

Gobbler's Knob

Round trip miles: 12

Gain: 2,700 feet

Campsites: Lake George

Spray Park Loop

Round trip miles: 16

Gain: 5,100 feet

Campsites: Mowich Lake, Eagle's Roost, Cataract Valley, Carbon River, Ipsut Creek

Rainier from Gobbler's Knob. Photo by Don Geyer.

#1: Gobbler's Knob

Ideal for an intro to backpacking or an easy weekend getaway, what could be better than pitching your tent beside a clear, sparkling lake within a mile of one of Washington's premier viewpoints? Not much, but it comes with a price—you won't be alone.

From the Nisqually Entrance in the southwest corner of the park, take the Westside Road to its closure 3.5 miles up. From this point, sling on your pack and continue up the road on foot another 3.8 miles, first along rushing Tahoma Creek, then plunging into forest for a moderate climb to Round Pass and the Lake George trailhead. The next 0.75 mile climbs 500 feet to the Lake George basin where six wilderness campsites await, including one large group site. For anglers, the fishing at Lake George is reported to be exceptional, and licenses are not required within the national park. After staking out your camp, take on the climb to Gobbler's Knob, a moderate 800-foot climb in just under a mile. At the Goat Lake junction, bear right and traipse through meadows brimming with seasonal lupine, magenta paintbrush and Columbia lily to the old fire lookout and a view that will knock your SmartWools off—Adams, Hood and St. Helens to the south and east, the Olympics to the west, Lake George below, and Rainier looming dead ahead with front-row views of the Sunset Amphitheater and Tahoma Glacier.

An optional camping destination (in case Lake George permits have all been snatched up) would be to take the Goat Lake Trail (at the saddle junction en route to Gobbler's Knob), 1 mile down into the Glacier View Wilderness for less-crowded camping at Goat Lake.

Spray Park wildflowers. Photo by Don Geyer.

#2: Spray Park Loop

Considered one of the best loop hikes in Mount Rainier National Park, the trail through the alpine meadows of Spray and Seattle Parks blazes with a bounty of seasonal wildflowers. Throw in an ample serving of glassy tarns, a couple of wispy waterfalls, an optional side trip to Carbon Glacier and a forested stroll up Ipsut Creek, and you have a photographer's dreamland. Really, what more could you ask for?

Starting at Mowich Lake (the Ipsut Creek trailhead is still inaccessible due to the Carbon Road washout), take a short jaunt south on the Wonderland Trail to the Spray Park junction. Merge onto the Spray Park Trail and make a gentle mile-long descent to the edge of Eagle Cliff. The trail then turns east, rounding Hessong Rock and passing the Eagle's Roost wilderness camp with seven sites. Shortly past the camp, take the 0.25-mile side trail to Spray Falls, a must-see. Following the falls, the trail vaults up 600 feet in the next half mile to the vast Spray Park meadows, with views of Echo Rock, Observation Rock, and the Russell Glacier above. On bluebird days, the view north extends all the way to Washington's North Cascades. Avoid trampling fragile vegetation by remaining on trails through this area. Plants that survive this harsh environment can easily be killed by a single bootstep.

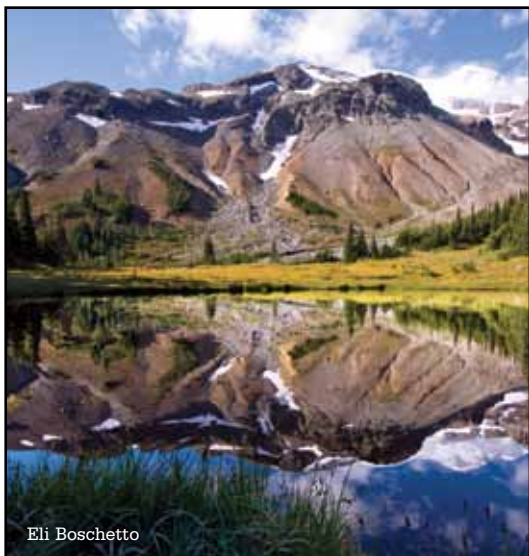
From the 6,375-foot high point in Spray Park, begin a 3-mile descent through more wildflowers in Seattle Park, past Cataract Valley wilderness camp (seven sites) to the Carbon River junction and wilderness camp (five sites). From this point, the route continues on the Wonderland Trail, following the Carbon River north, then northwest. At the Ipsut Creek trail junction, fork right 0.3 mile for camping at the Ipsut Creek camp (13 sites), or continue past Ipsut Falls, now bearing southwest, and start a healthy 2,500-foot climb up to Ipsut Pass over the next three forested miles. Finish your loop by turning left at the pass junction for a gentle climb along the flank of Castle Peak before dropping the last mile back down to your starting point at Mowich Lake.

