

Five Days in Goat Rocks Wilderness



Rod's Trails

FIVE DAYS IN GOAT ROCKS WILDERNESS

OR "OH, THAT'S WHY THEY CALL IT GOAT ROCKS"

According to the US Forest Service: A 105,600-acre alpine wonderland, the Goat Rocks Wilderness is a portion of the volcanic Cascade Mountain Range in southwestern Washington between Mount Rainier and Mount Adams. The Goat Rocks are remnants of a large volcano, extinct for some two million years. This ancient volcano once towered over the landscape at more than 12,000 feet in elevation, but has since eroded into several peaks averaging around 8,000 feet. The cluster of rocks and peaks have become known as Goat Rocks because of the bands of mountain goats that live here.

Goat Rocks Wilderness features mountainous terrain with elevations from 3,000 feet to 8,201 feet on Gilbert Peak. Much of it lies above timberline, providing out-standing alpine scenery. Many high-elevation trails remain impassable, due to snow, until July and snow can return as early as September.

Goat Rocks has been on my (Rod's) wish list for a very long time. We decided to backpack the area one day in advance when we discovered that our original location, the Wallowa's, was on fire. On Sunday, August 16, we drove to Packwood, WA, parked the Fit at Packwood Lake Trailhead and then drove around (about 20 miles) to Lily Basin Trailhead. About four miles from Lily Basin Trailhead, we came across a very steep, rutted patch of road and agreed that the Fit would likely not make it when we returned to get the truck and Gary would have to run up the road and get the truck. We tried not to remember that during the hike, but it came out from time to time.

Lily Basin Trailhead is not real hard to find, but there is no obvious parking. The trail is marked by a sign identifying it as trail 76. Park just a few yards up the road at a wide spot in the road and call it good. No fee for parking here, but at Packwood Lake Trailhead a parking fee is required (I think \$5 per day). But, now that I am old, I have my old-fart National Forest Pass so that I can park for free – cool.

We ate a bit of lunch at Lily Basin Trailhead and hit the trail, our destination being Heart Lake, 6.5 miles away.



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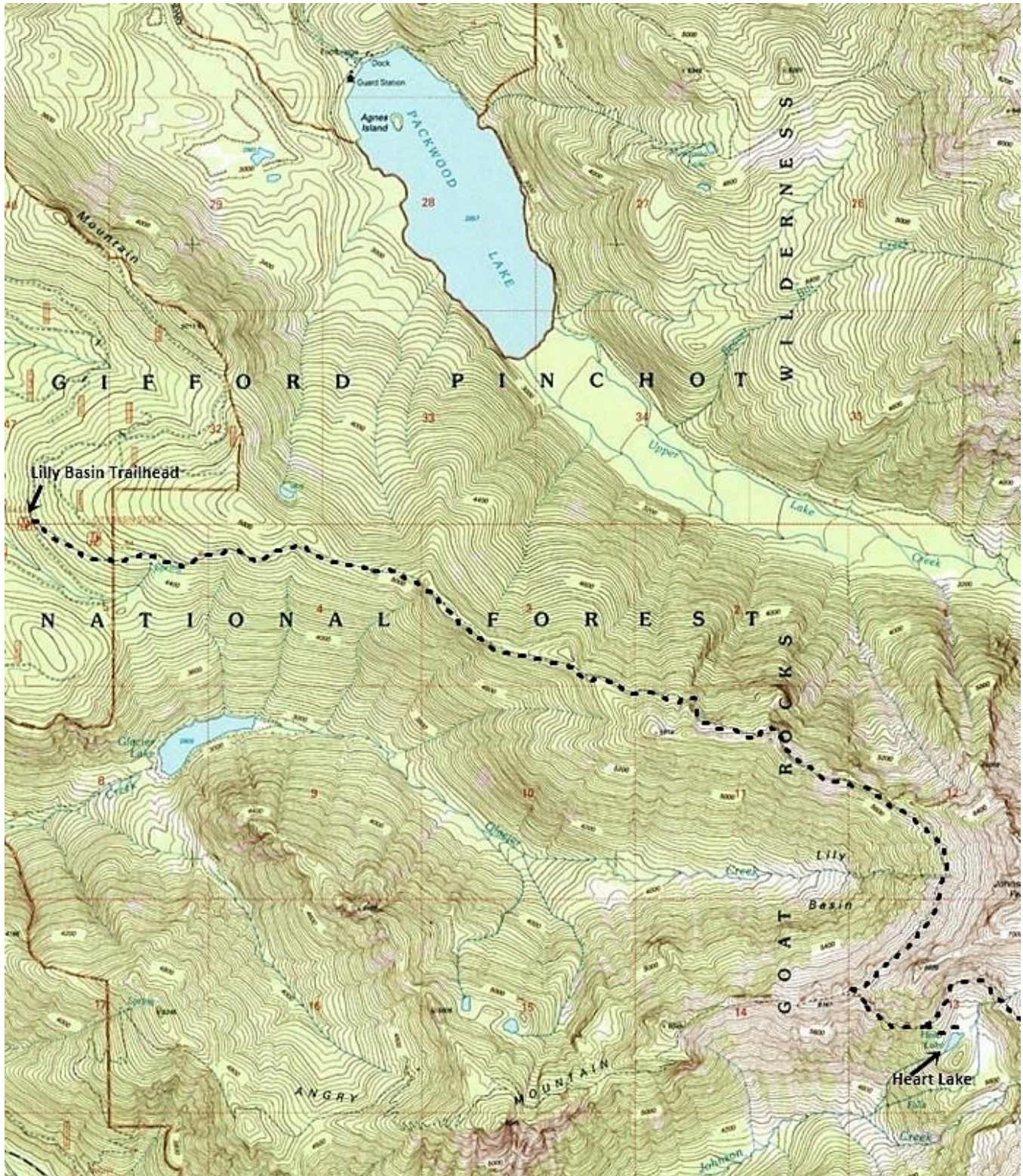
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Topo maps at the USGS Map Store: Packwood Lake, Old Snowy Mountain and Walupt Lake



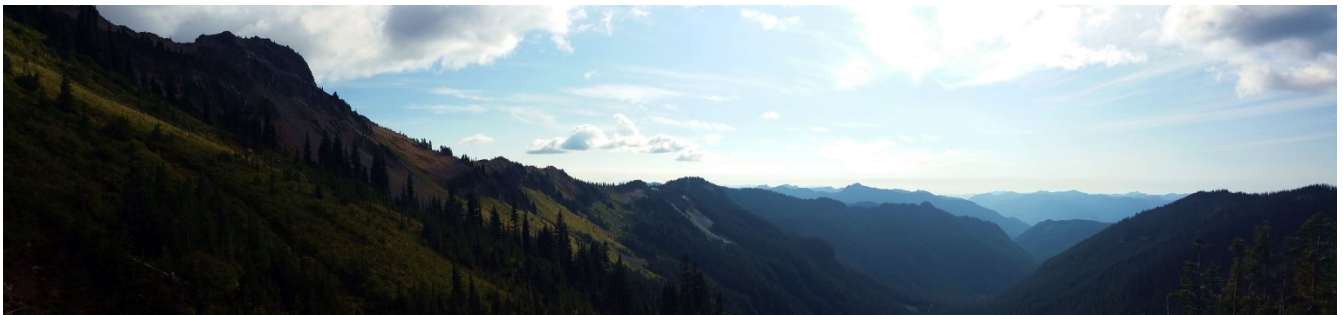
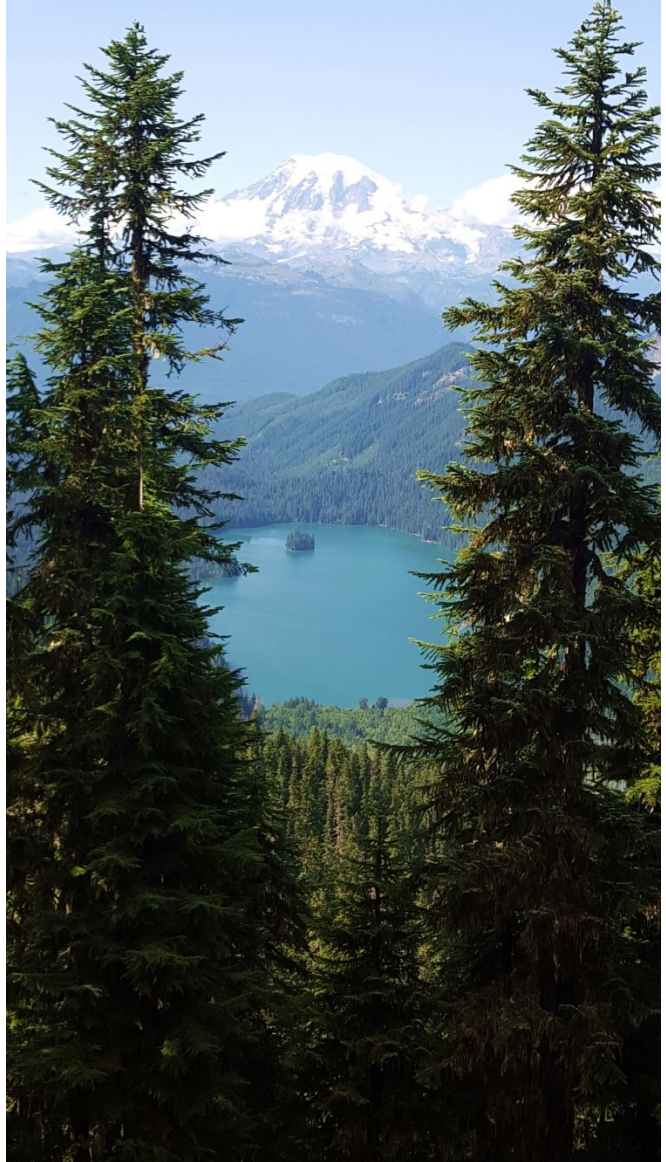
AUGUST 16: LILY BASIN TRAILHEAD TO HEART LAKE

There is a lot of information at the [US Forest Service site about Lily Basin Trailhead](#). Interestingly, the trailhead was numbered trail #76 but the forest service map has #86. Lily Basin Trailhead to Heart Lake is about 6.5 miles.



It takes little time to reach Goat Rocks Wilderness proper and it takes no time at all to start seeing the sites. The guide book rated this trip a 10 (out of 10) on the scenery scale. If there was an 11, then I would give it that. The only drawback was that we started running into smoke from the fact that the northwest is on fire this summer. We will just have to go back when it is not so smoky.

