

Swimming with Bears

A nine-day trip to Image Lake in the Glacier Peak Wilderness

JOHN D'ONOFRIO



Enjoying a dip in upper Lyman Lakes in the Glacier Peak Wilderness. A nine-day trek to one of the state's most beautiful places has been made all the more solitary after road washouts closed most access routes to the area.

BY JOHN D'ONOFRIO

We watch quietly, holding our collective breath as the bear approaches the shore of Image Lake, ambling in a most determined fashion down the slope. It reaches the water's edge about a hundred feet from where we are sprawled on the bank in the afternoon sun, and without breaking stride, plunges into the water. We watch in awe as it swims out into the lake, turns on its back, paws splashing, and then rolls over in the cool water. After a few moments cavorting in the water, it pulls itself back onto the bank and gives a mighty shake, water rising in a great arc, illuminated by the golden sunlight.

One expects magnificent vistas and green meadows covered with blooming hellebore in the Glacier Peak Wilderness. One anticipates lonely, wind-swept scree slopes and snow-capped mountains. One hopes for solitude and the great reverber-

ating silence of the high country. But one does not expect swimming bears.

We had begun our nine-day trek through the wilderness at Holden, the isolated Lutheran camp high above the shores of Lake Chelan, on a perfect late August afternoon. We had arrived on the venerable Lady of the Lake, the storied foot ferry sailing out of the town of Chelan, carrying pilgrims of all sorts up the lake. We disembarked at the dock at Lucerne and caught a ride up to Holden on the center's bus. On this late summer morning, the bus is filled with excited laughing and singing Lutherans on their way to summer camp.

In Holden, we retrieve our bulging backpacks filled with gear and food for nine days in the Glacier Peak Wilderness and slip away from the celebratory crowd. Packs hoisted, we walk west out of the camp toward the wild high country. The trail takes us through a magical green forest of cottonwood and aspen before

climbing an open slope. Traversing higher, lovely Hart Lake appears below us, an aquamarine gem set beneath the ragged escarpments of Dumbell Mountain. We drop down to the shore of the lake and work our way up the hanging valley through a jungle of undergrowth, barely able to see the ground beneath our feet in the dense greenery. We climb switchbacks in the blazing morning sun and contour beneath a massive boulder field, stopping at a welcome stream to refill our empty water bags.

After the stream, the grade relents and we pass by mighty Crown Point Falls, revealed in all its thunderous glory, draining the Lyman Lakes basin above in a series of powerful leaps down a huge rock face. Above the falls, lower Lyman Lake comes into view, its turquoise waters set below the imposing spires of Chiwawa and Fortress Mountains. We continue on, our sights set upward to Cloudy Pass. Lyman Basin will have to wait.

NORTHWEST EXPLORER

Climbing above the lake, we ascend through subalpine forest on switchbacks, our packs seeming heavier with each weary step. The trees alternate with small meadows dappled with lupine and paintbrush before we emerge onto lush alpine tundra beneath the pass, slopes covered in bear grass. We set up camp on a rocky knob above the pass, beside a small patch of snow and set about melting snow for water. As we eat, the sun flares magenta over a panorama of mighty peaks. An owl swoops low over us, always a good omen. After darkness descends, we settle back among the rocks and watch meteors streak across the star-bejeweled sky. Finally, our sleeping bags call and we slip into the tent as the benevolent moon rises in the east.

The morning dawns with clear blue skies and we eat breakfast on our elegant rock patio as a cloud of flies the size and disposition of Dobermans descends. We decide to quickly break camp and push on over Cloudy Pass, greatly disappointing the flies. We descend the far side of the pass and contour up and over Suiattle Pass in the trees, eventually emerging beneath the open meadows

of Miners Ridge, where we climb steep fields of blooming mountain hellebore, their gangly flower stalks bobbing in the breeze. The small creeklets we cross are filled with ethereal clouds of tiny blue butterflies. As we walk, we have to be careful not to inhale butterflies.

As we angle up higher on the green ridge, a sea of glacier-encrusted peaks reveals itself across the deep blue shadows of the Suiattle River Valley. Glacier Peak, from this perspective, is stupendous. The going is easy now as we ascend the meadows and crest a shoulder of the ridge. There below us is Image Lake, nestled in its beautiful green basin. It's been at least twenty years since I last visited this high mountain tarn—and once again it takes my breath away.

We drop our packs, pitch our tent in a green meadow below the lake with a front row view of Glacier Peak, and then make a beeline for the lake. Normally a busy place, a road washout on the more direct western approach via the Suiattle River Road has reduced the lakeside population to just the three of us. We doff our dusty clothes and plunge into the cold, clear water. After a bit of

splashing about accompanied by the obligatory cold water whooping we lie back in the green grass and bask in the warm afternoon sun. Not a cloud in the sky. The sensation of bare feet in the soft grass is indescribably delightful—a perfect moment.