For twice the meadows, flowers, lakes, jaw-dropping views—and mileage—try the 33-mile Northern Loop Trail.

“As an outdoor photographer, Spray Park is one of my favorite areas for the wildflower displays. They're best in late July. Plus, there are numerous tarns that reflect Mount Rainier, making this a really fun location to shoot.”

—Don Geyer, Renton, Washington
Northwest Photographer





#3: Glacier Basin Loop

This 13-mile loop is one of my own personal favorites, and a route I've covered for *Backpacker*. Sure, the Glacier Basin and Burroughs Mountain Loop can be done in a long day, but, with so much to see, why not slow it down? Take a few days to soak it all in.

From the Glacier Basin trailhead in the White River Campground, the 3.25-mile hike up along the Inter Fork of the White River is a breeze thanks to the recent trail restoration done by WTA and the National Park Service. Along the way, a 0.5-mile side trail heads up Emmons Moraine and offers incredible views of Emmons Glacier, the largest sheet of ice on Rainier, and a milky blue-green glacial lake below. Another mile up, pass the junction with the Burroughs Mountain Trail and continue to the Glacier Basin wilderness camp in a forested glen, where six campsites are available (including one group site). Just beyond the camp, Glacier Basin opens up in all its glory, with wide meadows, a large shimmering tarn, and views up The Mountain of The Wedge and Mount Ruth. You'll notice a well-worn climber's trail continuing up to Camps Curtis and Schurman.

For the next leg, double back to the Burroughs Mountain Trail junction and begin a hearty 1,900-foot climb for the next 1.5 miles, first through shady forest, then opening into hillside meadows with stupendous views over the White River Valley and Goat Island Mountain. As you continue climbing, the meadows dwindle away and soon you're in rocky alpine tundra with scarce vegetation. Cross a shallow saddle, then mount the final distance amid wide-open alpine plains. The view from 7,400-foot Burroughs Mountain reaches west to the Olympics, north to Glacier Peak and the North Cascades, and southward, where Rainier is all encompassing. From the summit, take a leisurely stroll down to Frozen

PLANNING YOUR TRIP

PERMITS: All overnight hiking and camping in Mount Rainier National Park requires a wilderness access permit. Permits can be obtained before your hike from any of the Wilderness Information Centers or ranger stations within the park. Advance reservations—highly recommended for some of the more popular trails and camps—can also be made via faxed application. Visit www.nps.gov/mora.



MAPS: As two of hiking's 10 essentials, having a good map and compass (or GPS)—and knowing how to use them—should be no-brainers. The two most comprehensive maps for Mount Rainier National Park are National Geographic's Trails Illustrated *Mount Rainier*, and Green Trails Maps' new *Mount Rainier Wonderland*.

WEATHER: Mount Rainier has a notoriously short hiking season due to heavy amounts of winter snow that keep most areas inaccessible until June and July. Even in summer, heavy rain, fog and snow are not uncommon, as Mount Rainier creates its own weather. Summer temps usually average between 40 degrees and 75 degrees near Longmire (2,761 feet), and between 40 degrees and 65 degrees near Paradise (5,400 feet). Nighttime temps, even in summer, can fall below freezing. Check the weather forecast just before setting out, and plan accordingly. Visit www.noaa.gov.



KEY GEAR: A **water treatment system** is highly recommended to prevent giardiasis, a disease caused by a particularly nasty little bug found in many mountainous water sources. Filtering, using treatment drops, or boiling water for at least seven minutes can eliminate most contaminants. Avoid filtering water from cloudy glacial streams as the tiny silt particles can clog

and ruin your filter element. Using **trekking poles** can greatly reduce the stress on your back and knees during those huffing slogs up steep hills or jarring descents into valleys, and helps to balance and stabilize the heavy load you're carrying.