Packwood Lake and Mt. Rainer



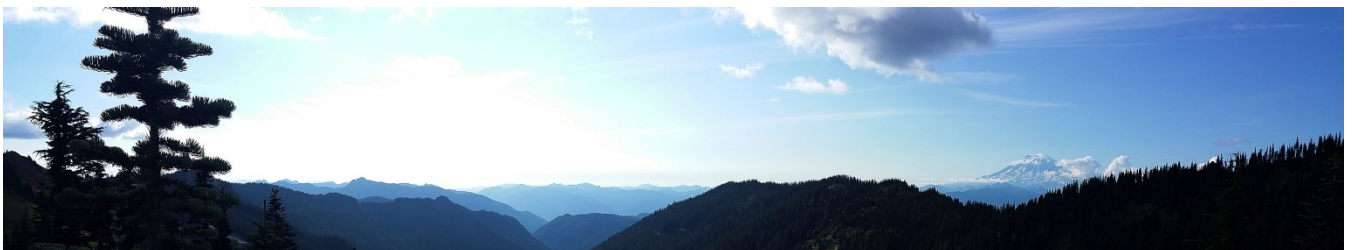
Stunning views of Mt. Rainer





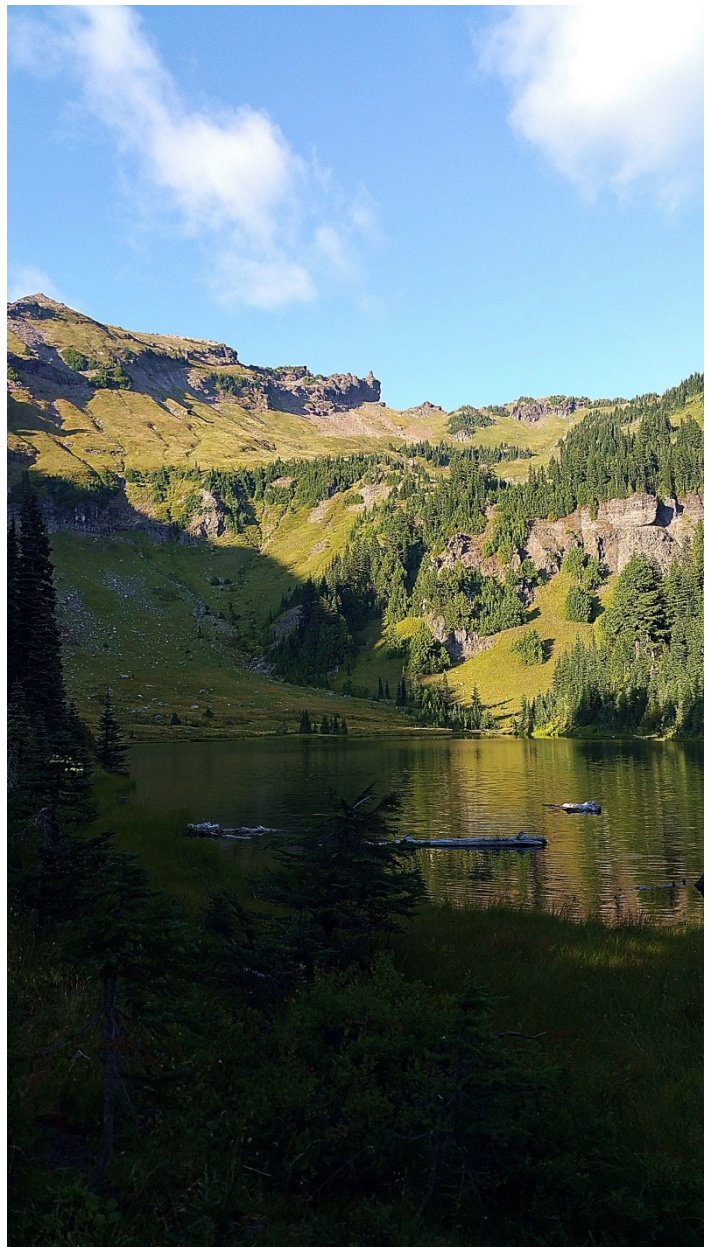
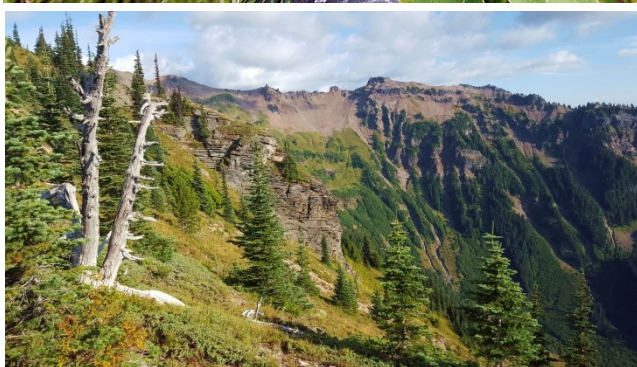
Views, flowers and handsome men aside, there was some serious hiking to do. The trail climbed for a couple thousand feet as it approached Heart Lake.





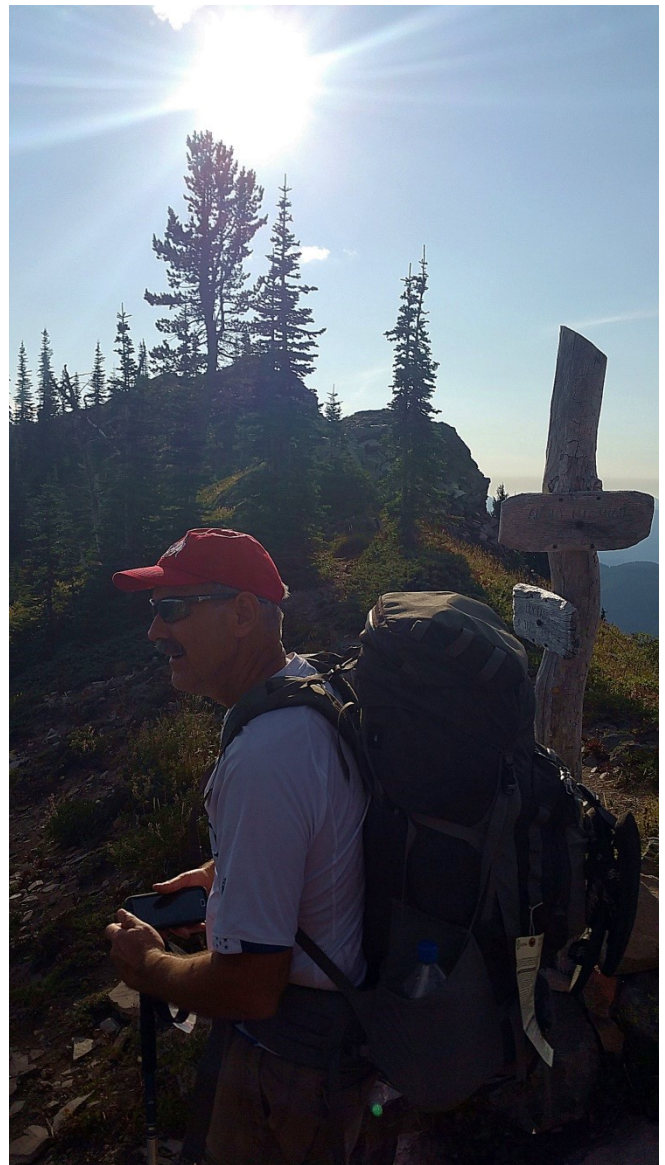
It took a while, but we finally ran into enough huckleberries that got our attention – YUM!



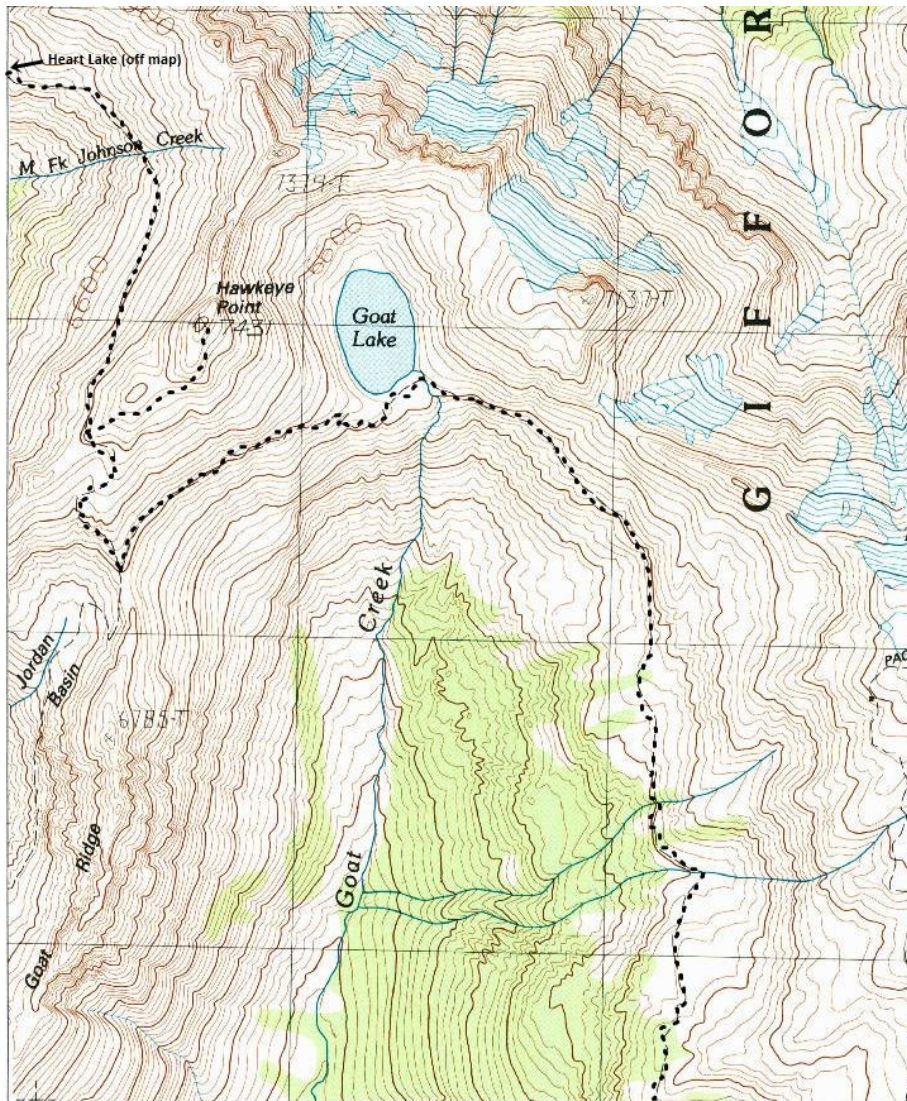


We finally made it to Heart Lake (right) and saw a lot of pretty stuff along the way. Way up there on the green slope of the Heart Lake picture there is a heard of Mountain goats.

With a great day behind us, we settle in, cook our food. watch the stars and hit the sack.

