

Mount Rainier, WA, 14,411 ft. – July 17, 2010, HP #10: Breaking Tradition

Immediately following our successful climb of Mount Hood in extremely windy conditions, Josh and I drove 230 miles from Timberline Ski Resort to Seattle Washington. Our plan was to take it easy July 13, and do some site seeing July 14. July 15, we were scheduled to meet the other members of our Mount Rainer climbing team at the Paradise area of Mount Rainier National.

As it turned out, Josh got a call - I had not yet given into social pressure and did not own a mobile phone at this point in my life - asking us if we could do Rainer as a quicker trip and meet a few other members of our group July 16 instead. We were told there had been a mix-up with the permits but more likely our group size exceeded regulations and had been split into two and allotted staggered start dates. Considering us both strong climbers, we were asked to sacrifice a more leisure itinerary. An extra day in Seattle was fine, even if we had nothing planned to do, and the morning of July 16 came soon enough.

At the end of 2009 I had started looking for a group, or even just a partner, to climb Rainier with in 2010. One my backcountry ski partners told me about a climbing club in Provo Utah planning to tackle it the summer of 2010. Enquiring further it seemed like the perfect solution and I ended up joining. The club held monthly activities involving either ice climbing, rock climbing, or mountain climbing. To qualify for the Rainer trip members were required to participate in several other mountain climbs in preparation. I met Josh through the club.

It is over 100 miles to Paradise from Seattle, and the morning of July 16, 2010 we allowed ourselves ample time to get there by 10:00 a.m. Along the Paradise road, which parallels the Nisqually River, the ultra-prominence of Mount Rainier was very noticeable. In fact, Mount Rainier is ranked the most topographically prominent mountain in the contiguous United States.

Legend has it that the name “Paradise” comes from the glorious views of the wildflower meadows common to the area. The site is popular with tourists as it is home to the National Park’s main visitor center with its gift shop and cafeteria. A concessioner-operated hotel, the historic Paradise Inn, is also located in the vicinity. We did not have time for any of the tourist attractions, nor were we interested in them.

Close to noon, under the weight of 40-pound packs, seven of us began the 4.25 miles and 4,660 vertical feet climb to Camp Muir, which was done almost entirely on a snowfield. Mount Rainier is a large active volcano, covered by twenty-six glaciers making it the most heavily glaciated peak in the lower 48 US states. The glaciers we would be traveling on above Camp Muir necessitate extra climbing equipment such as pickets, ice screws, ropes, slings, carabiners, harnesses, crampons, and ice axes. Additionally, we carried winter clothing, helmets (to protect us from rock fall), sleep bags, and tents, along with three days’ worth of food.

The name Rainier was given to the mountain way back in 1792 in honor of Admiral Peter Rainier. Rainier is also called Tacoma (Tahoma) which may mean “mother of waters” or simply

“snow-covered mountain”. Somewhat fittingly, and certainly by coincidence, the name Rainer means “Deciding Warrior” – that is according to urbandictionary.com. Which also states, “the name Rainier creates the urge to be reliable and responsible”, and “it causes the inability to realize your goals and ambitions”. Many reliable and responsible climbers might resonate with this meaning if denied the peak, as historically only about half who set out to stand on top of Rainier succeed. At least 10,000 climbers attempt Rainier annually.

Views to the south revealed Oregon’s Mount Hood where Josh and I had been just four days earlier in very strong winds. We were both hoping to not have a repeat of such weather on our Rainier summit day. Chatting with folks as they descended, we learned most of them had missed their summit bid due to strong winds, which did concern us.

Arriving at Camp Muir at 4:30 p.m. we located the 12 other members of our club, who seemed glad to see us, and who got a good laugh out of the horseshoe shaped mustache I was sporting. They had spent the day at a nearby glacier taking photos in crevasses and practicing crevasse rescue – as is typically done by many climbers during their first ascent of Rainier. Josh and I had done our own practice back home on the snowfield at Mount Timpanogos.

Camp Muir was crowded, as I suppose it often is during the peak climbing season, so we had to be creative to find and create a suitable spot for the tent. We needed water for dinner, and for the next day’s summit bid, and it took more than a couple hours of melting snow to create enough. In my trip notes I wrote “setting up camp, melting snow for water, and cooking dinner was a four-hour ordeal”. With food in our bellies, and the water ready for the morning, we laid down in the tent, and I pretended to sleep having too much on my mind to actually sleep.

