

WEEKLY

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Jump-starting Summer

A VISIT TO PALOUSE FALLS

Story and photo by John D'Onofrio · Wednesday, May 18, 2011



As spring unfolded in fits and starts, I thought I would take a trip to eastern Washington to take a look at Palouse Falls, which is, geographically speaking, basically way the hell out there in the middle of nowhere.

I've lived in Washington for more than 20 years and I can count the trips I've taken east of Twisp on the fingers of Django Reinhardt's left hand.

My old friend Jesse was in town, just arrived from bicycling across Laos and getting ready to head to Haines, Alaska for his summer job guiding river trips on the Chilkoot. He thought it was a good idea too (he's funny that way).

It was Ark-building weather on the west side of the mountains, so a little excursion east seemed just about right—a chance to stop and smell the sage, if you know what I mean.

We crossed Stevens Pass and rolled into open country under a wide-open Western sky, passing through landscapes of scrub trees and unrealized dreams.

We headed south out of the lonely hamlet of Washtucna through rolling hills that looked like a Lisa McShane painting and reached Palouse Falls State Park in late afternoon.

The campground was a vibrant and disconcerting green amongst the scrublands of the coulee country; a little slice of suburbia with a mowed lawn and water spigots every 50 feet. But it was pretty much empty except for roving packs of yellow-bellied marmots, a subspecies of marmot more akin to the prairie dog than what we're used to on the west side.

Obviously used to eating leftover hot dogs and s'mores, these critters circled our camp, barking for food. As I said, disconcerting.

We pitched our tent on the lawn, then walked out to a point that overlooked the falls, which drop 200 feet from a basalt ledge in a thunderous surge, filling the canyon with roaring echoes, music to winter-weary ears.

Darkness descended and we threw out our sleeping bags beneath the stars next to the tent, savoring the cloudless sky and the soothing white noise of falling water.

In the morning, we hiked out along the canyon rim to have a look around. A canyon wren sang its soft glissando theme song. I scrambled down the cliff face on basalt debris to the edge of the river above the falls, all froth and tumult. The canyon walls rose vertically from the water's edge, fluted in lichens and mosses, orange, yellow, green. Geese passed overhead in twos and threes, honking like Captain Beefheart, following the canyon north toward rumors of summer.

At day's end, we climbed back to the rim as shadows swallowed the canyon, returning to our putting-green camp in the twilight's last gleaming.

As we cooked our dinner over a crackling fire, a train whistle moaned in the distance like a hobo anthem. The fire burned down and an owl told us bedtime stories. The wind came up, but by then we'd crossed the threshold of sleep, dreaming of blue skies and summers yet to come.