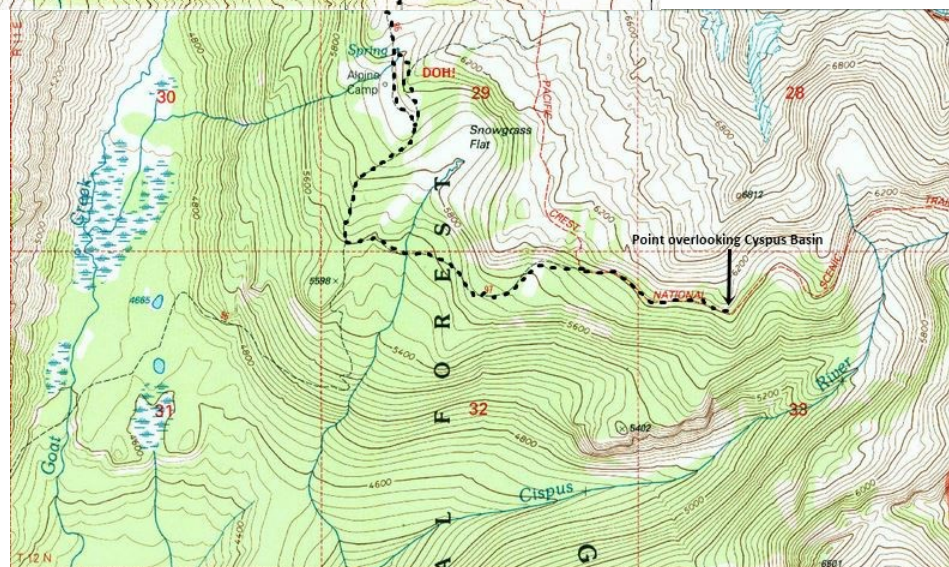


AUGUST 17: HEART LAKE TO POINT OVERLOOKING CYPUS BASIN



This day's trek was about 8 or 9 miles. We wanted to go longer but lingered at Hawkeye Point and Goat Lake. Then, at the DOH!, we got a little confused (I got a little confused) so we didn't quite make Cypus Basin, our original goal, but the view from the overlook where we stayed was worth it. I think it was one of the best camp sites we have ever had, at least a top 5.

This map knits together the two USGS maps: Old Snowy Mountain and Walupt Lake. Use this for reference only. Go to the USGS site and get more accurate maps.



Last night was chilly and moist, with a dew covering our bags, making them fairly damp. Damp enough that I put up my lean-to tent contraption, which worked pretty darned well. I was very impressed. Gary's bag is so light that it quickly dried out and the moisture never reached through to him, so he slept fine as well. But it was burrrrr cold outside our bags – down is nice.

The morning finally dawned and, as is our way, I woke up first and made coffee. This year we used Starbucks Via instant coffee. It was pretty darned good and I recommend it (or some other good instant) to taking brewing stuff (saves a little weight and the hassle of fixing real coffee). I kicked back with my coffee and enjoyed the waking wilderness while Gary slept.



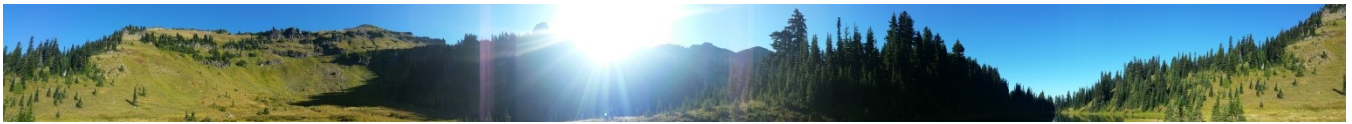
Beautiful morning over Heart Lake and in Heart Lake Basin. And Gary stays snuggled in his down bag catching a few more zzz's before I wake him up.



Good Morning Heart Lake



The sun soon pops up and motivates us to move along. We have a long way to go today.

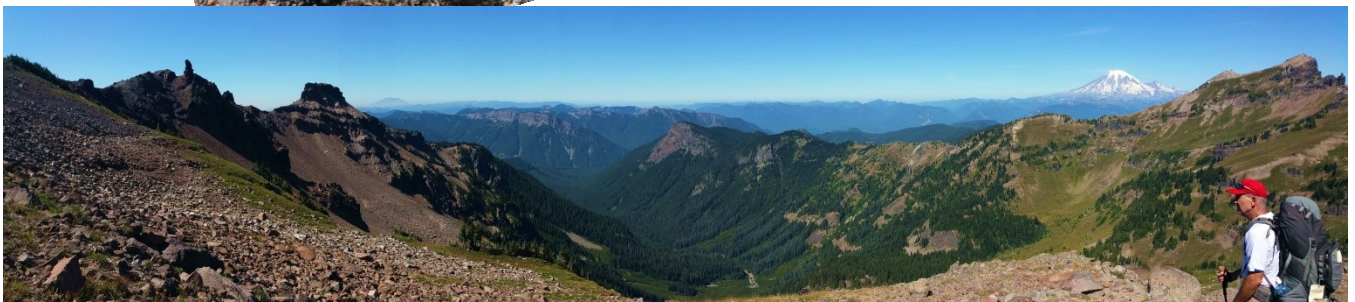


We leave Heart Lake to the goats, owls, and other critters with a promise that someday we will return.



Blue Skies

The hike is long and a lot of up. But the scenery is simply incredible, from the smallest critter that stops, looks up at Gary's camera and seems to smile, to flowers, mountainsides, mountains and beautiful blue skies.



We continued up a long trail towards a saddle, perhaps 7500 feet. As we drew close to the top of the saddle, we could see Mt. St. Helens in the distance (the flat mountain beyond the jagged rocks).

As we continued up the saddle, a snowcapped mountain began to poke up on the other side of

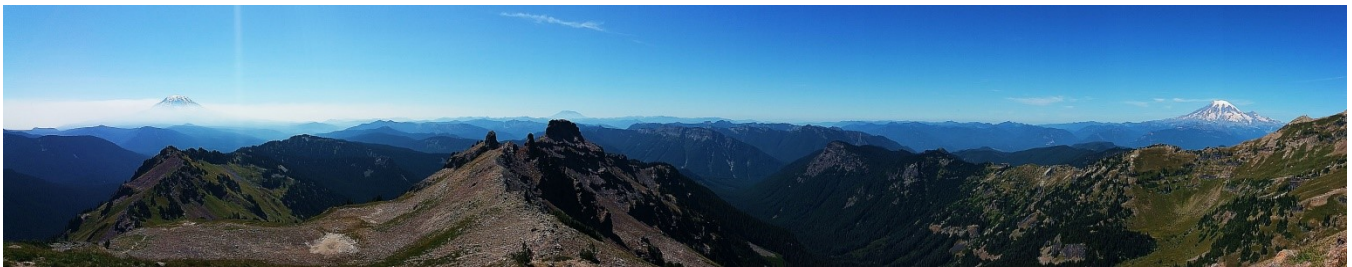


the saddle. It was quite beautiful. But as we made our way to the saddle, a rather striking haze came into view starting about a 3rd of the way down the mountain. The haze was smoke – fires raging around Mt. Adams (and many other places in Washington, Oregon and Idaho) had filled the valley just south of us with a dense layer of smoke.

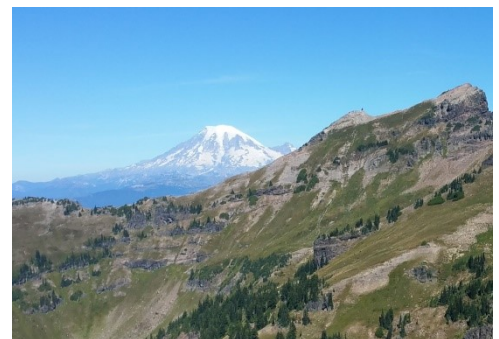
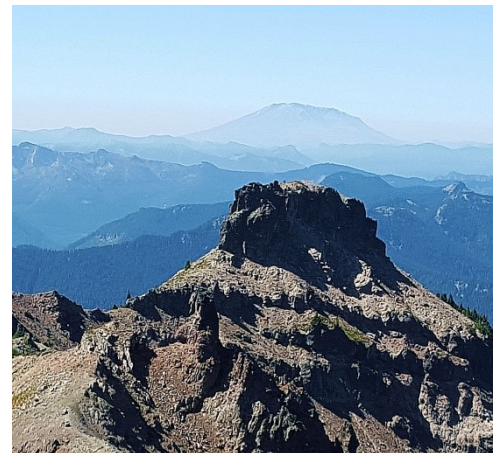
Not so Blue Skies



Mt. Adams on fire



To the north, Rainier was still fairly clear, but a panoramic shot (above) shows how the smoke went from south to north. Adams in the smoke to the left (south), a barely discernable St. Helens in the distance above that knob and Rainier to the right (north).

