

Solo hiker finds awe and ecstasy on Pacific Crest Trail

By **JESSI LOERCH**
The (Everett) Herald

EVERETT, Wash. — I was standing, half exhilarated and half terrified, on a ridge known as The Knife. Ahead of me, the trail followed the ridge, occasionally veering to one side or the other over steep drops to emerald green valleys. In front of me, Mount Rainier rose sharp against the blue sky.

I was alone and a careless step could send me tumbling down hundreds of feet.

I'd planned for this trip on the Pacific Crest Trail for nearly a year, and I knew what to expect. So I walked on, keeping my eyes on the trail when I was scared and letting the views soak into my soul when I felt more confident.

By the time I'd descended into the basin below The Knife, I was euphoric. Hiking often does that to me, but passing along The Knife was one of my proudest hiking moments. I knew in advance it would challenge me. I prepared for it. I did it easily. And I loved it.

Really, that sentiment sums up any outdoor adventure. Pick something that will challenge you. Train for it. Go do it.

The Knife was just a small section of my trip, even if it takes up the biggest place in my memory. Overall, I hiked about 74 miles on the PCT, starting south of the Goat Rocks Wilderness and ending up at Chinook Pass at Mount Rainier National Park. I hiked alone, often only seeing about a dozen people per day. It was a blissful solitude.

Along with my triumph on The Knife, the journey left me with countless small memories to savor.

Sensational swimming

Along the way, I swam in a lake nearly every day. Dumbbell Lake, north of White Pass on Highway 12, was my clear favorite. The afternoon I arrived, I was pleased and surprised to discover I was the only person there.

After I set up camp — while trying and failing to protect my blood from the voracious mosquitoes — I took a swim in the lake. The sun was low in the sky, the air was warm and the water was mild. It was heaven to float alone in the lake. As I soaked, I noticed movement on the opposite shore. A doe and her two fawns had come down to eat and drink. I floated in the water and watched them for at least 10 minutes until they vanished back into the forest.

After my swim, the wind picked up. I took my dinner onto a finger of rock that stuck out in the lake. The wind kept away the mosquitoes and I found a rock that fit my body exactly. It was like sitting in a recliner — I even had a footrest. I never wanted to leave. Eventually the wind died down and the mosquitoes chased me into my tent. Quite literally chased me. In the few seconds it took me to get inside,



In this August 2016 photo, a trail runs past the lower lake at Snowy Lakes, near the Pacific Crest Trail. Loerch hiked part of the Pacific Crest Trail alone.

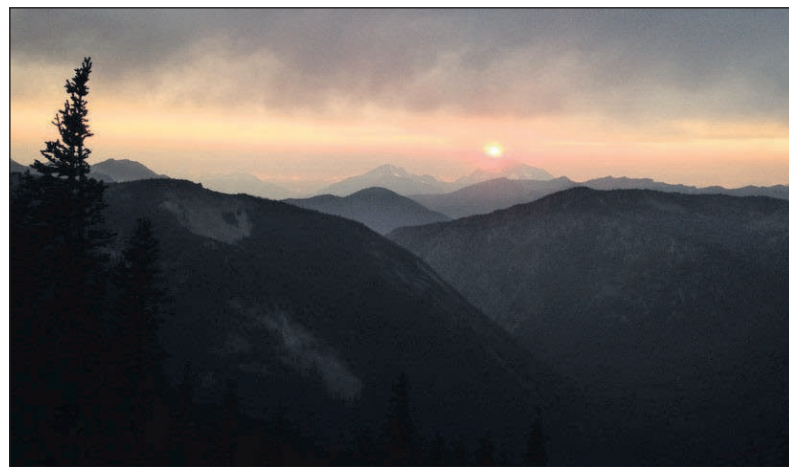
24 swarmed in with me. I know there were 24 because I counted as I dispatched them. Some bit me before I managed to squash them. My tent now has tiny little blood stains as a memorial.

It was worth it, though. Even with a bit less blood, I went to sleep happy in the knowledge that, next morning, I'd get to find new wonders on the trail.

Beautiful basin

Surpassed only by The Knife, Cispus Basin was my favorite section of trail. The trail climbs to 6,400 feet at Cispus Pass and then drops into the wide, bowl-shaped basin. As I descended, the sun lit up the countless small streams that flooded down to form the Cispus River.

