



OUTDOORS

## Skyline Divide

SAVORING THE EPHEMERAL



Well, suddenly it's September, summer already beginning to excuse itself and the kids back in school. Like last year, this summer has been fleeting

up in the mountains. With most trails covered in snow until August and winter breathing down our necks, it's prime time in the North Cascades. Time to get while the gettins' good.

With this in mind, we joined the throngs on the trail to Skyline Divide - a favorite beauty spot - one fine September afternoon. The trailhead parking lot was packed and cars were parked along the road for half a mile. Lots of folks looking for a little alpine glory before the snows return.

The trail up through the woods was busy. In addition to the hikers in two's and three's and eight's, a Washington Trail Association (WTA) crew was spread along the route, shovels and pulaskis in hand. You have to love the WTA. With Forest Service budgets cut to the bone, they are invaluable for maintaining popular trails like Skyline.

We reached the ridge top with its sweeping meadows and awe-inspiring views of Shuksan, Baker and scores of other marquee peaks. The wildflowers were still blooming: carpets of purple, yellow and white. No bugs at all. Lots and lots of blissed-out hikers though. I'd never seen half this many people on the Divide. However the crowds were left behind as we continued along the undulating ridge. Soon enough we found ourselves more or less alone in the great, omnipresent silence.

Dramatic clouds swirled around the peaks, cloaking the summits. An occasional beam of sunlight found us amongst the flowers, and we reveled in the warmth. Baker's summit appeared from the curtain of clouds, its glaciers a deep, breathtaking blue. Susan got out the binoculars to scan Chowder Basin for bears, commonly seen foraging down in that green valley and I sat back beside the lupines and watched the clouds. A breeze blew cold, a reminder of winter on the way.

I'm always filled with a sense of gratitude and bittersweet joy at times like these in the mountains, always aware of the fleeting nature of the seasons and thus by extension, of the passing of years and preciousness of life. It's good to be reminded of these things, helpful in the eternal quest to live in the moment.

The trees on the divide are stunted, twisted - and beautiful. *Krummholz*, they're called. In German, *krumm* means crooked and *holz* means wood. Those Germans have a way with words. These trees also speak to the passing of time and the fury of the elements. Their short stature is the result of only being able to survive where they are sheltered by snow or rocks, which protect them from winter's onslaught in the high country. For me, they embody the duality of beauty and struggle.

As evening gathered its forces, we retraced our steps along the ridge, turning for one last lingering look out at the snow-covered peaks before re-entering the darkening forest.