

Backpacking the Wonderland Trail 10/14/2022 – 10/17/2022

I planned to run the local Snohomish River Run this weekend, but with the air quality at the race at 160+ in Snohomish and unlikely to improve, I decided to head to Rainier and make an attempt at the Wonderland Trail. The Wonderland Trail is a 93-mile, 22,000 vertical foot trail that circumnavigates Rainier, which is usually snow-free from August-September.

There are logistical challenges of this trail – getting permits, river crossings, handling weather, organizing resupplies, and last but not least – climbing about ten mountain passes in a remote region.



Wonderland Trail Profile



10/14/2022: <https://www.strava.com/activities/7974877043> : White River → Ipsut Creek

10/15/2022: <https://www.strava.com/activities/7974887593> : Ipsut Creek → North Puyallup River

10/16/2022: <https://www.strava.com/activities/7980049994> : North Puyallup River → Reflection Lake

10/17/2022: <https://www.strava.com/activities/7980057694> : Reflection Lake → White River



Mowich Lake (Northwest Corner of Wonderland Trail, 10/15/2022)



Tahoma Creek Suspension Bridge, 10/16/2022



Exhausted after climbing the Cowlitz Divide, 10/17/2022



Fall colors on Panhandle Gap, 10/17/2022



Mountain Goats at Panhandle Gap, 10/17/2022

Motivation

"I've been wanting to do this hike ever since Mischa, Ariana, and I went to Indian Bar on a day-hike and encountered thru-hikers. Wael (Wilderness Adventure at Eagle Landing) counselors and various media also have been extolling the fun of hiking long distances. While I don't think I'll get around to a full AT or PCT thru-hike, this should be a fun backpacking trip that is still compatible with my other constraints & responsibilities. There's an unlimited number of hikes to do in the pacific northwest, but this was a notable omission given the time I've spent in Mt. Rainier National Park! Up, down, up, down, up, down but never around! It's on my list of things to do before I end up on the east coast. Since I've spent the past 2 months hiking & running every day, I'm in shape for it, if conditions permit.

The sport of trailrunning has a lot of allure to me. Initially I thought running was intrinsically damaging to the body. However, I think running's reputation mostly suffers from people doing long fast races on hard surfaces without training enough. I did about 230 miles of very slow running (11:00 minute-12:00 minute miles) over the past 2-3 months, and preemptively got 2 running assessments from a local PT. Each time I go they give me many strength tests & tell me which muscles I need to strengthen to increase the running volume without injury. This week, I ran two half marathons on soft trails, without significant soreness. Chris does even more, although I won't tempt fate with another this week."

- 04/29/2022, prior to the canceled July 1st 2022 attempt.

Red Tape:

The wilderness permit system on Rainier is byzantine. The goals are to protect the wilderness, conserve SAR resources, and allow both tourists and locals to use the park. There are three ways to get a permit: lottery permits, open-access permits, and walk-up permits.

The lottery permits require luck. The open-access permits require skill to deal with early-season and late-season conditions. Walk-up permits require flexibility that most people with full time jobs don't have. There is no auction system, and permits cost just \$6. Resale is not permitted – there is no way to buy your way around the wonderland trail.

There's about ~10,000 applications and 600 winners to the lottery, and those 600 winners are split into three groups of 200. Every few weeks another group of 200 get access to the campsite-selection website, where they can try to string together an itinerary that works for them (up to 14 days, maximum of 17 miles per day).

After the lottery winners are done, it's time for open-access permits. Everyone can pick over the scraps on recreation.gov, selecting either the very-early season (snow on the ground & unbridged creeks, such as the July 1st attempt), or the very-late season (risks blizzards).

The last option is walk-up permits – about 30% of permits are reserved for walk-up(s) – a person physically shows up at 7:30am at the ranger station, and the rangers will talk to you about what's available. Being flexible about the distance between campsites will help string these together into a viable itinerary.

After October 11th, usually the trail is covered in snow, and the permit system turns to 100% walk-ups. This year, there was a massive high-pressure zone, resulting in a solid forecast for no precipitation until October 19-20th. I had two days of personal-time which can be used without notice at work – I used both of them to make a four-day weekend, and went for it Friday morning at 4am.