I stopped at the first big stream and dropped my pack. I plunged my hands into the water, body bracing for the cold. Instead, all my muscles relaxed. The water was cool, but not cold. I splashed my face, rubbed off the dirt and sweat, and let the sun dry my skin. I balanced on a rock in the middle of the stream and water



In this August 2016 photo, the sun sets behind the mountains, as seen from the Pacific Crest Trail north of Hart's Pass. Loerch hiked part of the Pacific Crest Trail alone.

flowed all around me.

When it was time to walk on, I made no effort to rock-hop across any of the streams. I stepped right in and each time the perfect temperature of the water was like a gift.

At the last stream before I left the basin, I stopped to fill up my water bottles in a huge waterfall just off

the trail. I walked right up and filled my bottle from the torrent.

I walked out of the basin very wet and very happy.

A bit of magic

That night I slept at a well-established camp. After I set up my gear, I went looking for water. I followed a trail and found a tiny, fairy-tale

If you go:

The section of the PCT from Forest Road 5603 to Chinook Pass makes an excellent backpacking trip. You can also shorten it by hiking only as far as White Pass at Highway 12. Hiking from White Pass to Chinook Pass is also a good option.

I took six days for my hike. That meant I had to cover 12 miles a day — an easily achievable goal even if you want to spend lots of time swimming in lakes. One advantage of starting at Forest Road 5603 is that your first day is extremely easy. I did 13 miles, no problem, and I didn't start until mid-day.

Maps: The Green Trails Goat Rocks William O. Douglas Wilderness covers nearly this whole section of trail. The very beginning and very end are not included. I printed off the Halfmile PCT maps to cover those sections; www.pctmap.net/maps.

Resources: To research your own trip, the Pacific Crest Trail Association, www.pcta.org, and the Washington Trails Association, www.wta.org, are excellent resources.

stream. Water trickled from one perfect pool into the next. I filled up my water and went back to make dinner.

Not long after dinner, I was vaguely staring at the view when I realized I could hear water. Loud water, coming from the direction of the tiny stream. I went to have a look. The rivulet had become a rush. Water gushed from one pool to the next in a frothy torrent.

I was entranced. It felt like magic.

After a while, the logical part of my brain decided that the sun had probably hit a patch of snow and started it melting. The next morning, with the sun still behind the hills, the creek had returned to a trickle, confirming my theory. Actually, even with a logical explanation, it still felt like magic.

A lot of the trip was like that. During six days by myself, I had plenty of time to think and marvel at the world. It was a privilege I appreciated every day.

When I finished the trail, I had two minor blisters, a huge appetite, countless mosquito bites and memories to last a lifetime.

Be responsible

Be prepared with all of the 10 essentials (www.wta.org/hiking-info/basics/ten-essentials) to help you stay safe.

Practice leave-no-trace principles. Pack out all of your trash. Bury human waste. Bury or (preferably) pack out toilet paper. Camp at least 200 feet from water and don't camp on delicate vegetation. Get details at Int.org.

COMMENTARY

Why I want to hunt

Over the course of 33 years living in Oregon, I have caught salmon and steelhead with bait, lures and flies, rowed whitewater big and small, and backpacked through wilderness where a herd of elk thundered across my trail.

But I have never hunted.

Now that I am retired, I want to change that

This is something I have wanted to do since I was a kid.

Hunting was not a tradition in my family. I did persuade my parents to let me buy an Army surplus 1903 Springfield.

The .30-06 rifle cost about \$20, and my plan was to sportsterize it to hunt for deer. I got part-way through the process, but never even fired it until a couple years ago, after a gunsmith finished it for me. My father never hunted, there was no uncle who had ever hunted, and I moved away from the few friends who grew up to hunt. With no mentor, there was no hunting for me.

I moved to Oregon in 1983 to take a job as southern Oregon correspondent for The Associated Press, based in Grants Pass. Raising a family, I barely had time to teach myself to fish, let alone to hunt. But that changed when I retired last October.

In trying to understand why I want to do this, I have been reading a lot. I have found it is not that unusual. Tovar Cerulli, author of the book, "The Mindful Carnivore, A Vegetarian's Hunt for Sustenance," has even coined a term for this condition: Adult Onset Hunting.