CLOTHING: Mount Rainier's unique weather patterns demand layering. Carrying the right mix of apparel will allow you to deal with rapidly changing temperatures and weather conditions. Your backcountry wardrobe should include wool, down or fleece insulating layers and some kind of rain shell. Choose synthetic, breathable fabrics that wick sweat away from your body and dry quickly. Avoid cotton apparel—it stays wet when you sweat, robs your body of heat and dries slowly.



FOOD STORAGE: Most of Mount Rainier's wilderness camps provide bear poles or wires for hanging your food, trash and toiletries. Carry your food in a sturdy bag capable of being sealed or tightly tied off, as animals are attracted to any food scent. Never store food in your tent, and always remember: pack it in, pack it out.

Visit www.wta.org/hiking-info/how-to for a comprehensive Mount Rainier backpacking preparation guide, complete with gear checklist and permit information.

Hike It»

Glacier Basin Loop

Round trip miles: 11.5

Gain: 3,100 feet

Campsites: White River, Glacier Basin, Berkeley Park, Sunrise

Indian Bar and Summerland

Shuttle trip miles: 17

Gain: 4,400 feet

Campsites: Nickle Creek, Olallie Creek, Indian Bar, Summerland

The Wonderland

Round trip miles: 95.2

Gain: 22,780 feet

Campsites: 24 wilderness camps are available on or near the trail.

A backpacker coursing through Indian Bar. Photo by Tami Asars.

Wonderland Trail photograph on p.21 by Colleen Ponto.

Lake and a five-way trail junction. Here, you can head west to Berkeley Park and wilderness camp (three sites), or north to the Fremont Mountain Lookout. To continue the loop, head southeast on the Wonderland Trail, descending 1.25 miles into more subalpine meadows ripe with summer wildflowers and seasonal huckleberries. Keep your eyes peeled for black bears. Sunrise wilderness camp awaits with 10 campsites (including two group sites), near the shores of Shadow Lake. Completing the loop requires a knee-crunching, 1,900-foot descent in the last 2.5 miles back to White River.

#4: Indian Bar, Summerland

One of the most popular backpacks on Mount Rainier for its varied terrain, wide-open meadows, and incredible views, this 17-mile one-way route along the mountain's eastern side showcases the kind of scenery that will have you doing happy little dances of joy from one stunning panorama to the next. And judging by how fast permits are snatched up for this area, it's no secret.

Like Glacier Basin, this trail can be engaged from a variety of starting points, depending on time and interest. One popular starting point is the Box Canyon trailhead, 10 miles west of the Stevens Canyon Entrance. The first mile is a moderate trek northeast on the Wonderland Trail to the Nickel Creek wilderness camp (four sites), before starting a vigorous 2,000-foot climb to the crest of the Cowlitz Divide. The trail undulates along the divide, meadows widening the higher you go, eventually gaining another 500 feet to a high point with views of Double and Shriners Peaks to the east and

The Mountain rising immediately to the west. The trail then drops a quick 800 feet into the valley of the Ohanapecosh River and the wide meadows of Indian Bar. The wilderness camp here has only five sites, including one group site. In early summer, numerous waterfalls stream down the walls of the valley, fed by the glaciers above. This makes a good halfway point before starting the next climb.

From Indian Bar, the trail continues north, steeply climbing over 1,500 feet in the next 1.5 miles. It then levels somewhat, still climbing, while traversing the meadows of Ohanapecosh Park to the high point on the Wonderland, Panhandle Gap at 6,800 feet. Here you'll find yourself in the alpine zone, a landscape dominated by rocky talus that often holds snow through the summer months. Rangers and guidebooks issue warnings about traversing the snowfields here in bad weather, so exercise caution and good judgment. This is a common location to spot mountain goats, and the Cowlitz Chimneys can be viewed to the east. From the gap, the trail descends 1.5 miles to the Summerland wilderness camp (six sites) along Fryingpan Creek. Little Tahoma rises sharply above wide meadows brimming with wildflowers, and Goat Island Mountain dominates to the north. The route then descends steadily along Fryingpan Creek 4 miles to the trailhead at Sunrise Road.

Due to the area's popularity and the fact that you'll be competing with weekend hikers as well as advance-planning Wonderland Trail hikers for the handful of wilderness campsites available through this section, it can be tough to get this permit. To improve your chances of scoring a permit and savoring this idyllic location, consider a midweek trip.



