



OUTDOORS

Ice Bound

A MID-WINTER PADDLE ON BAKER LAKE

Story and photo by John D'Onofrio · Wednesday, March 4, 2009



My paddle hit the ice with a resounding *thunk*.

It was solid all right, and getting harder to avoid, great sheets of it spreading outward from the eastern shore. We're halfway up Baker Lake on a dazzling winter morning - the sun is shining and, except for some itinerant loons, we have the lake completely to ourselves. We paddle north, straight towards the

icy towers of Shuksan, gleaming like Shangri-La at the head of the lake. The woods surrounding the lake are in deep snow and a great quiet settles over us, broken only by the dipping of our paddles. There is no wind at all and we move through perfect mirror image reflections of the surrounding mountains.

The south end of the lake had been almost completely ice free but as we paddle north the ice reaches further and further out from the east shore and eventually we are compelled to cross back over to the western shore to find passage. We paddle along the snow-dappled bank, maneuvering up a narrowing lead of open water and soon the ice closes in all together, stretching completely across the lake, rendering further progress impossible.

We slip into a small cove of open water at the mouth of a stream and push through a thin crust of ice to reach shore on a sandy finger of land extending out into the lake. Mt. Baker rises like an island in the sky, its white dome glittering in the afternoon sun. We pitch the tent on a nearby snow bank and set off to explore the snow-covered sandbars along the water's edge.

Bare white trees line the shore above the cove and their reflection in the water is interspersed with chunks of bobbing ice, creating elegant patterns reminiscent of a Chagall painting. A pair of loons swims lazily in circles in our little cove, silently gliding amongst the ice. As evening falls we return to camp, light a fire and listen to owls.

By first light a steady rain begins to fall and we linger over coffee beneath the tarp, waiting it out. It's noon by the time the rain stops and we break camp, load the canoe and push off for home. The ice has receded somewhat overnight and in many places the contiguous sheets have broken up, covering the surface of the lake with geometric shapes that reflect the clouds like a broken mirror. We are obliged to paddle among these floes, threading our way in between the bigger ones and bouncing off of the smaller pieces.

As we approach the boat launch it begins to rain, big fat drops dancing on the glassy surface of the water. No matter - we're almost home. We spook a raven, and it takes flight over our heads, heavy wings beating the still air. We watch it for a long time as it heads up the lake, croaking its lyrical raven song until it disappears in the misty distance.

Getting there: Take Highway 20 16.5 miles east from Sedro-Wooley and turn left on the Grandy-Baker Lake Rd (just past mile marker 82). Follow this road for almost 14 miles and turn right at the sign for the Kulshan campground. The boat launch is about 1.5 miles down this road, just past the campground.