Packing List:**Pack:**

1x 18L camelback backpack

Shelter:

1x twilight bivy

1x half-length sleeping pad

1x 30F sleeping quilt

1x jacket, softshell pants, long-sleeve smartwool shirt, hat, gloves

1x shorts & t-shirt

3x socks

1x trailrunners

Water:

1x sawyer squeeze

1x bottle that screws into the squeeze filter

1x 3L camelback

Food:

8,000 calories of Tailwind Endurance Fuel – 80x (100 calories, 303mg of sodium, 88mg of potassium)

5,000 calories of chex-mix

4,000 calories of peanut m&m

4,000 calories of trail mix

Navigation:

2x trail map

1x elevation map

1x detailed guidebook of the trail

1x garmin forerunner 935

1x garmin in-reach sat messenger

1x 4000mAH battery

1x phone with offline maps

Misc:

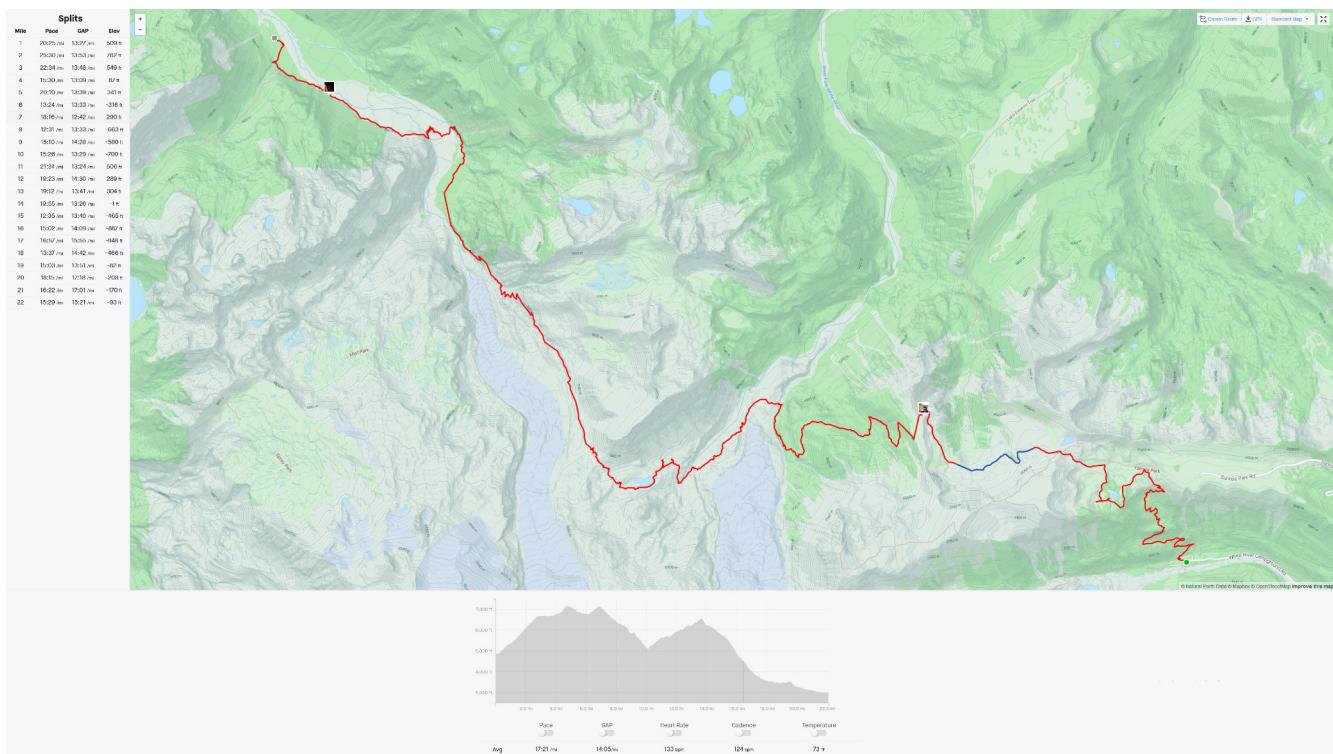
1x toothbrush, toothpaste

8x ibuprofin 200mg

1x small camp towel for drying out feet

Total weight: ~11lb without food & water

10/14/2022: White River to Ipsut Creek - <https://www.strava.com/activities/7974877043>



