

Mount Hood, OR, 11,239 ft. – July 12, 2010, HP #9: One Windy Monday

The day prior to leaving for Oregon, I spent most of the evening packing and double checking our gear list. Josh would not pick me up until the following afternoon, but I am not one to leave things until the last minute. We had been preparing for several weeks and in just three days we would be climbing Mount Hood – the tallest mountain in Oregon.

The main climbing season on Mount Hood is April through June as a combination of more stable weather and lower avalanche risk make these months optimal. During this time frame, the mountain sees a lot of traffic, reportedly making it the world's second-most climbed snow-covered peak, after Japan's Mt. Fuji. That does not, however, mean it is an easy mountain to climb. Its glaciers contain snow-covered crevasses ready to swallow up climbers without warning. The upper slopes are very steep where falling is likely to result in serious injury. Rock and ice fall are common, and its weather can rapidly deteriorate. Indeed, Mount Hood has been the site of many accidents, rescues, and numerous deaths. Many of its climbers use guides to mitigate the risks.

Mountaineering mostly in the Utah Mountains where glaciers do not exist, and crevasses are typically not a concern, neither of us had any hands-on glacier travel experience. Nevertheless, we had done our homework and studied up on the subject. To exercise our newly acquired knowledge, we had taken a training run up local Mount Timpanogos. There on the snow-covered slopes adjacent to Emerald Lake, we had practiced arresting falls while roped together, setting up anchors, and rescuing each other out of imaginary crevasses. Since we would be climbing Mount Hood off season, we understood we could only count on our combined knowledge to keep us safe.

July 10, we drove a bit more than half the distance from Orem Utah to Oregon's Timberline Ski Resort. Crossing the Snake River from Idaho into Oregon we stopped in Ontario, the first town we encountered. There we located a motel for the evening. The next morning, I was up and ready to go much too early. My eagerness was partly due to the anticipation of the pending adventure, but mostly because I do not sleep well in motels. As we resumed traveling west on I-84 we commented to each other how much the landscape reminded us of Utah rather than what we expected of Oregon as it was rather dry and barren. Upon reaching the Columbia River, the scenery improved. Soon thereafter we began to catch glimpses of a large white object in the distance, which in time proved to be Mount Hood.

Around noon we pulled into a town named The Dalles and ordered hamburgers from a local restaurant. From there we had just 21 miles remaining on I-84 west before exiting and following Oregon Route 35 for the last 40 miles. We stopped a couple of times along Route 35 to take pictures of the impressive 7,700-foot prominence of Mount Hood.

By 2:00 p.m. July 11, we reached Timberline Ski Resort and had our first look at Mount Hood's south side. To reach the summit, we planned to use either the Hogsback route or the South Side Old Chute Variation route. I pulled out the route descriptions and maps, and we began to pick out landmarks as we speculated about which route would be best for the current conditions.



After a while we visited the historic Timberline Lodge, there we chatted with a Park Service employee. He did not have any information about the current climbing conditions, but suggested we try the Climbers Cave at the Day Lodge. At the Climbers Cave we found self-registry climbing permits and a weather forecast, but no one to talk to. The forecast called for clear skies with 30 mph wind gusts. Leaving the Climbers Cave, we approached a ski resort employee asking him if he had climbed the mountain. When we learned he had, I turned to a ski resort map behind us asking him to point out the location of the Hogsback Ridge. He responded by saying "that is a cartoon map", and simply walked away without offering us his insights. Trusting we could rely on the information we had we gave up on asking for more.

Our plan was to start up the mountain at 12:30 pm – still nine hours away. Climbing at such an odd hour is done to avoid warmer temperatures of the afternoon which can present safety hazards including both rock and ice falls. In the meantime, we located an empty campground. I laid out my tent's footprint along with my sleeping bag and tried to catch some sleep while Josh rested in his car. Laying beneath some large pine trees, I watched the tops moving in the wind as clouds moved rapidly across the sky. I hoped the wind would push the clouds away, and we would be graced with clear skies.

By 8:00 p.m., Josh and I were both eager to do something, so we headed down to the town of Government Camp. The stores closed shortly after our arrival, but we stumbled upon a skateboarding contest underway. Before long, the sun set and the temperature began to fall, prompting us to enter a restaurant where we ordered a pizza. Around 10:00 p.m. as we headed back to the ski resort a storm seemed to be brewing which dampened our enthusiasm for the imminent climb.

