



OUTDOORS

Autumn's Last Gasp

DAYS AND NIGHTS AT HARTS PASS

Story and photo by John D'Onofrio · Wednesday, November 17, 2010



The curtain was coming down. That was obvious.

The forecast called for snow flurries - the first of the season - and we wanted one last hurrah in the high country before it slipped into its

winter cloak of white. We headed for Hart's Pass on the east side of the mountains, a strategic decision made to try to capture whatever late autumn sunshine might still be available.

Harts Pass is a favorite destination when the weather on this side of the range is questionable, often offering sunshine when the western slopes are submerged in clouds. It's also the highest point in the state accessible by automobile, affording instant access to the alpine.

We arrived in late afternoon and sure enough, the sun was shining - although a dense wall of grey was moving towards us across the Cascade crest. There was no mistaking the willowy smell of winter in the air. We drove to the end of the road and parked by the gate near the top of Slate Peak and continued on foot to the lookout perched on the top.

The top of Slate Peak is parking lot-level. In fact, it was literally flattened by the military in the late 50's to facilitate the construction of a radar station, which as part of the DEW (Distant Early Warning) system was abandoned before it was completed and never used. Your tax dollars at work.

We had Slate Peak to ourselves and spent some time admiring the surrounding parklands and savoring the fresh, cold wind. The last light of day touched the desolate peaks one at a time, like organ music.

We made camp below in the Meadow camp, a strangely beautiful place. Gutted by a forest fire in 2003, the meadows are coming back and the ghostly limb-less trees provide an unusual - and for me at least, beguiling - ambiance. Tonight, it's wide open to the moon.

By morning, a whisper of snow began to fall, making telltale little muffled sounds on the roof of the tent. We emerged amongst the spectral burned-out tree skeletons in a strange, watery light.

By the time we headed back up Slate Peak the snow had stopped, and the skies were a mixture of roiling clouds and fleeting patches of effervescent blue. The autumn sun shined through these gaps like a roving spotlight, highlighting small scenes of wonder amongst the vast mountain tableau. The wind was insistent and cold, blowing across from the cloud-hidden glaciers of the crest.

The north-facing ridges were all dusted with white striations of new snow, winter's foot in the door. Great cloud shadows danced below us in

the Okanogan Valley. It looked like you could head up that valley and disappear.

After a while, we headed down into the yellow woods beside the Methow River and made camp beside Robinson Creek. The forest floor was carpeted with fallen leaves - it was like being in a Monet painting, all shimmering and gold.

As darkness fell, we added layers of fleece and lit a fire. When the conversation lapsed, the silence was palpable - nothing but the musical burbling of the creek and the occasional sighing of the wind in the trees, a subtle soundtrack for the passing of autumn.

Getting There

Drive Highway 20 to Mazama, turn left and then left again on the Harts Pass Road. Drive about 19 miles and turn right on the Slate Peak road.