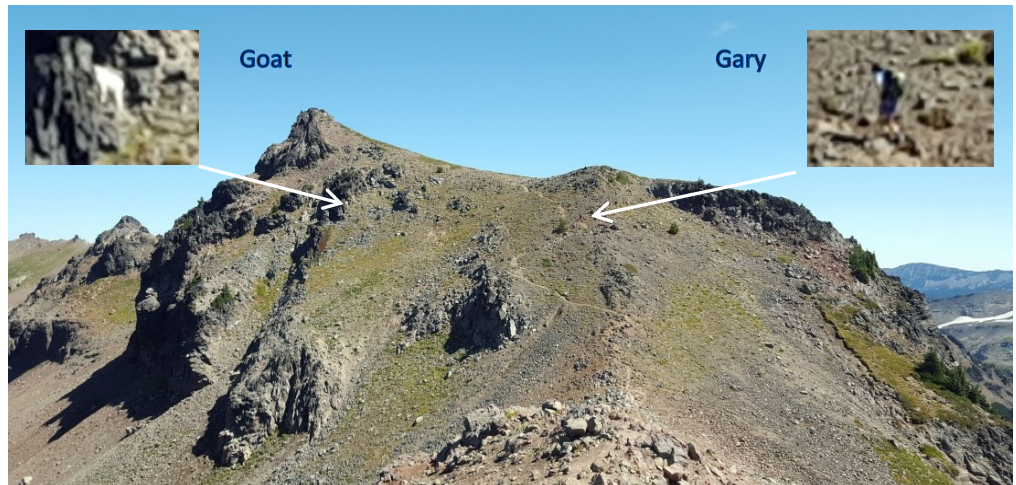


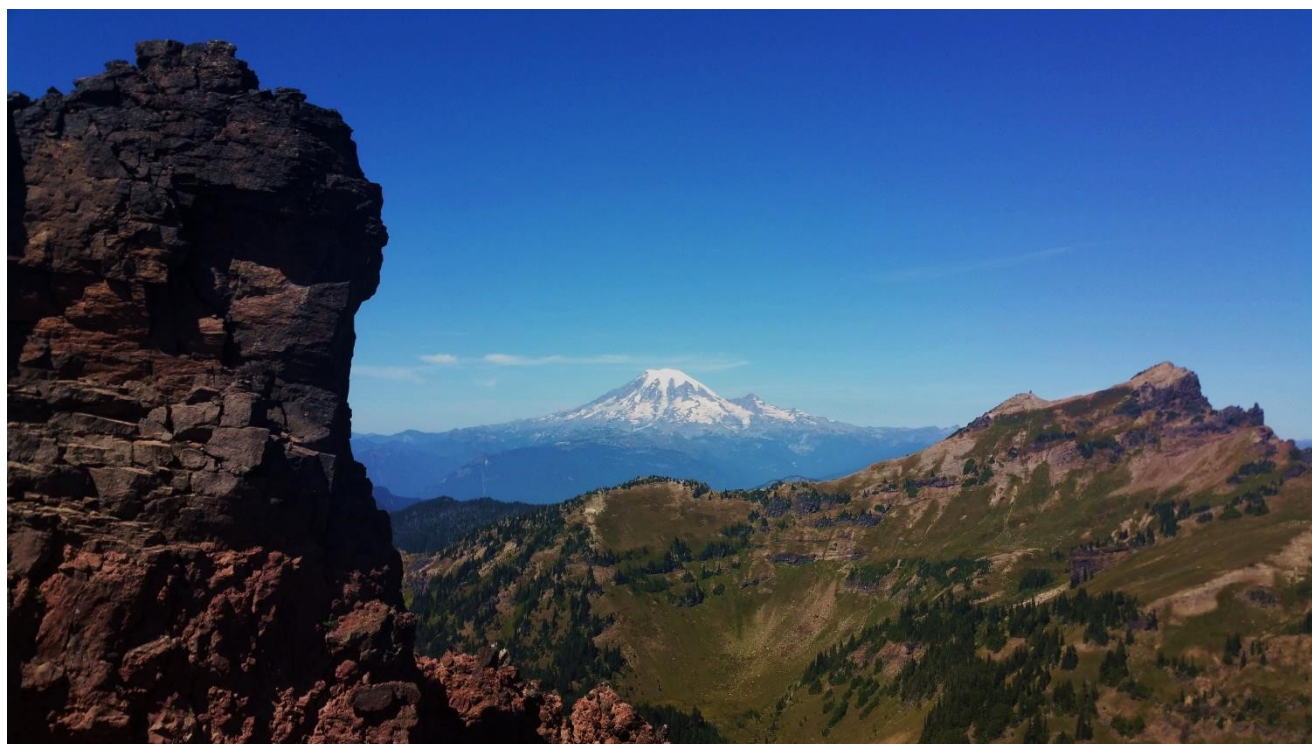
As we approached Goat Lake, we came to a side trail that led to Hawkeye Point. We had to climb it for Ben, who is an Iowa Hawkeye. It was not really that exciting, other than being a steep climb and the top gave us some nice views. It overlooks Goat Lake which is aptly named for the area because there is a goat in this picture. Gary is also in the picture way up there on the trail. Gary got a nice video of the Goat after I called it out to him. When I took the picture, I didn't realize that a goat was there until I saw it move later.

Mt. Adams and a lot of smoke in the background as Rod climbs to the top of Hawkeye Point.

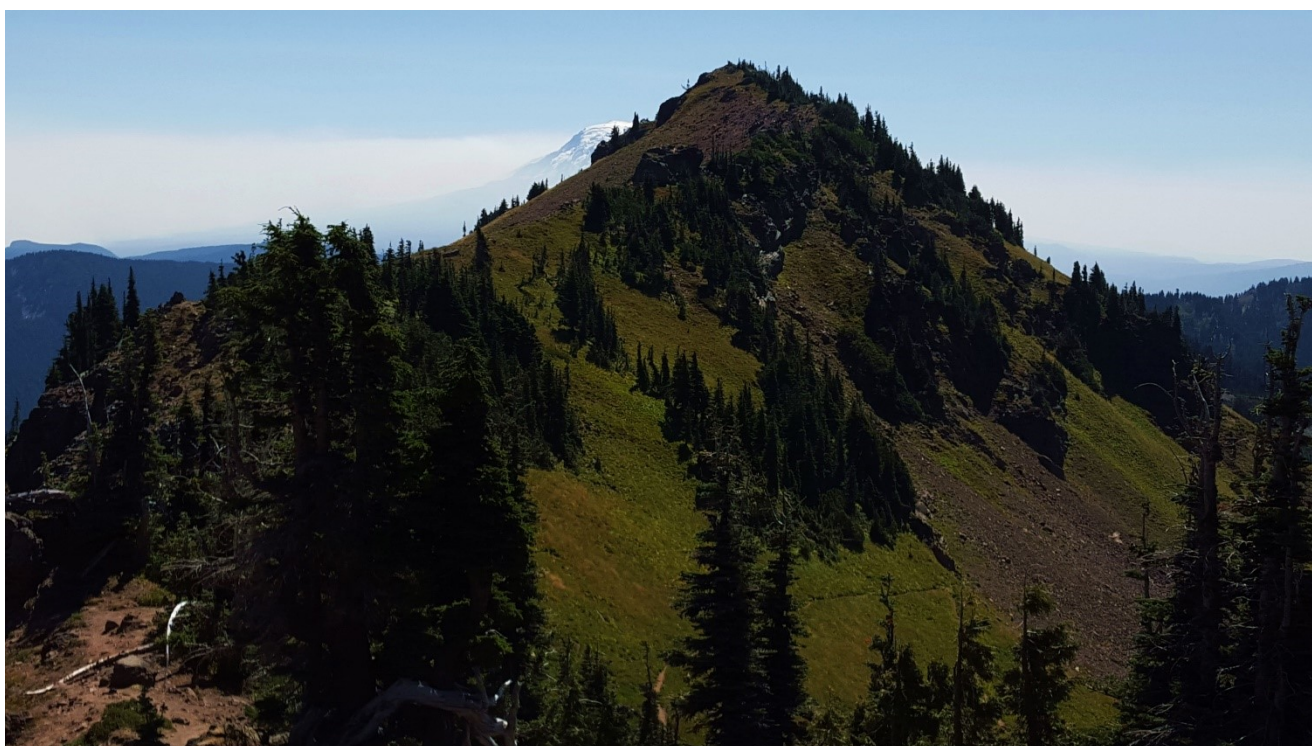
The top of Hawkeye Point really was beautiful. We took pictures and ate lunch. That is Goat Lake below. We thought about camping there for the night but there were a couple of other groups already set up so we moved on. Next time though.

Notice Gary's hiking attire. Cute.



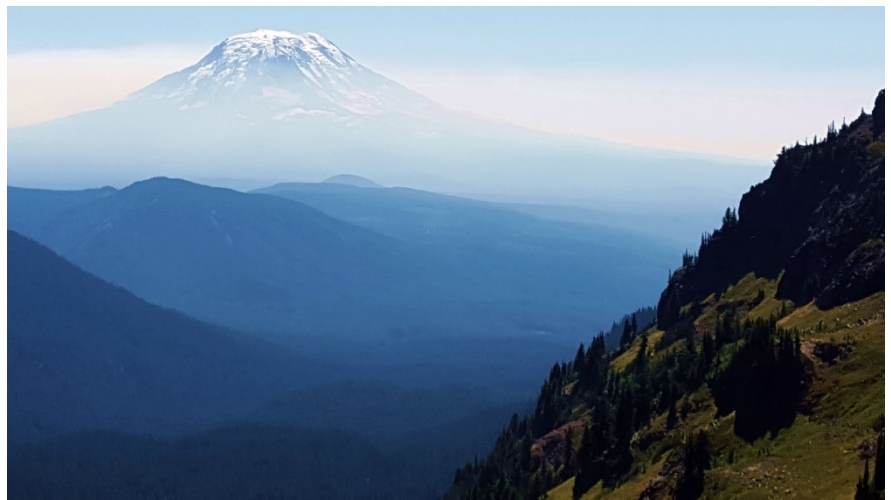


Mt. Rainier above and Mt. Adams below, hiding behind a knoll

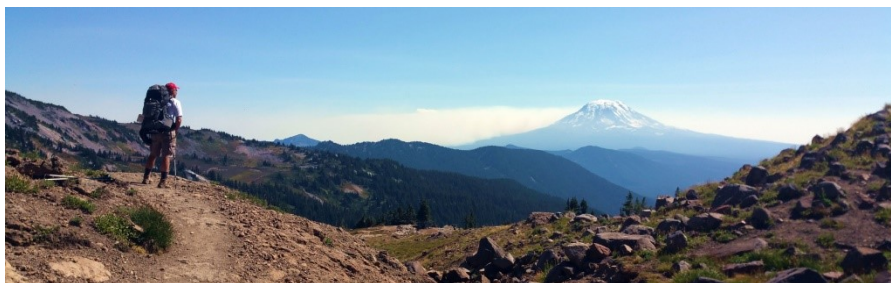


Smoke filled the valleys and slowly made its way towards us. The first day, we were smoke free, but for the rest of the trip, it was a constant reminder that this has been one of the worst fire seasons in the northwest U.S. in a very long time

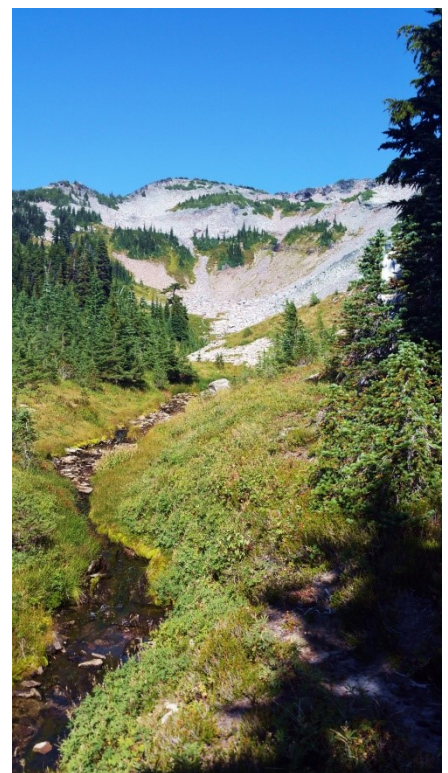
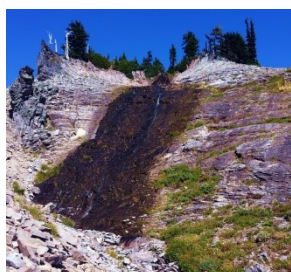
Goat Lake below. The high point is Hawkeye Point. The lake was clear by very cold.

