



Mountain Hellderness

Not all hikes are recommended

The author of this column enjoys being outdoors and sharing those experiences with others. I try to make the excursions described herein fun and easy. I had thought to do a column about winter wilderness travel, something more challenging than most *EW* hikes but manageable for a decent skier or snowshoer.

This has proven difficult. My first attempt at a column involved a ski trip across the Strawberry Mountain Wilderness in Eastern Oregon; unfortunately my chosen route proved infeasible due to lack of snow on southern aspects. A second trip into the Waldo Lake Wilderness devolved into low intensity warfare with snowmobilers that left many key destinations unreachable. A trek south from Hwy. 20 to Mount Washington along the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) sounded easy, and my deadline was looming...

After a leisurely breakfast at Hoodoo Lodge, I hit the trail. The first four miles from Hoodoo is along a well-groomed ski track, and I make great time under a bright sun.

Once I turn south into the Mount Washington Wilderness, I am almost immediately off track. The PCT is easy to find, but you know how it goes: You follow a nice set of ski tracks for a while, and they take you off in the opposite direction from where you're going.

The north side of the wilderness is densely forested, and you can't even see the mountain until you're pretty close, but no matter. I have a compass and bearings to anything from anywhere in the Cascades memorized better than my phone number. From the PCT trailhead on the north side of Mount Washington will be about a 180-185 degree bearing to the west flank of the mountain, so off I go, crab-walking my way up steep slopes of mountain hemlock and subalpine fir.

Mount Washington is dominated by a tall tombstone-like ridge in the dead center of the mountain, from which a half dozen shorter ridges radiate out in all directions, with deep cirque basins in between. After an hour or two of slogging uphill I find myself perched pre-

cariously on the knife's edge of the northern shoulder of the mountain, at least three quarters of a mile farther east than my intended route. So much for my vaunted orienteering skills.

This is a bit of a pickle. For purely aesthetic reasons, I am aiming for the southwest side of the mountain, knowing for a certain fact that at 5:30 pm the sun will sink below the horizon at a 223-degree SW bearing. The weather conditions give me hope that the dying sun will cast warm photogenic light on the southwest flank of the mountain. But here I am, about half way up the far *northern* side of the mountain. The only thing for it, of course, is to keep going up and contour around the west side of the mountain right below the summit.

Three hours of scrambling along a rock ledge and I am in place, and perfectly timed, too. The sun is going down, and my camera is lashed to my patented makeshift tripod (skis sunk in the snow).

The end of day lighting on the mountain turns out to be quite mediocre. Huh. Well, it's 6 pm. It is dark, and I am at 7,500 feet, nine miles from my vehicle, in the middle of the wilderness. I strap on my skis and begin a slow careful slalom down an ice packed chute leading to the tree line.

Snow conditions among the trees are terrible: Broken, crusty snow, the ruts and divots ill defined by the dim glow of my headlamp. I am heading southwest now, trying to lose some elevation before cutting north to Hidden Valley, where it will be smooth sailing all the

It is now about 8:30 pm. The moon's not up. I am in thick trees, on frozen snow, with one ski pole. Six miles to go. Fun, fun. As far as I'm concerned, the biggest problem at this point is lack of water. I started out with two full liters, which is not nearly enough. I stick some ice in with the little remaining water and put the bottle against my chest to warm it. Melt, damn you. Skiing downhill with one ski pole among the trees is not easy, and I fall on my face after another mile. It really doesn't feel good landing on my water bottle. Put the bottle back in my backpack. The ice hasn't melted.

It is really freakin' dark in this goddamned forest. I hate skiing. Four more miles to go. I stare at the green glowing dial of my compass. My bearing is at 0 degrees exactly. My compass is a good piece of gear, something that you can depend on, not like these cheap ass ski poles. I eat some snow. There are lights ahead: The Seven Day Adventist Church Camp on the shores of Big Lake. Whew. I will be able to take a snowed-over road from here out.

The road is a sheet of ice. I stick with it for a mile or so. Two more miles to go. I am very thirsty. I am very sore from falling on ice. To hell with skiing. I take off the skis and strap them to my backpack. I am walking the rest of the way. I take three steps, and fall down on the ice. To hell with walking. Maybe I will just crawl back to my rig; what about that, you stupid road? What are you going to do about that, huh? Hee-hee.

Whoa, get a grip on yourself, Johnston. You are starting to act weird. Are you seri-

To hell with walking. Maybe I will just crawl back to my rig; what about that, you stupid road?

way back to my ride.

This is always about the time that something real messed up happens, and sure enough, I make a too-tight turn around a tree and dig in with my poles, which promptly collapse, dumping me headfirst into a root well. I am uninjured, but upside down, skis pointed at the stars, face pressed into the snow, and my ski pole bent double and completely useless.

ously lying face down on this frozen road giggling to yourself?

Hoo-boy. OK, left foot, now the right foot. What in the *hell* is that? Oh, yeah, the moon. The bright cantaloupe glow of a full moon through the burned-up lodgepole snags provides enough light to see the bad spots in the road, and I put the skis back on.

Skiing is fun.

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