In the afternoon, the ski resort parking lot had been full but now it contained just a smattering of vehicles only one of which was occupied. The wind was howling, the moon and stars were absent, and there was a desolate feeling in the air. At the Climbers Cave I discovered three climbers. One man and two women whom I established were with the man waiting in the car I had noticed in parking lot. Returning to Josh's car I filled him in on my discoveries. Realizing another group was about to head out spurred us into action.

It took an hour and a half to get ready in the cold and dark as we reevaluated what to wear due to the unexpected weather. Nonetheless, we remained on schedule and ready to go by 12:30 a.m. – placing us one hour behind the other group.

The parking lot sits in front of the Palmer Glacier at an elevation of 5,800 feet. The climber's trail travels up the far east side of the glacier paralleling the ski runs. At the trailhead we saw two more climbers, parked behind the Day Lodge, about to start up. As we attached our crampons to our boots they passed by.

As we marched our way up heading north, the wind gusted from the west. The clouds above hid the stars and a gloomy feeling hung over us. The climber's trail travels two miles (as the crow flies) to the top of the ski area, gaining 2,800 vertical feet in the process. The groomed snow of the ski resort was very solid, and at times the slope was just on the verge of being too steep to flat foot, resulting in a lot of pressure on our heels. Along the way we made sure to stay away from the grooming machines doing their night's work.

Now and then we would notice the headlamps of the two groups ahead of us. With the colder temperatures my headlamp grew dimmer, so I turned it off to save the batteries, and Josh did the same to his. Despite the darkness, we could see the Palmer Lift and were aware of Crater Rock above it. Reaching a point about three quarters of the way up the ski slope, we passed the group of two while they were attaching their crampons.

As we neared the top of the ski runs, the headlamps of the group in front of us seemed to be moving toward us. The sense that they had given up and were heading down was a further blow to our already lowered morale. Gladly, what seemed to be the group descending turned out to be an illusion. It was explained when we encountered them resting facing downhill. Using the northern wall of the upper boundary cat track as a wind block caused them to be turned away from the mountain. It was a good idea and we followed suit.

While resting it did not take long to get cold, still we paused long enough to allow the others to continue up first. We had planned to rope up at this point as we would be leaving the groomed terrain of the ski area. The other group, however, did not feel that was necessary yet and so we too left our rope packed away. Despite our hopes of following them, we found their pace to be slower than ours, and soon we overtook them.

Finding ourselves in front, we looked around for some landmarks. We could see Carter Rock above us to the left and often we noticed boot tracks in the snow making us feel confident we were on the right course. After a while there appeared to be a ridge above us toward the Steel Cliff. We reasoned we might escape the brunt of the wind if we could get over the ridge. Yet, as we pushed up and to the right, "the ridge" turned out to be nothing more than a shadow. In the process we reached the east side of Crater Rock where we encountered a well packed trail in the crusty snow. By the time the trail led us to north end of Crater Rock dawn had arrived.

Now we could clearly see the true Hogsback Ridge ahead of us, and a crater below us to our left. We checked the time, discovering it was 5:11 a.m.

The decision we now faced was do we follow the Hogsback Ridge up to the visible bergschrund above it and risk not finding a way across it into the Pearly Gates, or do we cross the crater and trust the Old Chute route would obviously present itself? We decided to stick with our present track which entered the crater through some avalanche debris only to be lost on the snowless hot rocks of the craters northwest side. The crater was not large, and we felt if we roped-up we could safely cross it. As we measured out our rope and attached our prussics, the group of four passed us.

Without roping up the foursome walked down into the 10,300-foot-high crater and stopped to look at the fumaroles. We completed tying into our rope, in turn passing them as we made our way across the crater. Thankfully, on the northside of 10,560-foot Crater Rock we were somewhat blocked from the effects of the wind.

As we arrived at the top of the hot rocks, we noticed one of the men taking off on his own while his three associates hung back to rope up. The next 800 vertical feet climb some very steep slopes, 45+ degrees, to the summit ridge. I took the lead on our rope and headed up confidently having negotiated similar slopes on other mountains. My instinct was to stay to the right of the main runnel, but instead I followed the solo climber now in the lead and went left. As we got higher, and the slope got steeper, the solid icy conditions made the going extremely dangerous and time-consuming. At one point my crampons failed to penetrate the ice and down I went. Despite my immediate self-arrest, I slid at least ten feet before stopping. The slip made Josh and I both more aware of how hazardous the conditions were. I began picking my footings more carefully and would occasionally take the time to chop steps with my ice axe.