On Friday, I left at 4am, picked up snacks at safeway, and got to Longmire Museum (the winter ranger station) at 7:50am. Unfortunately the hours got moved to 9am, so I had a chance to try and stuff things into my pack better. 18L is a very small pack, but it helped me stay disciplined about what to put into the pack. I did some surgery on the book (**Hiking the Wonderland Trail: The Complete Guide to Mount Rainier's Premier Trail**) and ripped out the vestigial parts not related to navigation – this was not going to be a trip for identifying flora and fauna. While waiting for the office to open, some tourists asked me if there were any restaurants in the park. In hindsight, I should have offered them some of my backpacking food, since I would carry too much food on this trip.

I got my permits and the ranger gave me a bear cylinder to use. I put a third of the food into the bear cylinder to pick up on 10/16/2022, and hid the cylinder in the woods. Then, I drove around to white-river campground on the north-east side of the mountain. There are some benefits of starting at white river and going counter-clockwise – if things were going poorly, it's easy to hitchhike out of Longmire, and I went counter-clockwise so I could pass Mowich lake before the road closes for the winter on 10/16/2022. I like caching at Longmire, because I can borrow the bear-cylinder from the ranger station and return it as I go, and I don't have to drive an extra 2 hours at the end to turn it in.

I finally got going at 11am. From White River, I hiked to Sunrise Camp. I met some government scientists at sunrise camp, counting fir trees vs pine trees. Right now, the pines are losing ground to blister rust disease. I almost hiked up Burrough's mountain on accident, but a day-hiker commented that I had just left the wonderland trail 200 feet ago, and was on a different trail. Oops! I was more careful after this with navigation.



Skyscraper Pass

I filtered water at skyscraper pass, hiked up to Mystic Lake, and it got dark as I got to the bank of the carbon river. After climbing across on a 4-ft wide log, I met Tim Cooke (<https://www.strava.com/activities/7973973469>), who was making a 30-hour non-stop attempt at hour 18 and mile 50 or so, starting from longmire at 3am.

There was a scary looking set of red eyes blocking the trail near Ipsut Creek Camp at 9pm. After about 5-10 minutes of banging the hiking poles together, an unknown animal retreated into the forest and allowed me to pass. I believe this was likely a fox, but I wasn't going to follow it at night to verify...



Crossing a creek in the evening



Carbon Glacier at dusk

10/15/2022: <https://www.strava.com/activities/7974887593> : Ipsut Creek → North Puyallup River

On day two, I woke up at about 8:00am or so, and it took a while to stuff everything into the pack. Eventually I learned the system for rolling up the sleeping gear more efficiently, but for the time being it was still taking me about an hour to pack up ‘camp’.

After filtering more water (necessary about twice a day), I headed up Ipsut Pass, one of the steeper passes. The key with mountain passes is to walk at a sustainable speed, avoid checking the watch, and eat as much food as you can stomach as you walk. Uphill is a great opportunity to put the stomach to work digesting solid food, since the slow pace will avoid bouncing the food around (or worse, back out!). Topping out a mountain pass or gaining a ridgeline is a great feeling – you see a slot in the distance slowly get closer and closer, until finally you go over the top and see the light on the other side!

Giant Tree:



I talked to a few day hikers who were training for the wonderland in 2023, hoping to go on a more reasonable cadence. While conversing with them uphill, some members of their group got extremely winded, and we had to stop. Hopefully that was not overly discouraging, although I heard them talking about me from across Mowich Lake. (sound travels a LONG way over water).