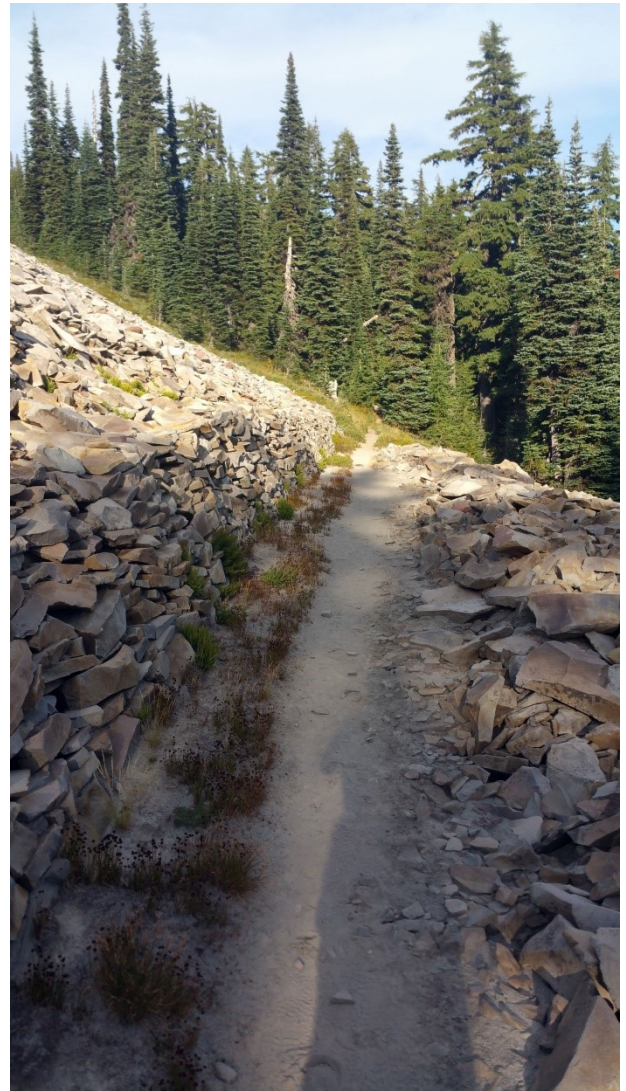


We hung out at Goat Lake, filled our water bottles, ate a bite and relaxed, but not for too long. Our goal for the day was Cypus Basin and we still had several miles of hiking. And there was still a lot of beautiful stuff to see, even if it was smoky.



Question:
Where did
that water
come from?

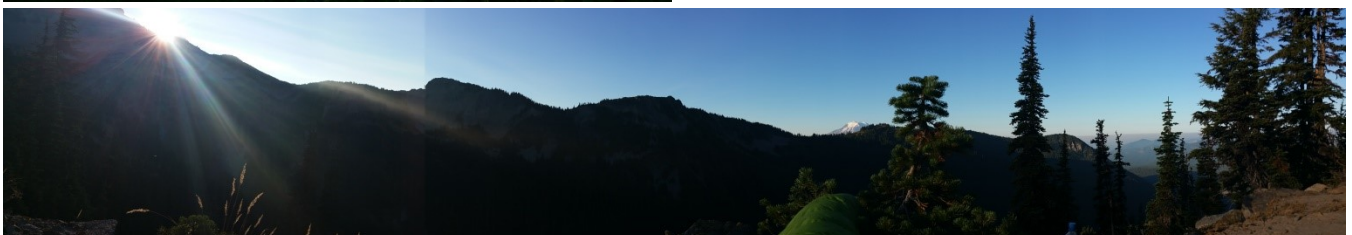




Sometimes, the trail was like a super highway but other times it was barely discernable. It snuck around downed logs, through scree fields, along ridge tops and across glaciers.



We still had time to stop and enjoy our surroundings. Every now and then, I would say, "Look where we are." Even on the trail, one becomes accustomed to putting that next step in front of the last, focusing on climbing that steep hill, picking your way over rocks, logs and debris, and just breathing. Then you stop, look up, and realize where you are.

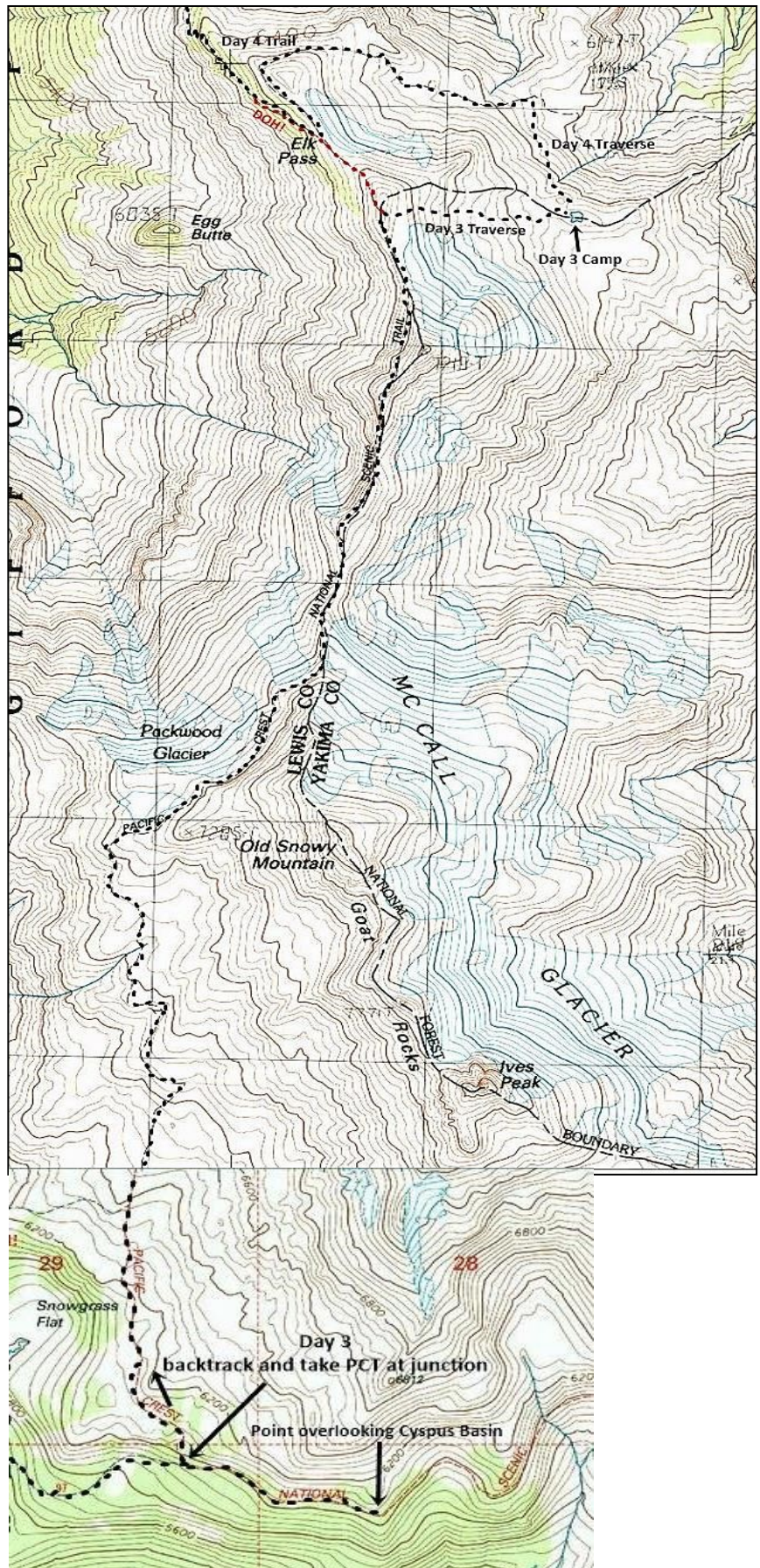


And, probably because we did stop a lot to look where we are, we didn't make it all the way to Cypus Basin, which was our original goal. But that was okay; now we have another new place to hike to in the future. Instead, we reached a beautiful overlook on Cypus Basin and the surrounding hills. There was no water at the camp itself, but there was a nice little stream just four minutes down the trail. It was so nice, in fact, dribbling out of a filtering hillside, that I chose not to filter it at all and drink straight from the stream. Excellent! That night, at camp, we did our usual things: eat, lay out our bags and fall asleep watching the stars and moon.

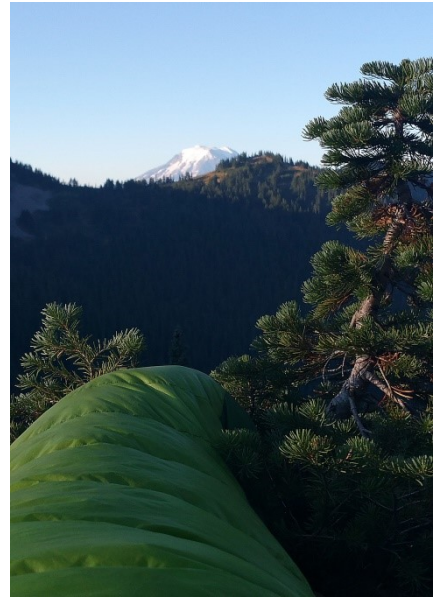


AUGUST 18: POINT OVERLOOKING CYPUS BASIN TO TARN BELOW OLD SNOWY MOUNTAIN

Our goal for the day was Lost Lake or a location in the valley a few miles from Packwood Lake. However, we decided to stay at a pretty tarn instead. We had to cross-country a little, down a steeper-than-we-thought mountainside. But we were conflicted and didn't decide to stay there until we were at the end of the red trail (the **DOH!** Just beyond Elk Pass label). We then had to climb back up a very steep hillside to reach the cross-country trail. But, it was worth it, I think.



Day 3 found Gary sleeping on the edge of a steep cliff. It was not that unsafe, unless he woke up in the middle of the night having to pee and decided to walk the wrong way. He didn't (walk the wrong way) and woke up to a nice smoke-free view of Mt. Adams across the valley.



Before we struck out for our next destination, the young woman that spent the night before with her family in the next camp over asked if she could interview Gary. We told her earlier in conversation that Gary did New Zealand's Te Araroa. She runs a website that has podcasts about hiking: soundsofthetrail.com. They talked for a good half hour. We got on the trail later than we wanted, but it was cool to hear the interview.



Blue skies, the long trail and the occasional critter patiently waited for us and we soon obliged.



A couple miles along the trail, we came to an intersection. There was a gaggle of girls, maybe 10, being led by a young woman. They ranged in age from 13ish to 15ish, or there-about. We chatted a bit. One of them said something like, "Wow, look at those strong legs." I thought she was talking to Gary, but she said, no, both of you. I blushed.

The gaggle took off ahead of us but we soon caught them. They let us go ahead. I figured we would outpace them, but no, they stayed within 50 yards of us for at least two miles and finally passed us when we stopped to look at Goat Lake in the distance. I kept looking back at them before they passed us saying, "Who are those guys?" in reference to the *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* movie, where they keep looking back at the law officers persistently tracking them. I am not sure Gary got it; I thought it was pretty funny.



The Gaggle of Girls in hot pursuit. Who *are* those guys?

We came to a glacier and caught the Gaggle. They decided to take a long break, water up at the glacier and clean up, apparently, since they stripped down to their skivvies, not too concerned that Gary and I were right behind them. I admired those kids for some reason. They were chatting, preening and playing. They seemed to be having a blast together out in the wilderness. Cool.

