

WEEKLY

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OUTDOORS

Reach for the Sky

CASCADE PASS AND SAHALE ARM

Story and photo by John D'Onofrio · Wednesday, August 15, 2012



North Cascades National Park is famous the world over for its incredible hiking. With everything from lowland old-growth rambles to epic alpine traverses, the park has it all. You could devote your life to exploring the possibilities here and die before the job was done.

As an introduction to the splendors of North Cascades Park, the iconic Cascade Pass trail has proven to be a favorite—in fact, it gets more use than any other trail in the park. And no wonder, as it affords even casual walkers the chance to experience the magnificent country above the tree line and soak in jaw-

dropping views of some of the park's spectacular peaks. And, impossible as it seems when you get to the pass, the best is yet to come.

Even the parking lot at the end of the Cascade River Road is wildly scenic, with some of the best views available by car in the state.

Once you're done ogling the peaks, strap on your hiking boots and head for the trailhead. The trail whisks you up through the woods, offering occasional glimpses of the wonders to come. Although you'll gain 1,800 feet in the 3.7 miles to the pass, the trail is so well graded that it's never steep.

Before you know it, you're traversing the open rock slopes that lead to the pass, surrounded by some of the most dramatic mountain scenery in North America. The last stretch usually has a few snow patches to cross. Trekking poles might come in handy.

Now, let's be clear: Cascade Pass is not the place to go to find solitude. A steady stream of pilgrims makes its way there every hikeable day of the year, so it's unlikely that you'll have it to yourself. But here's the secret: keep going. Head north on the trail to Sahale Arm and not only will you leave the crowds behind, but the views—already wonderful—will just keep getting better.

This part of the trail is steep. If you go all the way to its end at the Sahale Glacier, you'll have climbed an additional 2,400 feet in only 2.5 miles. It will seem farther.

But you don't have to go all the way to the top if time or energy wane. Walking on Sahale Arm is a supreme aesthetic experience. The meadows are lush and verdant with gardens of wildflowers in season. Gaze down, down, down to Doubtful Lake. It's aptly named. There's a trail that goes down there but, come on, you're on top of Sahale Arm. I've never been tempted to make the plunge.

The views out over the mighty fangs surrounding Cascade Pass are, in my humble opinion, as good as it gets from any trail in the North Cascades. As a matter of fact, at 7,200 feet, the Sahale Glacier Camp is the highest trail-accessible camp in the park.

If you keep going, you'll eventually leave the meadows behind for rocky moraine. The way is arduous, but each step yields better and better views of the sea of peaks.

Sure, it's a grunt, but do it. Take your time. Linger in the meadows. Savor every moment.

For more information about North Cascades National Park, go to <http://www.nps.gov/noca/>