Obtaining the same height as the bergschrund to our right we lessened the distance between us on the rope feeling there was no longer danger of breaking through the snow and falling into a crevasse. Soon the solo climber above us gained the summit ridge leaving our line of sight. The other three members of his group stuck to the right-hand side of the main runnel and before long had climbed higher than us. Mentally I kicked myself for not trusting my instincts.

Josh took the lead on the traverse as we chose to make our way back to the right-hand side of the main runnel. We wanted to see if his stiffer full shank boots would result in steps that I could follow in my half shank boots. Alas, the snow was just too hard to form steps without chopping. Returning to the right-hand side we shortly reached the summit ridge.

We watched the trio crawl northeasterly on their bellies, across the knife-edge toward the peak. The wind gusts were so strong not one of them dared to stand up for fear of being blown off the ridge, which surely would have been fatal. As we followed suit on our bellies, Josh who was in the lead, turned to me and yelled through the wind asking, "Should we call this good?", and I shook my head "No". Yet, not more than ten feet further along I shouted, "Maybe we should turn around." The wind was formidable and we knew we were taking a huge risk. We

decided we had to be prepared to jump off the opposite side of the other should the wind blow one of us off, thus arresting the other's fall with the rope connecting us.

Making it safely across the dicey knife-edge, we noticed the other three topping out on the summit still not risking standing up. Below the summit we stopped to put on our tinted lenses, and they emerged along with their solo companion. One of them informed us they were not going to descend across the knife-edge as they had spotted a different way down. I told them we would watch them. As they disappeared, we continued to the peak.

As I slithered through the wind reaching the 11,239-foot top of Oregon, Josh hung back acting as an anchor by keeping the rope between us tight. The drop to the north was even more vertical than what we had climbed. A couple of minutes later we traded places. The time was 7:00 a.m., it had taken us six and a half hours to summit. We commented to each other that the wind gusts felt like 60 or 70 mph.

Eager to get down to presumed safety, we spent only ten minutes on the peak. We had seen where the other group had gone down, but at first glance we were not sure it was the best alternative. However, once we returned to the knife-edge the idea of shimmying down it headfirst was not appealing, and we elected to mimic the other group.



Josh went first as I hung back to keep the rope between us tight. We took our time, and with the loss of elevation we were again somewhat sheltered from the dreadful wind. Along the way we eventually saw the other two climbers who had started out at the same time as us. They were over the hot rocks and starting up the Coalman Glacier. We watch one of them slip and go a long ways,

perhaps a 100 feet, before he stopped. That seemed to be enough for them, as recovering from the fall they both immediately turned around and headed down.

Continuing down slowly, we reached the crater within an hour. We snapped a few pictures of Crater Rock and the avalanche debris running into the crater and then climbed the Hogsback Ridge. On the opposite side of the ridge, we were reunited with our de facto climbing partners

who were enjoying a rest. As we untied from our rope, we chatted with the trio and the man revealed that during the regular climbing season he was a Mount Hood guide. We also learned their fourth member had hurried on down as he was trying to complete biking from Portland, climbing Mount Hood and biking back within 24 hours. Hearing that made us realize we had seen him riding his bike up to the ski resort along the Timberline Highway the previous evening. We thanked the guide for being there, acknowledging we had followed his lead at times which had contributed to our success. We also learned the two women were twin sisters. Within 40 minutes, with plenty of snacks in our bellies, we resumed the descent.

The views south over the ski resort, with Mount Jefferson on the horizon, were amazing. To our right (west) was a sea of clouds, yet straight ahead was clear. I had a feeling of freedom, and a major sense of accomplishment. The grimness of the night had been swept away by euphoria. To quote James Ramsey Ullman, "we had escaped to reality!"

Rounding the east side of Crater Rock, we were once again blasted by the west winds, nearly being blown over at times. Below us, just above the upper boundary of the ski resort we watched the guide trade his crampons for a pair of skis he had stashed there. At one point as he attempted to ski downhill into the wind it literally pushing him back uphill. By now the winds persistence had become very bothersome.

Our descent path took us to the top of the Palmer Lift, where we found the twins enlightening the ski patrol about their fatigue and asking if they could ride down on the lift. Eventually he agreed but said the chair had to be full to stabilize it against the winds. Josh volunteered to fill the last spot on the chair and down went the lucky three the quick way. Off I went on foot, down the groomed runs toward the climber's trail.

