

WEEKLY

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OUTDOORS

Beyond the Flowers

THE FAR SIDE OF SKYLINE DIVIDE

Story and photo by John D'Onofrio · Wednesday, August 26, 2009



Skyline Divide is a hiking destination justifiably famous for its remarkable wildflower displays. These flowers, combined with awe-inspiring views of Baker and Shuksan draw crowds on sunny summer days.

The crowds are even bigger than usual this year as both the Glacier Creek and Hannegan access roads are closed for repairs, focusing hiking activity on the divide.

But here's the thing: Skyline Divide offers more than the meadows covered with lupine that most hikers come to see. Another aspect of the divide is revealed to those who follow this magnificent trail to its end at the icy headwall of Chowder Ridge. Here, beyond the verdant green a different landscape awaits; a dramatic rock-strewn ridge softened by lingering snowfields that is literally in the shadow of Mt. Baker.

It is this "other" Skyline Divide that we came to experience as we hoisted the backpacks and hit the trail. We had a few days to spend in the mountains and hoped to spend them wandering these high parapets beyond the throngs of flower devotees.

We climbed up through sweet sun-scented forest in late afternoon, avoiding the heat of mid-day and emerged into the sweeping green meadows above tree line. As always, the view provided an excellent reason to drop the packs and drink in the scene - here were the wildflower wonderlands in their kaleidoscopic purples, reds, yellows and whites.

We pushed on, following the undulating ridge, each step a scenic delight. We made camp beside a lingering patch of snow and ate dinner in golden evening light surrounded on three sides by the glorious North Cascades and on the fourth, to the west, the burnished Salish Sea, islands floating like Fata Morganas in the setting sun. As darkness fell, lights filled the Fraser Valley and stars filled the sky.

In the morning we loaded our day packs and headed further out along the ridge, past marmots that watched us with wary eyes. As we ascended, the green slopes gave way to rockier, barren landscapes and we reached the high point of the Divide at 6500'.

We spent a few moments in contemplation (can you blame us?) and moved on, following the boot-beaten path towards the great white mountain, traversed a rocky spine and then descended via a series of giant steps to the headwall of Chowder Ridge; the terminus of the Divide. We spent an hour in the cool shadows of the headwall before started back over the great stone steps. Back at the high point, we watched the sun set on the distant sea, turning the sky a thousand shades of gold, and then made our way through the gathering darkness back to camp.

After dinner, I sat beside the candle lantern and listened to the night music of distant coyotes when my attention was caught by shimmering light in the northern sky; the Aurora Borealis! Candle lantern extinguished, I sat back in my therma-rest chair and watched the ethereal curtains of light play across the sky, a fitting finale to a few days well spent on Skyline Divide.

Getting There:

From the Mt. Baker Highway, turn right on Glacier Creek Rd (1 mile past the ranger station in Glacier). Make an immediate left on Deadhorse Rd. The trailhead is 12 miles up the road on the left.