Mowich Lake

With weather forecasts accurate to about 3-4 days, folks are either very fast & light (such that weather is predictable), or slow & armored and ready to get stormed on (spikes, parkas, waterproofing, and whatnot). The October backpacking crowd is generally the light-and-fast crowd – this trail just doesn't work in the winter, because panhandle gap is steep enough to be serious in the snow. It does not take much to make snow at 7000+ ft above sea level in October, so everyone has to be willing to book it 15 miles to the nearest road if a storm arrives.

After a quick cold bath to clean off at Mowich Lake, I headed south, eventually ending up at Golden Lakes. I met three groups of clockwise hikers – Unknown Fast Ultramarathoner (<https://www.strava.com/activities/7975047317>) (started 7 hours ago at Longmire, later tracked down to be [Paul Heffernan](#)), Trent (6-days, clockwise from Longmire) and a middle-age couple (~6 days, clockwise from Longmire). While my campsite was intended to be South Puyallup River Camp, in practice I ran out of steam at North Puyallup and camped there. I didn't want to camp at Klapatche Park – that area is known for bear activity.

Despite my efforts, my pack was raided on night two by some rodents who enjoyed chex mix. Not sure why I left it in the outside mesh pocket.



Golden Lakes



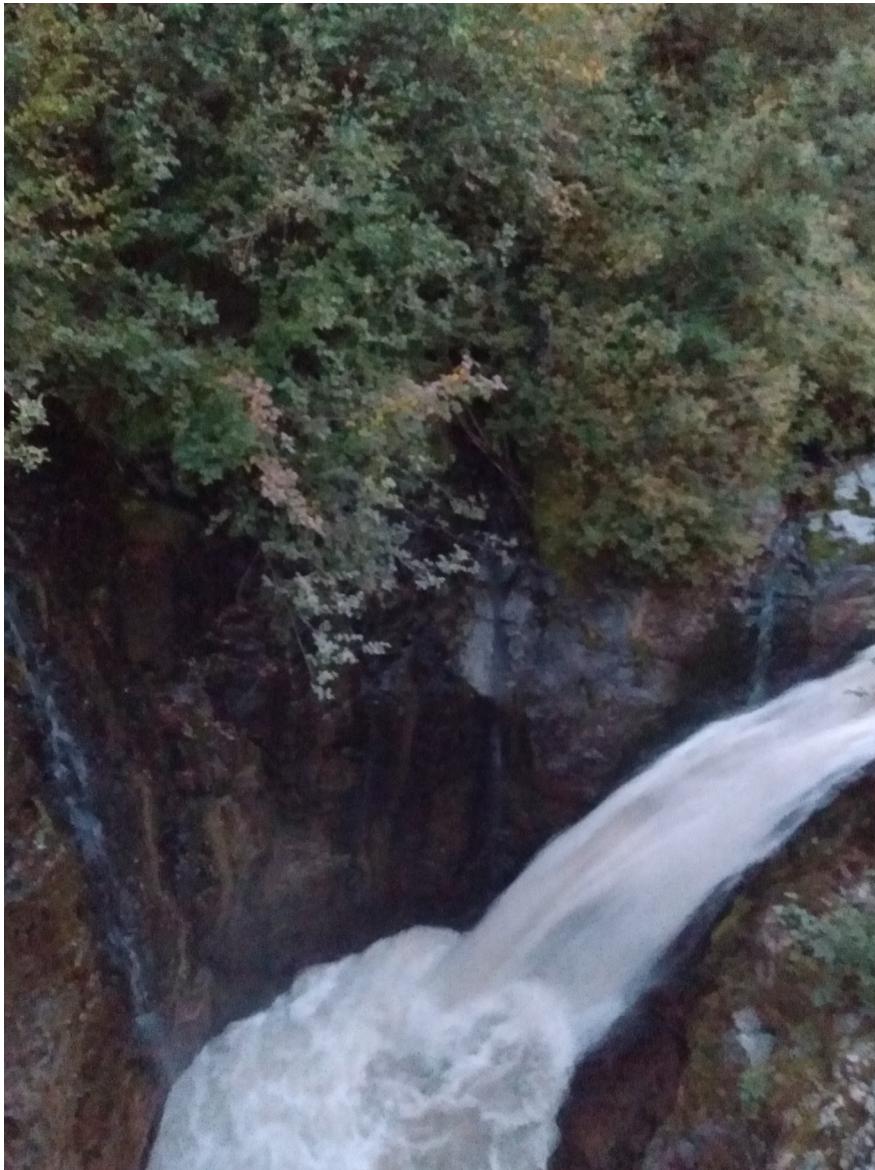
Robbed!