#5: Wonderland

This is the big one. The 95.2-mile Wonderland is *The Trail* around *The Mountain*. Along with the John Muir Trail, the Tahoe Rim Trail and the High Sierra Trail, the Wonderland Trail is ranked as one of the most scenic long-distance trails in the western United States. And like these others, the window of opportunity is a slim two to three months per year due to high elevations and extreme weather conditions. While no technical mountaineering skill is required to complete the Wonderland Trail, careful planning, determination and endurance are key—and that's just for getting your permit!

Along the way, you'll visit every environmental zone that this towering volcano has to offer—from dense, old-growth forest in deeply carved valleys to subalpine meadows carpeted with wildflowers, to the desolate alpine zone of foreboding rock and ice, skirting the very glaciers themselves. Over the course of the circuit, you'll gain as much cumulative

elevation as you would if you climbed from sea level to above the roof of North America, more than 22,000 feet (Mount McKinley in Alaska is the highest point at 20,320 feet). Access to the Wonderland can be reached from any of the four corners of the park: Longmire, Stevens Pass, Sunrise or Mowich Lake. Most hikers aim to complete the trip in anywhere from a fast-paced week, to a more leisurely two-week stroll in order to soak up every ounce of picturesque goodness. For longer-period hikers, food caches are often planned for pickup along the way.

"If you can, take your time. The climbs are long and steep. Be prepared to be wet and cold on any day, as rain and thunderstorms happen even in summer. But experiencing all this scenery makes it all totally worth it!"

—Geoff Krueger, Portland, Oregon
Two-time Wonderland Hiker



Asters and more along the Wonderland.
Photo by Troy Mason.

This is where we refer you back to the guidebooks, as there's just too much information about the complete loop to list here. The FalconGuide *Hiking Mount Rainier National Park* has an entire section dedicated to the Wonderland Trail, with route details, elevation profiles and campsite descriptions, as well as helpful planning info. And no matter

how you take on the Wonderland Trail, as one all-out marathon or in sections over the course of several seasons, you'll walk away giddy with scenic overload and a sense of accomplishment that will last a lifetime.

These suggestions are but the tip of the glacier, if you will, and no matter which trail you choose, you can't go wrong. Of course, there are numerous other fantastic backpacking locations to explore on The Mountain. Indian Henry's Hunting Ground offers wide meadows and an explosion of summer wildflowers. Sunset Park and the Golden Lakes showcase views of the Ptarmigan ice cliffs. At Crystal Lakes you're bound to see more elk and mountain goats than people.

But remember, nature rules here, and Mount Rainier is still considered to be an active volcano. A properly planned trip will ensure that your experience is successful and memorable. Pay heed to trail signs and warnings, don't feed animals, exercise proper food storage, avoid trampling meadows and practice leave-no-trace ethics. Do all this and Mount Rainier will remain the Northwestern gem that it is for us, and for future generations, too. And if you happen to see me on the trail this summer—I'll be the one in the orange Gregory Palisade backpack, with a Nikon hanging around my neck—give me a wave, and tell me about your experience backpacking The Big One.♦

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FAST FACTS

Mount Rainier was established in 1899 as America's fifth national park by President McKinley, and largely advocated by John Muir. Its summit height is 14,411', making it the fifth-highest mountain in the lower 48.

As late as 1924, people considered changing the name of Mount Rainier to Mount Tacoma, to better reflect its original Native American name.

Mount Rainier is home to the largest single-peak glacier system in the contiguous United States. At 5.7 miles long and 705 feet thick, Carbon Glacier is the lowest glacier in elevation (3,500 feet) of any in the lower 48 states. Emmons Glacier, at 4.3 square miles, is the largest glacier in the lower 48.

About 9,000 people a year attempt to reach Mount Rainier's summit; about half actually make it. Of the 56 known routes to the summit, the Camp Muir or Camp Schurman routes are used by 80 percent of climbers.

The fastest recorded circumnavigation of the complete 95-mile Wonderland Trail was in 2006, when Kyle Slagg clocked in at just under 21 hours!

Mount Rainier's snowfall record is 1,122 inches (93.5 feet!) in the winter of 1971-1972.

The Douglas-firs found in the Grove of the Patriarchs are estimated to be more than 1,000 years old. The Alaska yellow cedars on the upper Laughingwater Creek are more than 1,200 years old.