

# WEEKLY

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## The Path Less Traveled

A VISIT TO GOAT LAKE

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Story and photo by John D'Onofrio · Wednesday, July 13, 2011

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Spring has come and gone. Summer has arrived. And yet, *still* the high country is buried in snow. For those of us with “the itch,” it’s torture.

But lo! There is a wonderful destination available now without stepping foot in the white stuff. The destination is Goat Lake, and the journey is delightful.

For many years, the trail to Goat Lake climbed gradually through lush forest beside the roaring tumult of Elliot Creek. But inattention and overuse combined to turn the trail into a quagmire for lost souls, and it was abandoned in favor of the “high” Elliot Route, an old logging road that, while efficient enough, lacks the character of the “low” route.

But the original route has recently been completely rehabilitated, and, let me tell you, the journey is sweet.

We headed out of Darrington and into the deep woods, the land of chainsaw sculptures and foreboding clouds. We followed the Sauk River upstream and made camp on its banks.

In the morning, the parking lot at the Goat Lake trailhead was packed. As one of the few melted-out trails to access the high country, it is wildly popular right now.

I use the term “high country” here in a relative sense. At less than 3,200 feet, Goat Lake is not particularly high, but its setting in a wild glacial cirque, surrounded by a conclave of icy peaks, makes it appear much higher.

We headed up the old logging road into the green forest, walking through colonnades of freshly leafed-out alders and patches of big cedars, the remains of what once was. After the sparkle of the alders, the shadow-filled forest seemed Brothers Grimm dark.

The old road ended at a braided creek, recently rearranged by winter storms. We crossed it and began climbing rough-and-tumble switchbacks alongside the cascading waters of Elliot Creek.

At the crest the lake abruptly came into view, a gleaming aquamarine—the color of water recently converted from ice. Dark mountains rose into the clouds, their faces brightened by spectacular waterfalls.

We glimpsed the great walls of ice, rock and snow of Cadet Peak through the mists, tantalizing and seductive. The air was completely still—not a breath of wind—and the reflection in the lake was flawless, mirroring the ramparts.

Somewhere in the murky clouds, an avalanche roared. As evening fell, we ate dinner beside the candle lantern and listened to the soothing sounds of falling water.

In the morning, sunlight filled the cirque and, after a short excursion along the lakeshore, it was time to head home.

We headed back down the switchbacks, and when we came to the junction with the “low” trail, we went our separate ways; I was curious about the rehabilitated old trail and my companion opted for the predictability of the old road.

The lower Elliot trail was completely magical, winding through hobbit woods and gardens of bleeding heart, trillium and skunk cabbage beside the bucking bronco whitewater of the creek in its mossy green gorge.

There were a million creek crossings, all easy, and the marshy spots had been ingeniously bridged or bypassed. Hats off to the forest service types; they’ve done a great job of restoring this route.

I encountered no one the entire way back to the trailhead, which was fine with me.

As the mountain snows start to melt, I'll be turning my attention to higher country, but next year, when that itch needs scratching, I suspect I'll find myself back in the green Eden beside Elliot Creek.