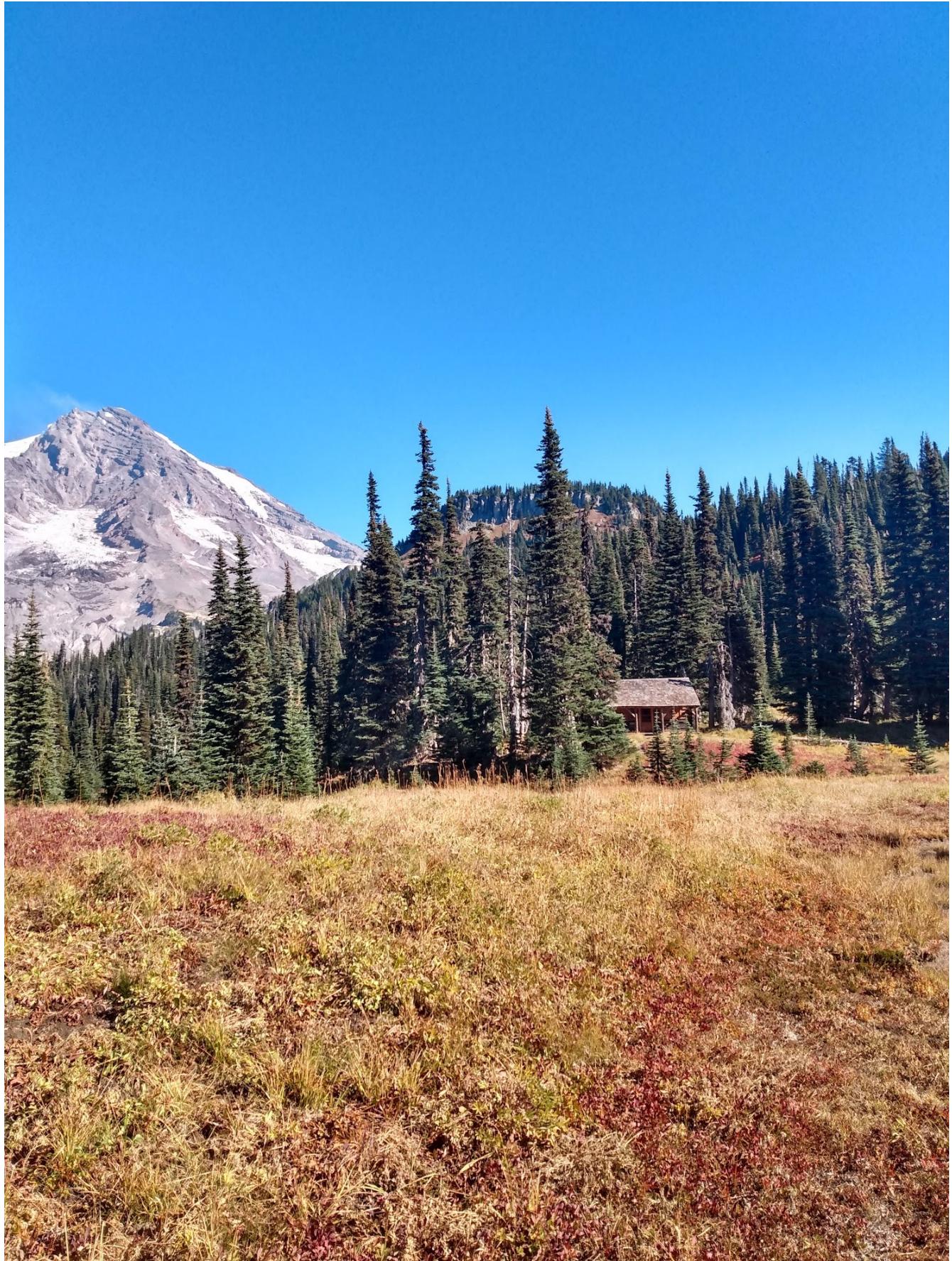
10/16/2022: <https://www.strava.com/activities/7980049994> : North Puyallup River → Reflection Lake