In the midst of this reverie, the bear appears, and joins us enjoying the cool waters of Image Lake. After a half hour of bear watching we fill our water bottles at a meandering stream. The last light of day paints Glacier Peak orange and purple, and coyotes howl somewhere in the distance. Deer gather around us in the meadows. It's like being on the Discovery Channel.

The next morning is spent swimming in the lake and basking on its green shores. We rouse ourselves and hike up to the lookout cabin to gaze down into the blue depths of the Suiattle River Valley and out across the cavalcade of wild peaks. A solitary hawk circles overhead, carving lazy spirals in the

Trip Essentials

Image Lake (via Holden)

Round Trip: 29.6 miles to Image Lake, side trip to Upper Lyman Lake an additional 6 miles round trip

Elevation Gain: 3,670 feet in (including side trip to Upper Lyman Lake), 938 feet out.

Hikable: mid-July through September

Maps: Green Trails 112 Glacier Peak, 113 Holden, 114 Lucerne

To get there: Take the Lady of the Lake (or other ferries operated by the same company) from the town of Chelan up Lake Chelan to the dock at Lucerne. Call (509) 682-4584 or visit www.ladyofthelake.com for more info. There is no road access to Holden. Only certain ferry runs are met by the Holden bus, which takes you the 11 miles from the Lucerne dock to Holden, so check the schedule carefully. More info on Holden can be found at www.holdenvillage.org

JOHN D'ONOFRIO



Backpackers on Miners Ridge. Marmots, wildflowers and superb views are just a few of the highlights on this classic Cascades trek from Holden Village.



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Glacier Peak from Image Lake. One of the most beautiful places on earth.

cloudless sky.

We climb steep heather slopes above the lake. The early evening sun casts a rich golden light on the meadows. We are surrounded by wildly cavorting marmots whistling Dixie. As the sun drops toward the horizon of spires, Glacier Peak shines like a beacon. Although surrounded by muscular peaks, its monarch status is unchallenged. We are serenaded by the evening songs of birds as the last lingering rays of the sun illuminate the great volcano.

Morning brings high, fluffy clouds and pancakes adorned with freshly picked blueberries. We set off to the north and climb to a notch high on the ridge. The icy fortress of Dome Peak is front and center, its complicated gothic ridges wrapped in glaciers. From the notch we scramble up along the crest of the knife-edge ridge to the highest point on Miner's Ridge and a 360-degree view of peaks in all directions. Far below us, the green slopes are fringed with thin bands of trees, like penciled-in moustaches. A thousand feet below us, Image Lake gleams in the sun. We sit amid the bear

grass and watch the marmot floorshow as clouds begin to gather in earnest around Sinister Peak.

A bank of dense cloud passes below us, between our ridge-top perch and Plummer Mountain as the sun breaks through on the western horizon. Our shadows, falling on the clouds below us, are ringed in a rainbow of colors. It's the famous Brocken Spectre! A rare meteorological event, the Brocken Spectre occurs only when shadows are cast downward onto clouds at the exact moment of the setting (or rising) sun. For a brief and exhilarating moment, our aura-enhanced shadows dance among the swirling clouds on Plummer Mountain.

The peaks are cloaked in purple clouds as we descend back to camp through a misty dreamscape, picking our way through the greenery between impressionistic stands of austere alpine trees, soft and indistinct in the gathering evening. A place the elves might call home.

The next morning, we crawl out of the tent into a cloud. Whiteout. The hissing of the stove seems unnaturally loud in the

mist-dampened morning. We drink coffee and listen to our friends the marmots as they tune up for the day's whistling. The clouds lift and we take a morning swim in the silent lake.

By lunchtime dark, big-shouldered clouds return and it rains briefly, big drops splattering in the dust. The rain turns to hail and then abruptly stops. We hike up to the empty horse camp and continue on up through gardens of heather, past gnarled krummholtz and lichen-covered boulders. We stop on a high parapet and watch the surrounding mountains drift in and out of view. Another magical evening enfolds us as the sun goes down, bathing the meadows and lake in rich golden light, the kind of light that makes photographers giddy.

Blue skies return by morning as we break camp and haul our packs up to the lake for one last dip. Our bear rejoins us for a swim before wandering off, snout dipping in the copious blueberries. With a pang of regret, I hoist my pack and set off over the green meadows, saying my goodbyes to Image Lake.

We spend the day moving through

the magical high country back toward Cloudy Pass. We descend Miners Ridge into the shadow-activated forest, climb over Suiattle Pass and finally reach the final push to Cloudy Pass in late afternoon. Atop the pass, we pitch the tent and enjoy the evening meal while swatting mosquitoes. The only overcast at Cloudy Pass tonight is the cloud of mosquitoes.

Dawn arrives in shades of pink and purple and the mosquitoes are up early, hungry for breakfast. That's me. We drink our coffee and a huge golden eagle swoops down over our heads, wings outstretched, talons dangling. We pack up camp, by now an automatic and efficient undertaking, and descend the green slopes among the ever present marmots.