Josh and I would be roping up with the White brothers Tyler and Aaron, and the plan was to leave Camp Muir at 3:00 a.m. I advised the brothers that an hour and a half would be needed to prepare in the morning, but I was the only one up 1:30 a.m., and the only one ready at 3:00 a.m. By 3:40 a.m. everyone on our rope team was ready and we began the climb of the remaining 4.75 miles and 4,330 vertical feet to the top of Washington. Most groups (including the other 12 members of our club) start as early as midnight so were breaking tradition with our late start.

We followed the Disappointment Cleaver route - the most common route. The guiding services seem to dominate this route and have a sort of controlling attitude toward it. Add to that the aforementioned crowded conditions and the tourist nature of the Paradise area, and together these factors tend to lessen the otherwise precarious and adventurous nature of climbing Mount Rainier.

From Camp Muir the route traverses the Cowlitz Glacier to Cathedral Gap at 10,640 feet and then continues left along scree, ice, and snow to Ingram flats at 11,100 feet where we encountered our first crevasse. From Ingram Flats we climbed the Disappointment Cleaver to 12,250 feet.

The term cleaver refers to a rock ridge which divides, or cleaves, a glacier into parts or from another glacier. In this case the cleaver seems to separate the Ingraham glacier from the Emmons glacier. Perhaps, the strain of reaching the Cleaver and still having a long way to go before reaching the highest point resulted in the name “Disappointment Cleaver”, but your guess is as good as mine. “Disappointment” might also apply as I have heard climbers are often turned back here due to threatening weather higher up.

As we ascended the Cleaver, we watched the sunrise. By 6:30 a.m. we reached the top of it, where we paused to remove our headlamps, and wait for another rope team from our crew. With the sun out we had a nice view of Mount Adams. The weather was clear and calm, and the only clouds we saw were in the distance and below us.

Next, we ascended Ingraham’s Glacier to Emmon’s Glacier which took us to the 14,180-foot crater rim by 9:15 a.m. En route many of our club friends had passed us on their descent.

Rainier’s crater is close to a quarter of a mile in diameter, which is very large, but walking across it seemed even longer. The summit is topped by two volcanic craters, with the larger east crater (the one we stood on) overlapping the west crater. At 9:40 a.m. our rope team of four reached Columbia Crest, the true summit, at 14,411 feet.

The summit plateau of Mount Rainier holds two other named points in addition to Columbia Crest. Point Success is the second tallest at 14,158 feet, and Liberty Cap which reaches 14,112 feet. One hundred feet beneath the ice of the craters lies the 16-foot deep, unofficially named, Lake Muriel - the most elevated lake in North America. Lake Muriel is a pool of meltwater that forms as heat rises from the depths of the volcano turning ice into water and filling the twin craters.



As such it may not be a permanent lake, coming and going as conditions warrant. I like to think we walked over it without even knowing it was below us.

I did not see or smell any of the fumaroles that surely exist on this volcano. Nor did I concern myself that I was standing on what some consider one of the most dangerous volcanoes in the world. Records date the most recent volcanic eruption clear back to the first half of the 1800, but apparently there is a strong probability of eruption in the near future. As a point of reference, I personally experienced consequences of the 1980 Mount St. Helens eruption as our family car and yard in Alberta was covered in ash.

Since we had broken tradition with our late start, and with the other late starters of our group behind us, we had the top of Washington to ourselves. The temperature was below freezing with blue skies, and a moderate wind was blowing, and we were covered in generously insulated parkas. We spent just ten minutes on the peak mostly taking photographs, then moved lower out of the breeze to have a snack. After 45 minutes of relaxation, we began our descent. Already behind the conventional schedule we probably lingered at the top a bit longer than we should have, but it is not every day one finds himself at such an awesome place. No harm was encountered despite our late start – no avalanches, no falling through a snow-bridge into a crevasse, and no falling rocks - dangers an early start is intended to mitigate.

The return to Camp Muir took four hours. When we reached the vicinity of the Disappointment Cleaver at 1:00 p.m. we were down to our shirt layers and the snow/ice were melting. I removed my aluminum crampons to avoid using them over the rocky section, and the time delay seemed to disagree with the White brothers. Josh and I were on our own rope, as were the brothers on theirs, so they just untied their rope from ours and sped off. Passing the scree, I reinstated my crampons, and we continued backtracking arriving at Camp Muir at 2:27 p.m. after 11 hours on the high mountain. Most of our club members had already packed up and started down.

With our tent set up, my desire was to relax and spend the night as our permit allowed. However, Josh was very set on getting off the mountain that same day. As such, after melting more snow for water, we packed up our gear and started down to Paradise at 5:00 p.m. arriving within two and a half hours. At that moment we were both too tired to fully appreciate our accomplishment, but it was another big one indeed.

Photo Album: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/k4TFfxGDcP93UGBw8>