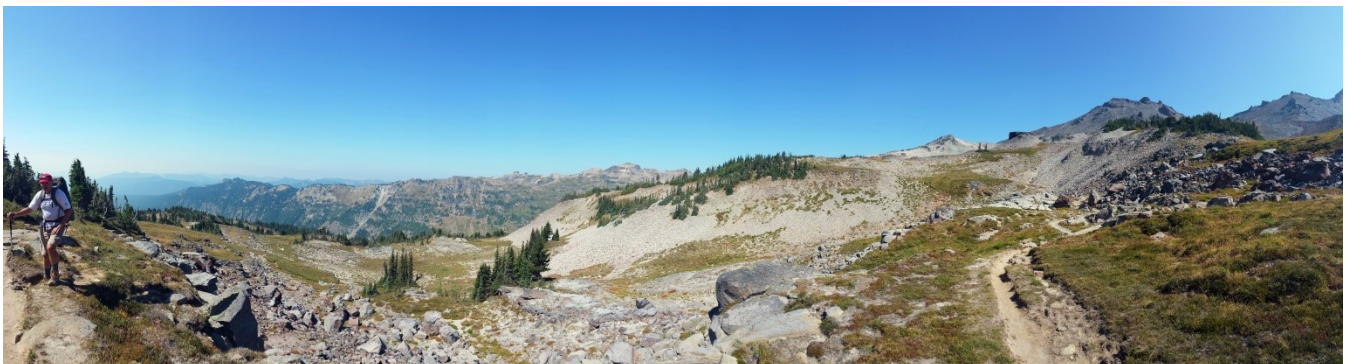


Gary got one more view of the Gaggles almost an hour after we passed them at the Glacier. From the top of Old Snowy Mountain (which I decided not to climb), Gary told me later that he could see the girls, still doing their thing at the glacier. And we trudged on.

There was an area along the way with nothing but rocks and sand. From the pictures I've seen of Mars, except for the warmth and goofy-looking aliens, I would have sworn we were on Mars.



We emerged from the Mars landscape to a more earthlike one and continued our hike.



We found ourselves at a junction where we could choose to go up to Snowy Mountain or along the western flank. Gary went up, and I took the flank.



The flank trail that I (speck lower right) took (above) and Gary (or is that the man of steel? Able to leap tall *mountains*) on Snowy Mountain Trail. See next page for *real* man of steel.





Yeah, that's what *I'm* talkin' about.
The trail gets crazy narrow and steep.



The Junction of the PCT flank (easier) route and Old Snowy (harder) route. But, there was one mean little glacier to cross on that steep flank where one slip would not be a pleasant little glissade.



The view from Old Snowy was very impressive, but we are going to have to go back when the view is even better – without that smoky haze.



Selfie time. We were not together at this point, but for some reason, we decided it was about the right time to take a selfie: Gary from the top of Old Snowy and Rod at the junction of the flank and Old Snowy trails.

Did I mention earlier that the trail was crazy wicked? The highest point of the PCT in Washington.



Looking down from the flank of Old Snowy into the Packwood Lake Valley. Egg Butte in the middle, Packwood Lake way down there and Mt. Rainier.



Old Snowy (7,880 feet) is not the most beautiful of all the peaks in the Cascades, but it is still a mountain and worth having its picture taken. You can see the trail snaking down that green hillside directly down from the peak.



We continued along the crazy wicked trail and reached a saddle where the PCT went straight and the trail to Lost Lake went to the left. At the saddle we spied a tarn about a half mile off trail. It looked like a rather easy cross-country descent to get to it and it also looked like there were several good places to spend the night. We debated, went along the trail to Lost Lake and then decided we wanted to cross-country to the tarn after all. The problem was that we had descended a long way after our initial decision to stay on the Lost Lake trail and now we had to go all the way back up that hill-mountain. Ouch! At least it was ouch for me. But we finally made the descent to the tarn, which was not quite as easy as it looked from the saddle.



From the saddle, you can see the tarn to the left of my pack.



Above: Glaciers above the tarn

Left: It looked much easier from the saddle, but as we made our way, we found that looks can be deceiving.



We camped down by the little blue tarn. Now, come on, THAT is cool!

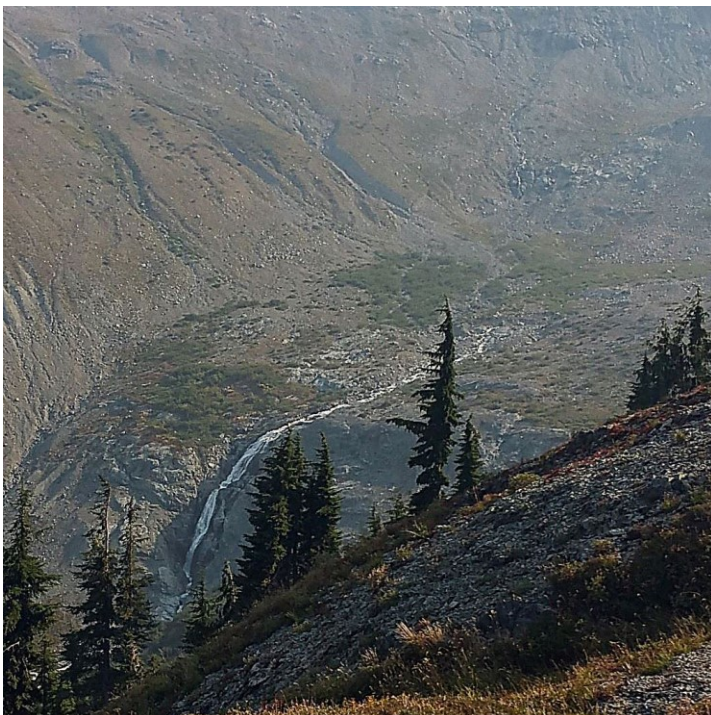


Views from around the tarn





A river of glacier water pours into a beautiful waterfalls that Gary just couldn't get to. Next time.



If those look like lamas, it's because they are. They seemed to be all on their own. We never saw an owner. Probably abandoned.



Of course, goats were everywhere – Oh, that’s why they call it Goat Rocks. We didn’t get a good picture but if you squint, those white spots near the top of the knoll below our camp are goats. We need to get a better picture of goats somewhere.



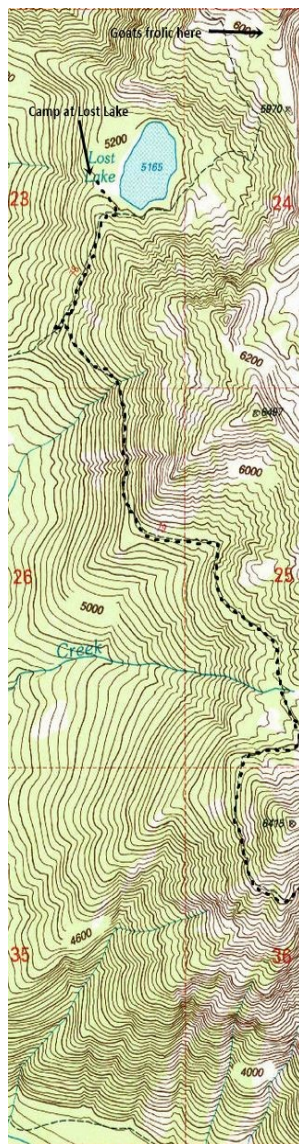
Believe it or not, this was camp. There were several nice spots to choose from. While it might not look like it, there are a couple of good spots to put down our mats and bags. That is all we need: something flat and somewhat smooth, i.e., no rocks, roots or wreckage.



During the wee hours of the night, when the Milky Way was at its brightest, looking like a star-borne breath in the heavens, a bunch of small rocks rumbled down the hill on the right side of the picture above. Being mere feet away, Gary and I both startled awake. I am not sure what went through Gary’s mind, but my first thought was that we were being visited by a bear or, perhaps, the mountain was sliding down on us. I am not sure which I preferred – how about *neither*.

I grabbed my trusty headlamp that I leave right beside my pillow (yes, I have a small, lightweight pillow that I carry with me – my one and only luxury) and threw the beam up the slope. Lo and behold, there were three or four mountain goats within ten yards of us. Our presence had not affected them in the least. Perhaps they couldn’t see or smell us, although by this time in our trip we were becoming pretty ripe – we stunk! But when the light beams hit them and they heard both Gary and I yelling for our lives, they skedaddled up and over the little ridge of rocks.

Dang! If we had only had the presence of mind to take a picture, but I guess the fear of being eaten by a bear or crumpled by a rock fall takes precedence over photography :-P.