We reach the shores of beautiful lower Lyman Lake and turn off on a spur trail leading into the upper Lyman Basin. We wind through stands of picturesque trees to open meadowlands, the upper lakes visible ahead in their austere setting of rock and ice. We climb onto the lateral moraine of the Lyman Glacier and then drop down to the shores of the lake at the head of the basin. The glacier spills down the rock face of Chiwawa Mountain and into the lake.

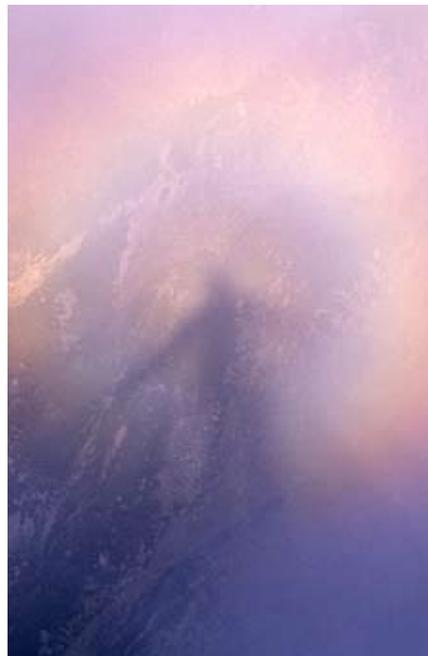
We drop our packs beside the glacier-polished shore, strip off our pungent clothes and jump into the icy water. The warm sun dries us almost immediately and we spend an idyllic afternoon lounging on the warm rocks beside the water. We have the basin to ourselves, savoring the afternoon sun, listening to the glacier's music as it creaks and groans.

Dusk comes and spreads a subtle pallet of colors across the surface of the lake. In the distance, Sitting Bull Mountain rises like a scene out of some lurid landscape painting by Thomas Kinkadee. Darkness falls and we eat chili, drink hot tea and watch the stars. The darkness is alive with sounds as the groaning glacier alternates with the unnerving rumble of rock fall.

Up at first light we sit quietly, waiting for the coffee water to boil in the chill morning air. The sun moves slowly down the rocky face of Chiwawa, taking its

time to reach us in the bottom of the cirque. We drink our coffee and listen to the agreeable white noise of falling water punctuated by the occasional groan from deep within the restless glacier. When the sun reaches us, the chill is vanquished instantaneously and we luxuriate in the sunlight.

After a week in the wilderness, we have slowed down and are beginning to learn how to just sit and be. I never fail to be surprised by how long it takes for the "noise" of our normal day-to-day lives to fade away. Here on this sun-drenched summer morning, sitting on



The Broken Spectre.

an ergonomic glacial erratic, we find a moment of stillness.

We trace the rocky shore of the lake to the place where the ice and water meet and discover the entrance to an ice cave among the glacial rubble. We step inside the mouth of the cave and explore its sinuous course. The sculpted walls and polished ceiling of the icy chambers glow with an iridescent blue, like the lighting scheme from a dream. We move through the cave cautiously as the sound of large falling objects can be heard frequently. We exit through a side door and climb onto the cave's roof, making our way

across ice and rubble back down to camp and a mid-morning swim.

After another glorious hour spent doing nothing, we set off across the tundra-like basin toward the lower lakes and green meadows. There are glacial erratics everywhere, boulders deposited by the retreating ice, some of them the size of Winnebagos. We follow the picturesque watercourse that connects the tiny turquoise tarns like a string of pearls. Its rock-hewn channel twists and turns and cascades down a series of sparkling terraces, smooth wet stone against lush gardens of green. We reach the outlet of the last of the upper lakes and stand at the brink of a thundering waterfall, cooled by the spray and inhaling the negative ions. Far below us, Lower Lyman Lake shines like a jewel.

My companions head back to camp, but I linger at the lip of the waterfall and watch cloud shadows dance across the untroubled surface of the lake. Eventually, much later, I head back through the green-gold meadows, savoring the sweet and melancholy light of evening. The tarns and streams reflect the sunset glow of the surrounding cliffs, and I walk beside pools of yellow and purple light. The evening sky burns magenta as a few wisps of orange cloud encircle Sitting Bull Mountain like a smoke ring.

Darkness comes as I reach camp. We prepare our last dinner in the wilderness and we eat in reverent silence beneath a million stars. In the morning we will break camp one last time and head down the trail to Holden and its happy Lutherans and then eventually by bus, boat and car back to "civilization." I stay up late, listening to the wind and the water and the rumbling stomach sounds of the glacier. As is my habit, I take a moment to internalize the scene, to memorize the sounds and the wind and the sky and to hold them inside for safekeeping. Breathing deeply, I slip into my sleeping bag and embrace the shifting landscape of dreams. ♦

John D'Onofrio is a writer, photographer and WTA member from Bellingham.