I woke up at sunrise, and left quickly. By now I had learned how to pack up camp, and I was 8 miles behind my original plan, and 18 miles from Longmire. The goal for day 3 was to resupply at longmire, check the weather report, and make a decision on if I can finish the route. Ideally, a few more hours after Longmire would get me in striking distance on Day 4 – Indian Bar, Nickle Creek, or Maple Creek would all be nice. Paradise River camp would make the final day an infeasible 30 miles & 8k+ vertical foot gain, and risk an extra day and missing work on Tuesday.

After crossing Klapatche park and San Andreas park, I went past my original planned campsite and continued south. After gaining Emerald Ridge, I ended up crossing through Indian Henry's Hunting Ground (which Dad camped at many years ago!). The suspension bridge was massive!



Waterfall near North Puyallup River



Indian Henry's Patrol Cabin



The sign



Tahoma Creek Suspension Bridge

The descent from Devil's Dream was uneventful – while the campsite had a reputation for bugs, they were not around in October. I passed through Pyramid Creek campsite, ascended Rampart Ridge, and descended towards Longmire. At the Kautz Creek, some women were closely inspecting a log crossing. Since the river was benign, I decided to test the log in style and ran across the top of it. I asked them if Longmire was around here somewhere. I must have looked somewhat dire, because they looked at me like I was an alien! They told me Longmire was 3 miles down the trail, and I trotted through the moraine in that direction.

At Longmire, I picked up my cache, turned in my rented bear cylinder, and officially moved my itinerary from Nickle Creek to Maple Creek. As it would turn out, even this decrease in expectations was not pessimistic enough, and I wouldn't make to Maple Creek either by night 3.

I was not sure if I should continue at Longmire. I was surrounded by happy, normal national park visitors, and it seemed like they had the right idea. In a pinch, Chris would drive over and pick me up. But, I was not 'in a pinch', the weather report looked solid for another three days, and I had plenty of provisions. From a musculoskeletal perspective, everything was feeling sore but solid. I took some ibuprofen (200mg – a responsible quantity), turned in extra unopened food to the food bank box, ripped out some more pages of *Hiking the Wonderland Trail* and threw away trash.

Onwards!

This optimism promptly collided with a 2,000' climb, on a day where I already had 5500' of gain. I slowly trudged up the climb, and just as I crested the climb, night fell and I lost motivation. The bivy sack came out about 500 meters from reflection lake, about 8 inches off the trail.



Narada Falls, past Longmire

10/17/2022: <https://www.strava.com/activities/7980057694> : Reflection Lake → White River