Two-hundred feet shy of the parking lot I found Josh waiting for me, and together exhausted we walked down to the car arriving before 11:30 a.m. As I removed my pack and retrieved my left-over slice of pizza, Josh went into the Climbers Cave to take back the voluntary information sheet he had dropped off prior to our departure. Returning, he informed me the updated weather forecast had called for 50 mph wind gusts, as we had certainly experienced.

We said goodbye to our three climbing associates, as they headed out for Portland. Soon after we left for Seattle.

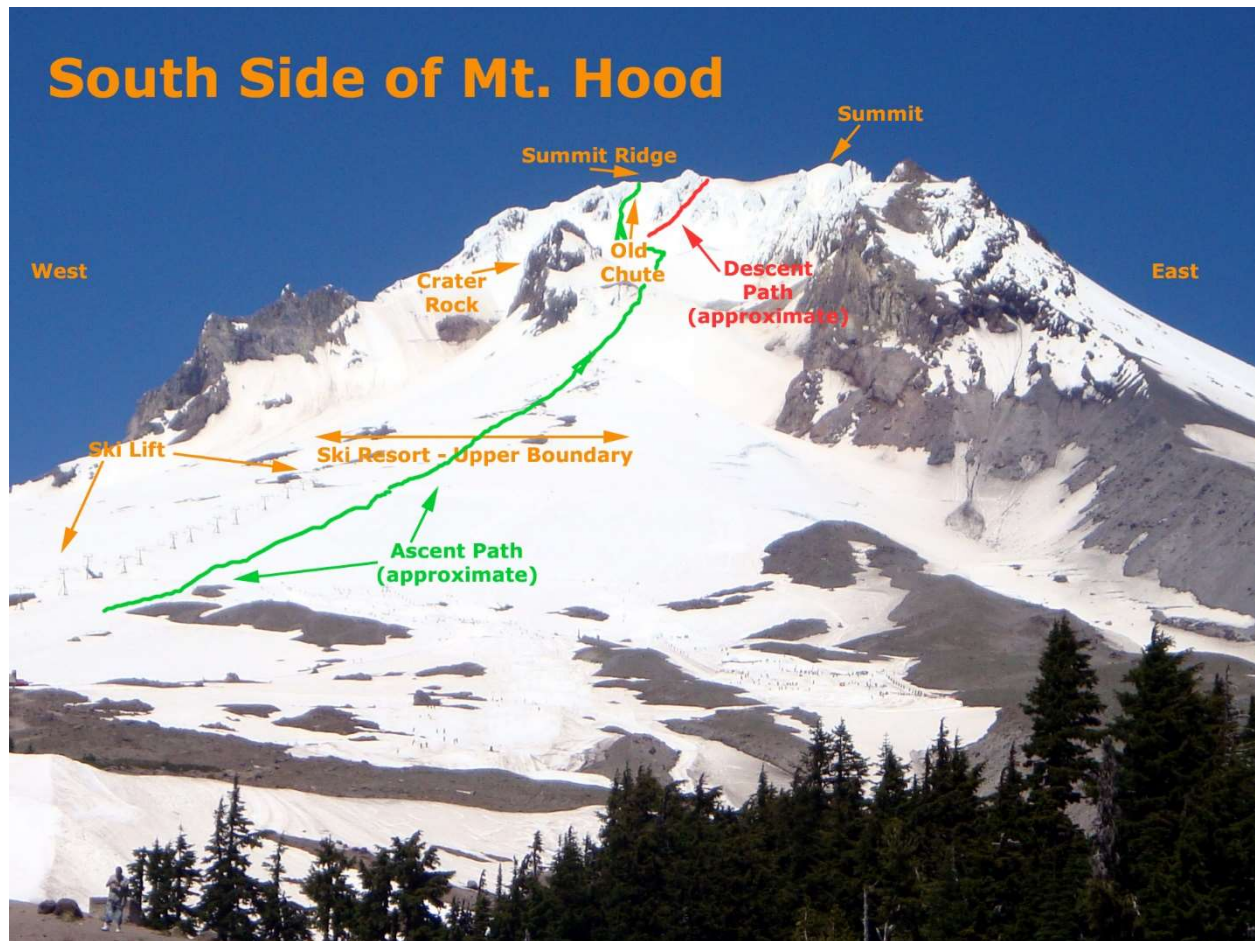


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