

WEEKLY

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OUTDOORS

Hello, Goodbye

A BAPTISM IN BAKER RIVER

Story and photo by John D'Onofrio · Wednesday, July 11, 2012



We set off up the Baker River Trail in early afternoon. It was a freakishly hot day with temperatures nearing 80 degrees, making the hike in through the electric green of the verdant new growth a decidedly sweaty affair.

This was a farewell hike with my son Chris, leaving the next week for two years in Uganda in the Peace Corps. Emotions were complicated.

Water was running high, requiring some high stepping across creeks, but all in all, the trail was in great condition; minimal blow-downs and smooth sailing through fern gardens and elegant draperies of moss. When the trail dipped near the river, we'd get a blast of icy air, like opening the freezer on a hot day. It felt good—like honest-to-God summer.

At Sulphide Creek we said goodbye to the trail and headed downstream, bushwhacking through the bristling greenery; salmonberry, devil's club, the occasional stinging nettle.

Deeper in the forest, away from the stream, the way was over moss-carpeted jumbles of fallen trees, through a dense green world, a world of tendrils and shadows.

In the tangle, orientation was elusive and we made our way through the brush following the sound of Sulphide Creek somewhere off to our left, gradually harmonizing with the more deep-throated song of the Baker River dead ahead—our destination for the evening.

Climbing down an undercut bank, we found ourselves on the broad rocky bar of the Baker River, where Sulphide Creek offered itself up to the river.

Hot and sweaty, we dropped our packs, shucked our clothes and submerged ourselves in the pristine river—a brisk and stimulating baptism and balm for the trail-weary soul. We reclined on the bank and a warm breeze blew upriver, tousling the greenery and drying our hair. Nothing for it but to lean back in our Thermarest chairs and absorb the succulent sunshine.

Chris and I have enjoyed many backpacking trips together over the last 20 years, starting when he was seven years old. There's a lot of water under the bridge and a lot of great memories. Suffice it to say that it will be inconceivably difficult to have him on the other side of the world for two years.

As a parent, my feelings are a mixture of pride in his adventurous spirit and altruism and a deeply felt sense of loss.

But there, beside the Baker River in the mellow sunshine, I savored the moment, wanting it to last forever.

Later, we sat beside a small fire at the river's edge and watched the light drain from a purple sky. As darkness fell, our conversation dwindled. Stars appeared. The music of the river seemed bittersweet, a refrain to accompany our dreams.

It wasn't quite a swan song, but it was something close.