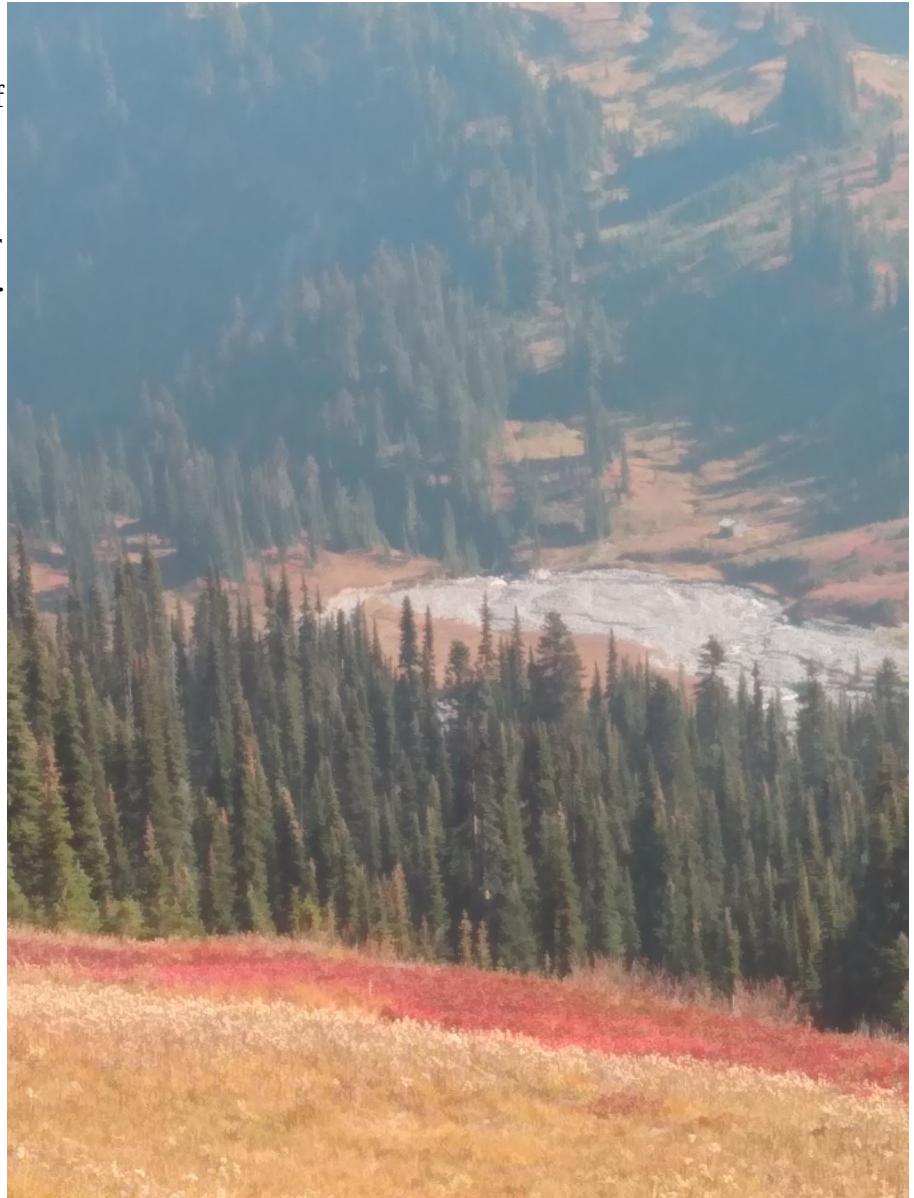
I woke up at 5am. Rather than list of which body parts were sore, I'll list the ones that were not sore. The quads and abs were doing OK. Everything else hurt. Somehow even my arms were aching from using the trekking poles. But, the end was in sight, and I got an early start on level / downhill terrain to Maple Creek. I filled up 3L of water, and moved onwards.

There is always water at Indian Bar, but the Cowlitz Divide is hot and exposed. This is where I made a bit of an error, and didn't fill up at Nickel Creek. It would have been better to top up another liter prior to climbing the cowlitz. I crossed dry-stream after dry-stream after dry-lake, and ran out. While annoying, this was not a serious situation. There's a lake about 2 miles east off the trail, that I could walk down to in a pinch.

Alternatively, I could push on to Indian Bar shelter – even if it is dry, I could wait for nightfall to climb up Panhandle gap. On a 50F night, I can climb a hill without losing water very fast. In addition, I was consistently drinking 6L+ a day, and was well hydrated going in to day 3.

Water conservation wasn't necessary though, and Indian Bar had tons of water nearby. I filled up, rested, and contemplated the most formidable section of the wonderland trail that lay ahead – Panhandle Gap.

Panhandle gap is notorious for it's high elevation, steep inclines, and snow accumulation into August.



This year though, Panhandle was a rocky trail like any other. The biggest danger came from me eating too much – I had consumed 21 servings of tailwind (100 calories each), 1500 calories of chex mix, 1000 calories of peanut m&m's, and my stomach started to feel quite unsettled after a short jog.