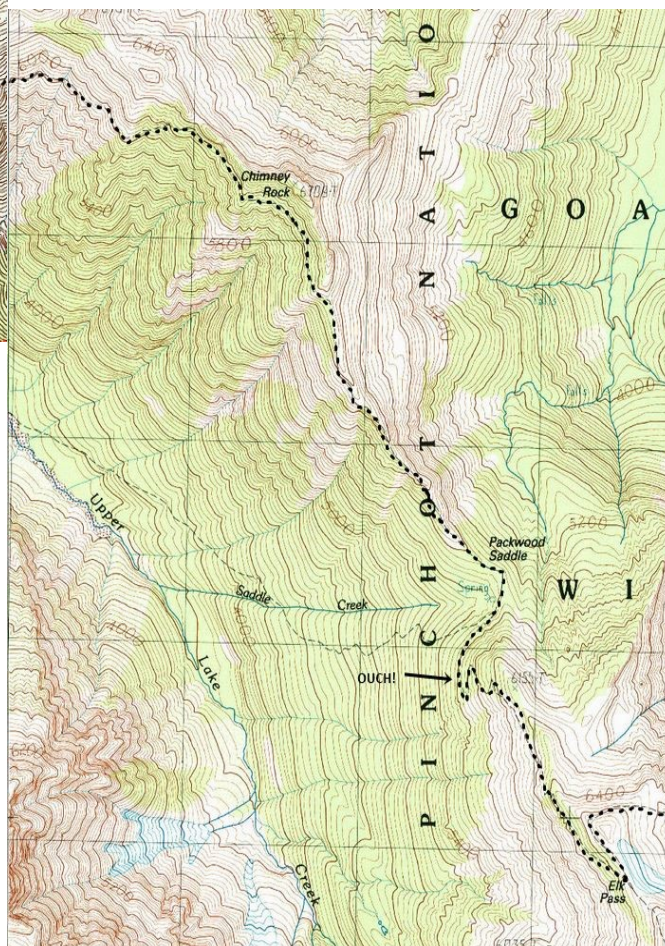


AUGUST 19: TARN BELOW OLD SNOWY MOUNTAIN TO LOST LAKE

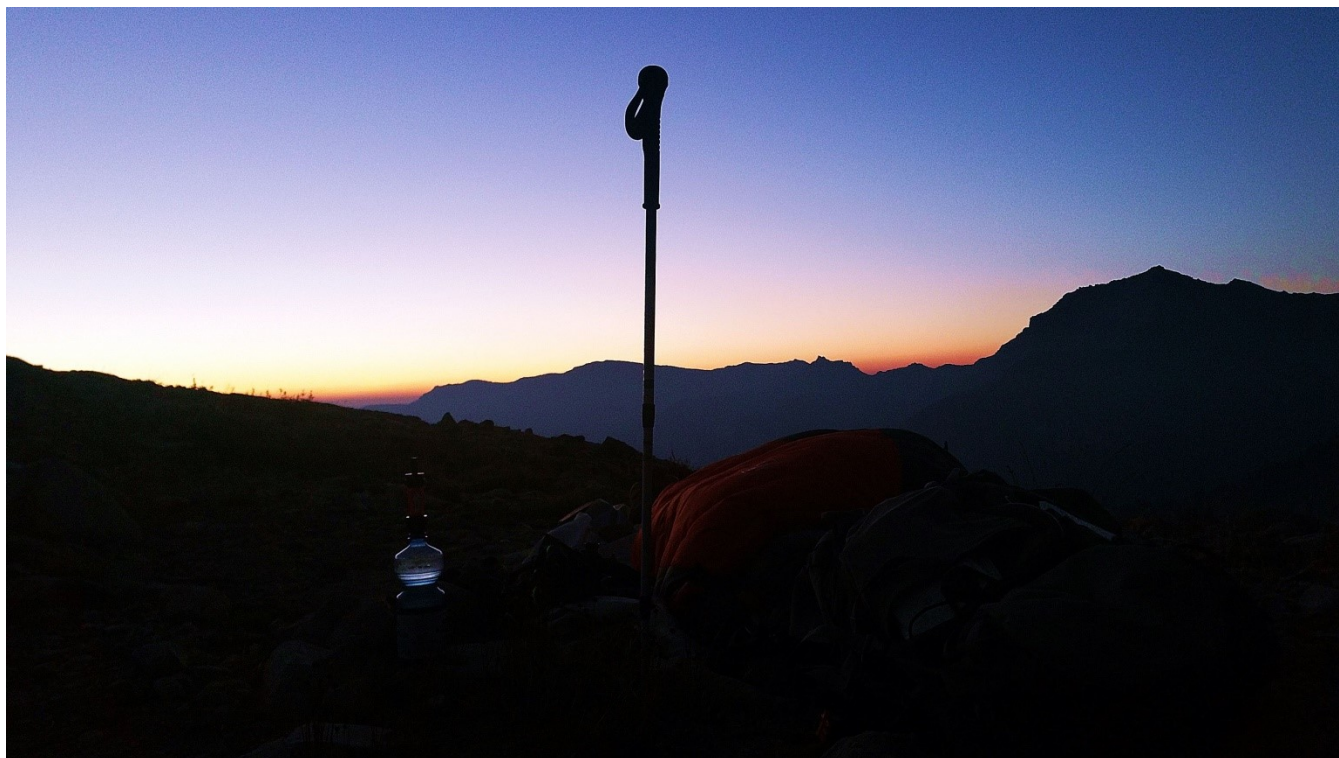
It was a wicked hard hike today. Not sure how many miles, but there was a lot of “up” and “around.” The “up” should be self-explanatory, but the “around” means that there were some serious wind-fallen trees that we had to navigate around. In a couple of cases we actually lost the trail for a few yards.

Start way down there by Elk Pass and work our way up to Lost Lake where we swam and watched goats frolic about. Well, really, all they did was stand around and eat, but it was still nice – relaxing – to watch them.

Yep, that’s goat poop.



Believe it or not, Gary arose before I did, and then went right back to his bag after taking the picture below. The sun was just coming up, I was snuggled into my bag and my water bottle, trekking pole and backpack marked my territory. Gary took this picture of the sun just starting to rise over our camp at the tarn. It is one of my favorites of all time.



The view from my sleeping bag was pretty nice too.



After a bit of self-coaxing (and the fact that I really had to pee) I rolled out of my sleeping bag. While performing my morning ablutions I heard a few rocks in the little bowl just below me, no more than 20 yards away, and bingo – I got my wish to see mountain goats closer up. The local herd, with the Billy in the lead, walked right below me.



The big deal for this morning (other than the goats) was to figure out just how the heck we were going to get back to the main trail. We had scouted a potential route the evening before and it looked a lot easier than the one we took to get here – it was nowhere nearly as steep, at least it looked that way. After eating, having a cup of coffee, packing and collecting water from the glacial stream to the right, we set out.

I once again chose not to filter my water. I figured there simply could not be anything bad in that water. Turns out I was right (or at least I didn't get sick), but I probably should be less lazy and filter my water.

We could see the trail (the PCT) just below us, across a slope. Looked easy. And, long story short, it *was* easy. We scooted over a football field-length wide scree field, dropped onto a grassy flank and then dropped onto the PCT. We took the PCT back to the Lost Lake trail and our day was set.

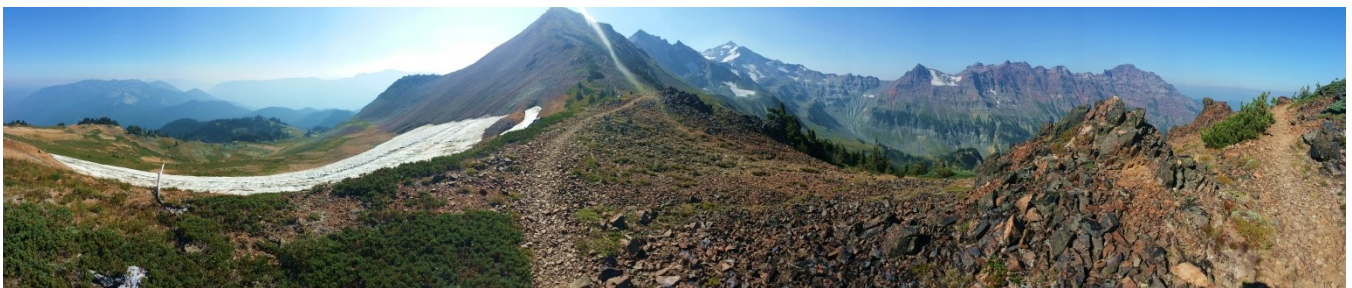




The stream went one way and we went the other, across the scree field below. If you look closely, you can see the PCT cutting through the gray rocks in the lower right of the picture. That was our objective. Looks are definitely deceiving. While the slope looks pretty easy, the rocks are loose and often very large. One slip and you can go a long way and those rocks will go right down with and *on* you.

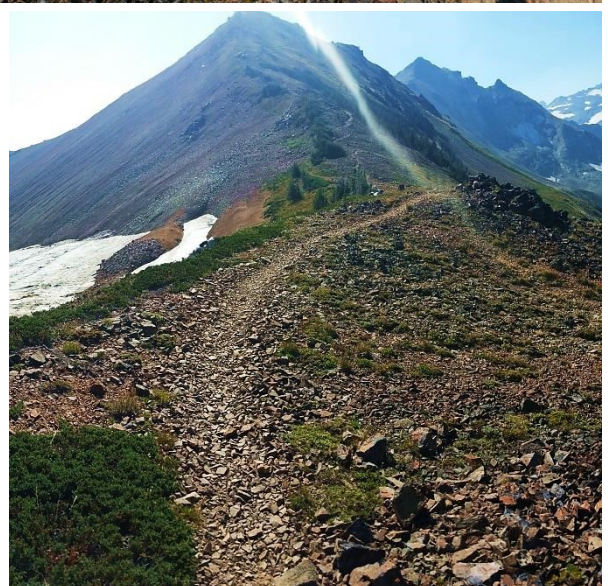


Once on the trail we made good time. We met one guy that wouldn't quit talking though, so that slowed us for several minutes. He was a nice enough guy and had opinions on just about everything and told us to make sure to vote for Bernie (Sanders). But soon, we were back on the trail and making what we thought was good progress. Our goal was Lost Lake over Packwood Saddle.



Gary took one of the most interesting panoramic pictures I have seen in a while (above). I like how the trail connects with the sun beam at the top of the peak and it looks like a cloud of trail coming down the peak.

We met folks along the way and were amazed when they told us how far they had gone that day. One guy wearing a Kentucky cap and two teenage girls with him had gone at least five miles and another man and his son (maybe 12) had gone about seven miles from Lost Lake, where we were headed. We figured we had gone maybe three. I guess we could say we had a late start, but I was impressed with these backpacking kids.



We buckled down and stayed focused on the trail... and it was as steep as the picture below looks.



Egg Butte at the head of the canyon that leads down to Packwood Lake.



We pondered the wilderness about halfway to Lost Lake.



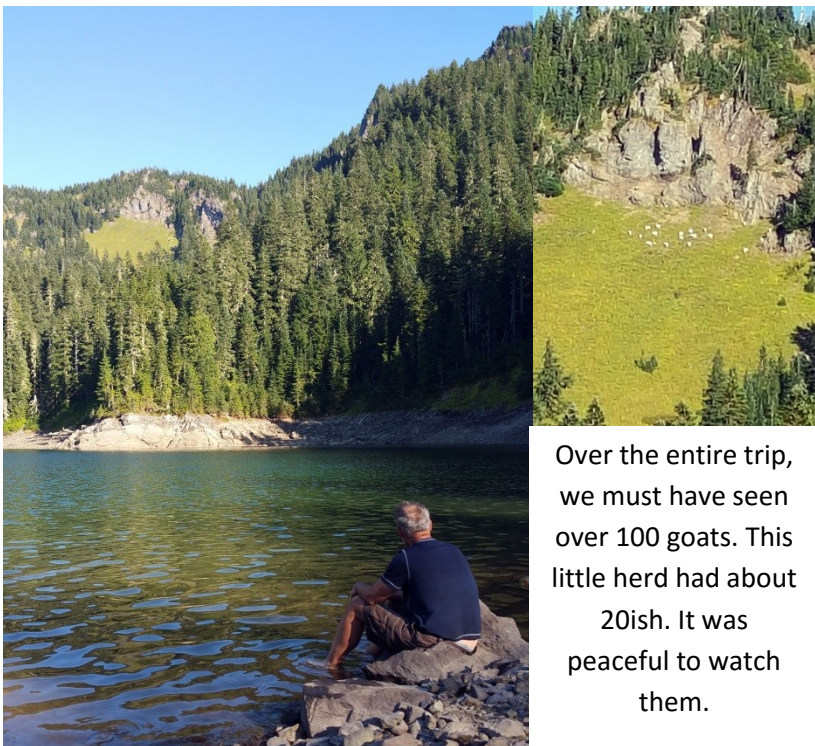
We ate lunch in the woods



One of the people we met on the trail told us that we would run into some pretty gnarly windfall. It took a while, but he was right. The trail is in there somewhere...

But we persevered and were finally rewarded with Lost Lake. Only one other two-person group was there. Of course, they had the best campsite, but there were plenty more.

