



OUTDOORS

Stairway to Heaven

AUTUMN GOLD AT YELLOW ASTER BUTTE

Story and photo by John D'Onofrio · Wednesday, October 3, 2012



Everyone who has hiked around Mt. Baker has their favorites: Skyline Divide; Copper Ridge; Lake Ann. All great - no doubt.

But there's something about Yellow Aster Butte that beguiles me, that calls me back again and again. Maybe it's the marquee views of both Shuksan and Baker. Maybe it's the edge-of-the-sky lines of the

butte itself. Perhaps those sweet little tarns, iced over for most of the year, their water crystalline and pure. Certainly, it's the excitement of ascending Tomihoi Peak, at 7451 feet, a bully pulpit over the wildest reaches of the North Cascades.

Years ago, to reach Yellow Aster meant climbing the Keep Kool trail, a StairMaster affair with one of those delightfully ironic old-school names. Keep cool? I don't think so. It weeded out the casual visitors. I remember a long-ago Fourth of July in hallucinogenic mists on the Butte, where the fireworks were provided by shooting stars. Today, the price of admission is not so steep. The trailhead, located at mile 4.5 of the Twin Lakes Road, provides straight-forward access to the wonderlands above.

Climb up through avalanche slopes of greenery and gurgling little streams, into the forest. Press on through wet little meadows, breaking tree line above a verdant valley. Hang a left at a junction (straight ahead the trail crests a rise and drops like a stone to Tomihoi Lake - not recommended) and traverse across meadows of mountain hellebore and heather, dipping into the storm-gnashed gully of a snow-melt creek and rising to a shoulder beneath Yellow Aster Butte.

If you're day hiking, turn right and ascend the steep trail to the summit of the butte and magnificent views of the surrounding peaks. The top of Yellow Aster Butte is a sacred place. Watching the sun go down and hiking out by headlamp is a time-honored tradition.

If you're planning to spend the night (or two, or four), drop down the precipitous goat path to a basin filled with sparkling tarns, a paradigm of alpine grandeur. Pitch a tent between the tarns, or better yet, keep going. A rough path leads up the flanks of Tomihoi Peak to wider views and lonelier camps (assuming that there's still pools of snowmelt water amongst the rocks and rubble).

Whether you make camp down amongst the tarns or higher on Tomihoi, you'll want to explore the route that ascends to near the top of the peak. The higher you go, the more expansive the views out over Yellow Aster to the wild Pickets, a paradise of untamed peaks. Up here there are more goats than people, and on several occasions I've watched bears forage in the high meadows beneath the peak.

Go as far you feel comfortable. To attain the summit of Tomihoi, you'll need to cross a finger of glacier - not recommended unless you have an ice axe (maybe crampons too) and know how to use it. No matter. The views from the high notch below the summit are spectacular enough.

Baker, Shuksan, the wild world gathers below you like a dream. Most people live their whole lives without an inkling that such beauty exists. Count your blessings. Watch the stars come out. Life is good.