I have killed plenty of fish. But I am less certain about killing a warm-blooded mammal—something with big brown eyes that can look at me and focus. People tell me they felt a combination of remorse and elation at their first kill. Do I really want



JEFF BARNARD
Comment

that?

With all the anti-hunting sentiment out there, defenses of hunting abound. Hunting controls wildlife that damage crops, and keeps populations at a point the diminishing habitat can sustain. Hunters take true responsibility for the meat they eat. Guns and ammo sales generate serious money for restoring wildlife habitat and helping non-game species headed for extinction.

Since 1937, the Pittman-Robertson Act has drawn a surcharge on guns and ammunition that goes to states for wildlife conservation and hunter safety. Ironically, the surge in sales of assault weapons and pistols is generating record amounts of money for conservation.

This year, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service distributed \$695,141,699 nationally, according to the website. Oregon's share was \$15,457,600.

But what motivates me is more in line with the late Spanish philosopher, Jose Ortega y Gasset, who concluded that "The hunter is the alert man."

Similarly, natural history writer Pete Dunne writes in his essay, "Before the Echo," that as a birdwatcher, he is part of the audience watching the great play of the natural world. But as a hunter he is on the stage, one of the actors.

Fishing demands alertness and attention to detail. But I want to see and feel what comes from the hunt.

Jeff Barnard wrote for The Associated Press for 35 years, 33 of them based on Grants Pass. Since he retired last fall, he has been writing a blog for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Oregon's rifle deer hunting season begins Oct. 1 statewide.

House passes bill to maintain trails

Rep. Walden hails legislation

By **GEORGE PLAVEN**
East Oregonian

Congress is considering a bill that would increase maintenance of public trails on national forests to ensure they are accessible for outdoor recreation.

The U.S. House of Representatives has passed the National Forest System Trails Stewardship Act, which gives the Department of Agriculture two years to come up with a national strategy for better maintaining 157,000 miles of trails.

Specifically, the strategy would aim to increase volunteers with the Forest Service on trails projects, and encourage firefighting crews to perform maintenance during the off-season. Rep. Greg Walden, R-Oregon, hailed the legislation as a pathway to more sustainable trails management.

"Hunting, fishing, camping, and other outdoor activities are cherished pastimes

here in Oregon, and they should be enjoyed for generations to come," Walden said. But as many people in Oregon know, the public trails in our state are in desperate need of better management."

The Forest Service is only able to maintain about a quarter of its trails up to standard, and nearly two-thirds of trails receive no maintenance at all, according to a 2013 report by the congressional watchdog Government Accountability Office.

The goal of the bill is to increase trail maintenance by volunteers and partners by 100 percent after five years. The Secretary of Agriculture will also be in charge of selecting between nine and 15 priority areas within the National Forest System that have seen either reduced access to public land, or increased risk to natural resources and public safety.

The bill now heads to the Senate for consideration.

Contact George Plaven at gplaven@eastoregonian.com or 541-966-0825.

BRIEFLY

Search suspended for man in Columbia Gorge

PORTLAND (AP) — Authorities have suspended the search for a 68-year-old man whose car was found Sunday at Horsetail Falls in the Columbia River Gorge.

Portland police say Thomas McAdams was reported missing Saturday and the search was suspended Wednesday night.

Authorities have searched over 200 miles of the trail system on the ground, by air and with police dogs in the gorge.

Police said in a news release they've found no sign of him and that McAdams had been upset

about personal issues and has exhibited signs of memory loss recently.

He's 5 foot 11 inches and 165 pounds with gray hair, green eyes, bushy eyebrows and a mustache.

Anyone who sees McAdams is asked to call 911. Anyone with non-emergency information is asked to contact Detective Heidi Helwig at (503) 823-0797.

Ochoco National Forest releases off-road vehicle plan

BEND (AP) — A U.S. Forest Service draft decision calls for creating about 137 miles of trails and roads in the Ochoco National Forest

for off-highway vehicle riders to use during summer months.

The proposal from the Ochoco National Forest comes as part of a long-running process to designate places in the forest for motorized vehicle users.

Released last week, the decision argues the routes laid out would meet demand for such riding areas; avoid areas associated with other recreation activities like hiking and horseback riding; and minimize impacts to sensitive resources. The routes would include existing trails and roads, along with new trails, staging areas, information kiosks and other facilities.

It would cost about \$488,000.