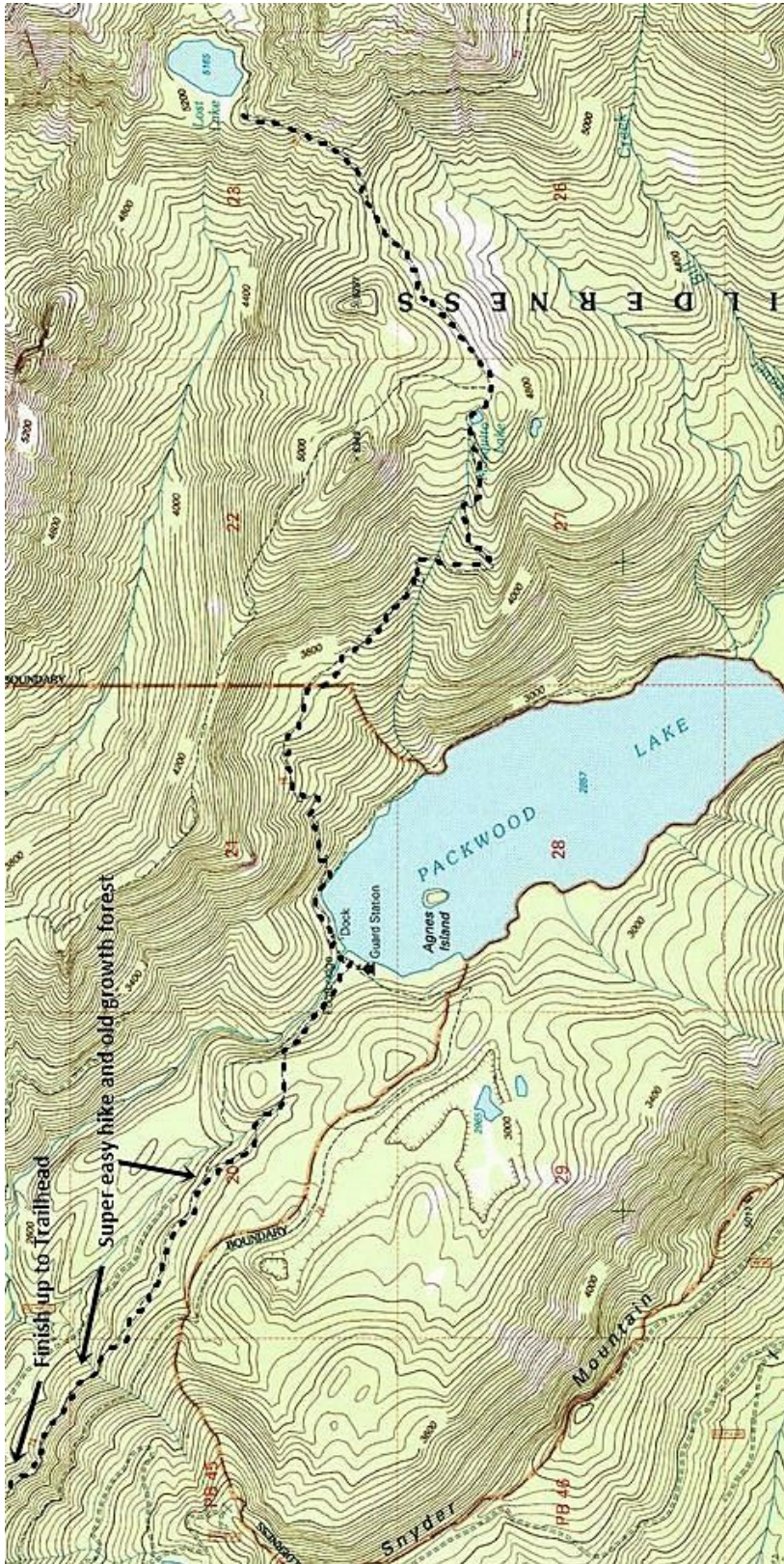
At Lost Lake we took a swim. The water wasn't too cold. We then laid back on the beach and watched, yep, the goats up there on that green hillside.



Over the entire trip, we must have seen over 100 goats. This little herd had about 20ish. It was peaceful to watch them.



AUGUST 20: LOST LAKE TO PACKWOOD LAKE TRAILHEAD



You have to rotate the picture.

It was an incredibly easy hike for eight miles from Lost Lake to Packwood Lake Trailhead. We covered the eight miles in four hours and that was with stopping at Packwood Lake for at least ½ hour for photo ops, snack and to take on some more water.



As is our way, when we are ready to be done then we move fast, and so it was today. We had an eight mile hike from Lost Lake to Packwood Lake Trailhead. We left at about 8:00 in the morning and were at the car by noon. But we were able to take a few pictures along the way. The first of which was a bull elk that decided to walk right by our camp. That is not a real common occurrence, even in the absolutely GREAT Pacific Northwest.

The morning mist that lingered over Lost Lake hinted at why it was named what it was.



And I think the picture above is one of my favorite ever. I am not quite sure why it looks like Gary has an Abraham Lincoln beard? But still, it is pretty cool. There is so much in this one picture that describes what I live for.

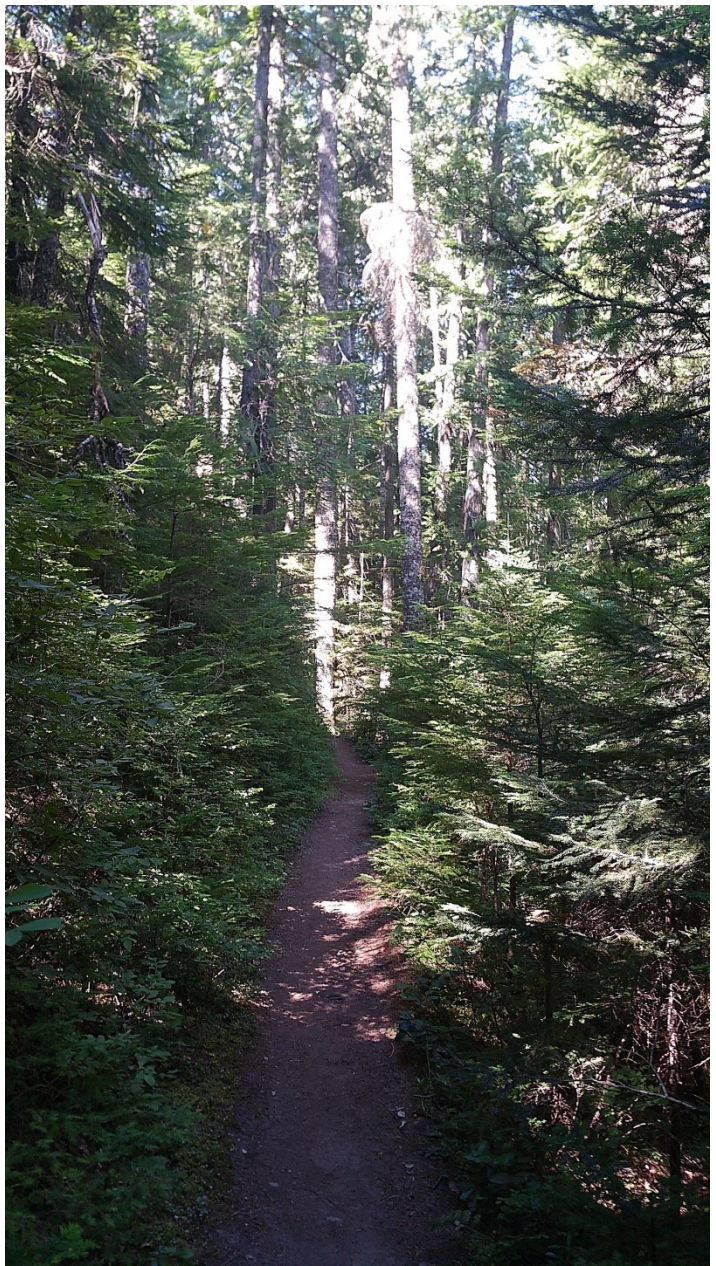
Time for one quick selfie at Packwood Lake and a nice picture of the lake with Snowy Mountain in the background. It is another four miles to Packwood Lake Trailhead.

And we also had to take a couple of requisite slug pictures. The first one is a slug in horse crap...we prefer the slug.



There is a beautiful old growth forest about two miles from Packwood Lake Trailhead. We didn't get any real good pictures, but the trail is real nice and a perfect hike to take a youngster on to explain what an old growth forest is all about. It has ancient trees (never cut that I can tell), nursery logs with trees growing right out of the fallen trees and a beautiful undergrowth (which means not much undergrowth at all). It is a tremendously healthy old forest. Someday, I will take a little grandchild here and tell him or her all about what makes an old growth forest so special.

We also ran across maples near the end of our journey. They were already turning color, which seemed a bit premature. It is neat because it shows deciduous trees in (or near) old growth and just a few miles up the valley there are no trees at all – above timberline.



We made it! Except,
for one little detail...

When we drove the Honda Fit to the steep ruts in the road on our way back to get the truck we discovered, as we suspected, that the Fit couldn't make it up. The picture doesn't look that bad, but the Fit spun its tires and just wouldn't do it. So, as we expected, one of us was going to have to run up and get the truck, about 4.5 miles away. Gary really wanted to do it, so what could I do, I let him. But I did put on my running shoes and walked up the road to meet him halfway(ish).



The truck rounds the corner a couple of miles up the road and Gary seems no worse for the wear. And then we were on our way home.



THE END

I tried to write a poem, but failed miserably. Here is an early draft of the first of four verses (or sections, whatever they're called – stanzas?). The other four were meant to be *Morning, Day, Evening*., still in my head. Maybe someday I will finish the entire thing.

NIGHT

Dense, the stars, permanence of night's pierced-black canvas

Star-borne breath of god

Chilled, but cozy, enfolded in my down-filled bag

Conscious? Conscious...

Where am I? Where are *we*? My son sleeps in the next bag over

What woke me?

Two nights hence, wandering mountain goats will wake us as they meander through our camp, eliciting whoops of fear-filled joy. Ahh! Bear!? Mountain goats in our camp! Imagine that.

Listen...first night, out here, aware, sensitive, cautious...of everything...

Listen...

A rock rolling down the thousand-foot basin slope? Perhaps...

A chill breeze ruffling my tent? Perhaps, if I was in a tent

An owl? No, that is tomorrow night

Pain? Yes. butt, hips, back, cramped legs...

But that is expected out here

In the wilderness

It is the way it is meant to be...a price gladly paid

Listen.. is that padding about out there? Bears pad about "out there" – the other side of my bag

Something watches.... I feel it – consciousness

Perhaps it is the quiet, the nothing – o such a bad word, out here: nothing

It is everything, the presence of...everything – the broker of sentience

Yes, everything...me...I hear...me

Inescapable pressure from chill black depth, the quiet, the nothing...the everything...the noise

In my head...breath

And not to breathe, for the moment may evade me, precious and rare it is

Star-borne breath of god.