While eating too much isn't particularly dangerous by itself, vomiting is. After vomiting, a person is usually dehydrated and lacking in electrolytes. Therefore, I stopped running immediately, drank a few sips of pure water (no tailwind), and proceeded with caution as to not further jostle my peeved digestive system.



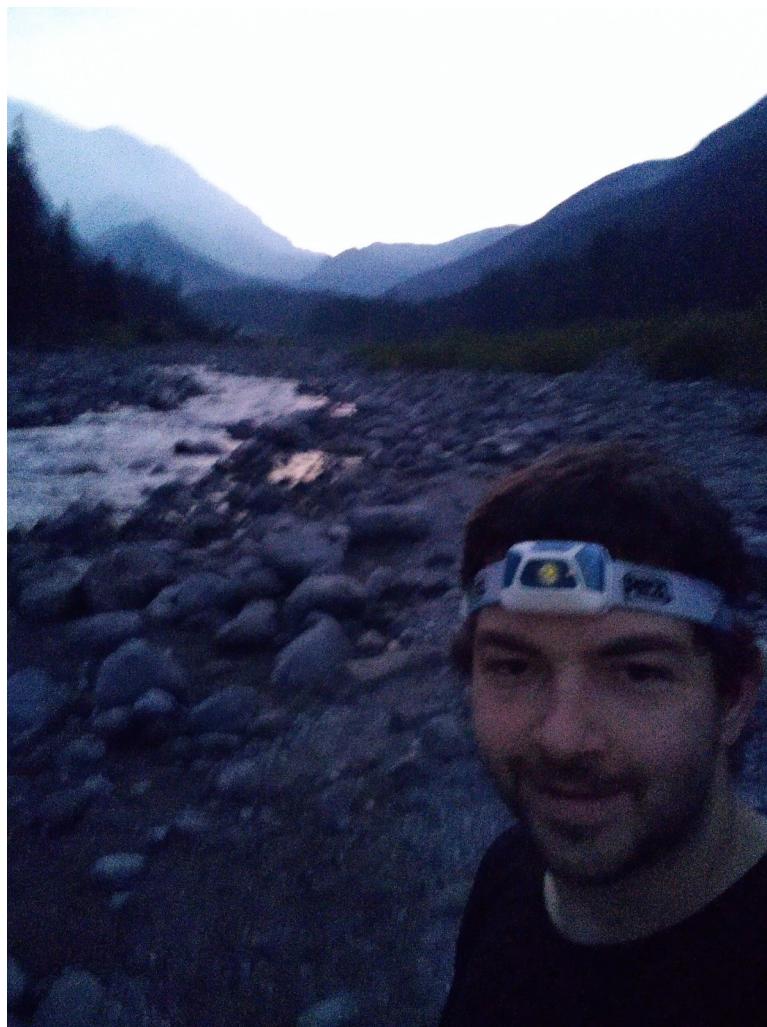
Goats

After Panhandle Gap, it was ‘all downhill from here’ for the next 12 miles. I walked past summerland (using the composting toilet), across Frying Pan creek, to the Frying Pan creek trailhead. I left my pack at the trailhead, drank a few sips of water, and decided to sprint the last 2.4 miles to the White River trailhead and drive down to pick up the pack.

Much to my surprise, I drove up and saw fellow humans huddled around my pack. They had seen me hiking back to frying pan, and were very concerned about my unclaimed pack at nightfall. Unfortunately, in the 35 minutes it took me to pick up the car, the last people down from the trail had called 911 and reported an abandoned pack at nightfall at a common day-hiker trail. I should be more careful about the optics of leaving my pack in random places.

After clearing up the misunderstanding (just picking up the car folks! Not all who wander are lost!), I was off to Seattle and arrived home before 10pm. What an adventure, and what a finale for the summer season.

I have been trying to make this trail happen for several years. Excessive snow in July, losing the permit lottery again, and lack of time off work made this challenging, so I am elated to finally accomplish that goal after so many false starts.



Crossing the White River – the finish line is 300 meters away.