



Autumn in Shangri La

A VISIT TO YELLOW ASTER BUTTE

Story and photo by John D'Onofrio · Wednesday, September 30, 2010



I followed Luna the dog up the tilted avalanche slope. We were ascending meadows carpeted with riotous fall color towards Yellow Aster Butte, a favorite destination. The colors were unreal – a thousand variations on red, orange, purple, and yellow. Luna was enthusiastic.

Above us the sky was clear and the sun was blazing. Here in the bread basket of autumn, it was the nicest day of summer. First Baker and then Shuksan reared up on the horizon as we climbed, their icy ramparts gleaming in the sun. A tiny creek bed at the base of Yellow Aster Butte held the last of the season's Monkey flowers, a precious reminder of the summer gone by. It was a perfect afternoon in the North Cascades.

We arrived at the junction with the trail that descends into the magical basin filled with scattered tarns. From above the tarns looked like mirrors, reflecting the distinguished profiles of the Border Peaks. We descended the cliff on ingenious switchbacks, threaded our way amongst the pools and dropped our packs at the north end of the meadows, in the shadow of Mt. Larrabee. Camp for tonight.

The stars were thick as thieves and the Milky Way shimmered overhead. The night breezes were warm. September became October. All is well.

In the purple, pre-dawn light I loaded a day pack and slipped between the tarns to the cliff face. Above, I wandered the wonderlands, examining nooks and crannies and sampling the sweet blueberries

We spent the day exploring the rocky knobs to the west of the tarns. The last knob commanded a spectacular view of Baker, Shuksan and the technicolor wall of Tomyhoi Peak. We dubbed this “Shangri La Knob”. At day’s end, the tarns below us in the basin were bronzed by the low sun and the fall color gardens seemed to be illuminated from within. Back at camp, we enjoyed the silence beneath unknown constellations.

In the morning we decided to move camp to ‘Shangri La’. After re-establishing camp there, we climbed the steep rough-and-tumble path up Tomyhoi. As we ascended the flaming red slopes, the views grew wider, eventually including the Pickets, Whatcom Peak & the splendid and complicated massif of Redoubt. Continuing up the undulating ridge, the Border Peaks formed a great wall to the north, their soaring rock faces a ruddy red in the afternoon sun.

We climbed to “the notch”, a gargantuan gap in the ridge and explored the immediate vicinity. Looking down through the notch, the steep meadows were covered in mardi gras colors, plunging into the dark forest far below. Ptarmigan, already wearing their winter coats of white, fluttered in the heather. The sun dropped below the mountains to the west and the surrounding peaks dissolved into dusky silhouettes. We hightailed it down the ridge in the twilight and descended the wall in semi-darkness.

The morning brought swirling clouds, obscuring the low lands. We lingered over cups of coffee and watched the mists dance around us, reluctant to leave. Finally we loaded our packs, said our goodbyes to Shangri La and started down through rubble and heather towards home.