

WEEKLY

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Hidden Lake Peak

A JOURNEY INTO THE SKY

Story and photo by John D'Onofrio · Wednesday, October 7, 2009



We lock the car, hoist our packs and immediately begin ascending through the dripping forest on the gnarled root-choked path. Water is running everywhere. After a sweaty mile, we break out of the trees and work our way up the verdant valley of Sibley Creek through shoulder-high fireweed and cow parsnip. Great fields of mountain hellebore are in bloom, their gangly alien-looking blossoms swaying in the breeze. Here too, water flows down through the meadows in countless rivulets, brightened by monkey flower and lichen.

As we climb, a somber mist fills the valley, flowing around us, hushing the burbling water sounds. We get occasional glimpses of steep green slopes rising to grey rock - where we're headed, into the clouds. Eventually we reach the upper end of the thick brush and the terrain becomes rockier, softened by heather. We cross Sibley Creek for the second time and leave the main trail, following a faint path up a

gully – the route to Sibley Creek Pass. This lonely little pass is infrequently visited despite sensational views of many of the grand peaks in the area. Access is via an unmarked turn on the busy trail to Hidden Lake Peak, a goat path of a trail. If we weren't looking (hard) for it, we'd have missed it.

We climb steeply up the ridge, using heather and rocks to pull ourselves up in places. Immediately the mist thickens to white-out conditions, lending a distinctly otherworldly atmosphere to our efforts. As we gain altitude the slopes become rockier and nearly devoid of vegetation. Visibility is nil and we make our way from cairn to cairn in the opaque mist. There is much enthusiastic grunting. Gaining 900 feet in a scant half-mile, we come upon the pass suddenly, discernable as such only by the fact that beyond it is thin air, an indistinguishable void dropping away to who-knows-what.

We drop our packs and scout the environs of the pass, locating both a semi-flat spot amongst the rocks for the tent and an all-important last lingering patch of snow, a source of drinking water. We're above the land of flowing water here on this high bench.

We establish camp and wander around the pass, exploring the surreal, cloud-softened rockscape. The rocks are streaked with swirling reds and oranges, accented by luminous green lichen and streaks of quartz that look like snow in the obscure half-light of the swirling clouds. Periodically the clouds roll past us and we are afforded brief glimpses of surrounding cliffs and ramparts. An unseen waterfall, somewhere below us to the east provides a pleasing background of white noise. Marmots dance amongst the rocks. It's cold – we don our many layers of fleece and face the wind.

As evening approaches the curtains of mist whirl around the high country, revealing and concealing the epic towers of El Dorado Peak looming above us and the cold, snow-dappled basin below us to the east. The clouds rise for a moment and sweeping emerald green slopes appear shockingly vibrant in the grey dusk. As suddenly as they appeared, they are gone in the murk.

After dinner we wash our dishes in snow and relax on the rocks around the candle lantern's corona of light. Late in the evening, the clouds sink into the valleys below us and the milky way glitters overhead. In the darkness, the up thrust silhouettes of previously unseen mountains crowd the sky, a beguiling and mysterious sight.

In the morning the world is filled with brilliant sunshine, the veil lifted. The mountains are revealed in all their dramatic splendor. Directly above camp Hidden Lake peak rises, all grey fractured rock and snow. Behind us Mt. Baker and the Sisters gleam in the morning sun above river valleys filled with clouds. We break camp and pick our way down the steep slope back to the main trail. At the junction we stash our backpacks in the brush and set off for the Hidden Lake lookout to have a look around.

The trail traverses heather and rock slopes and rounding a bend, reveals the distant lookout cabin perched improbably on a jagged rock fang. From here it resembles a witches castle from some dark fairy tale, possibly home to flying monkeys.

Chastened by the sight, we climb to a great notch above Hidden Lake in its lonely basin of stone and lingering snow. We ascend a snowfield and negotiate a massive steeply-tilted granite escarpment and begin climbing the boulders towards the lookout.

It is early afternoon when we scramble over Volkswagon-sized rocks to the summit and flop out on the granite beside the cabin. I've spent the better part of 25 years wandering the Cascades high country but nothing I've seen has prepared me for the view from the top. The North Cascades are revealed in all their glory – mountains upon mountains, stretching from Baker in the north to Rainier in the south. Countless peaks, glaciers and deep green river valleys surround us on all sides like a topo map come to life. Seen from here, the great summits like Glacier and Dome peaks appear simply as high spots in a majestic sea of ice-encrusted rock.

We linger on the smooth stones in the warm sun for an hour, enraptured by the scene, before starting the long descent back down the rocks towards the green world below.

Getting there: From Rt. 20 (the North Cascades Highway), turn onto the Cascade River road near Marblemount. At 9.8 miles, turn left on Road 1540, signed for Hidden Lake. Reach the trailhead at 4.7 miles, elevation 3600'.