

On the Summit of Sahale

A rewarding climb above historic Cascade Pass

SCOTT HARDER



Climber Jeff Metcalf ascends Sahale Glacier. This moderately easy route is a great way to try a guided climb and see if the sport is for you.

BY SCOTT HARDER

Early in the nineteenth century, explorers and prospectors tramped over Cascade Pass in search of gold and fortune. Cascade Pass was the only thing separating Eastern from Western Washington for American Indians and settlers. Located just outside the city of Marblemount, Cascade River Road leads hundreds of hikers and climbers to the base of many peaks and glaciers every year.

Marblemount received its name in 1890 from area resident Matilda Clark Buller. One day a miner told her, “Mrs. Buller, I have just discovered a

mountain of marble,” and Mrs. Buller said, “Then we should name our town Marblemountain.” A few years later it was shortened to Marblemount.

Once you leave Marblemount and travel across the bridge, you find yourself at the Cascade Pass Trailhead in 22 miles. But this season things were much changed. In the fall of 2003, major flood damage and many avalanches destroyed a section of the road to the pass. This made it quite a challenge to visit some of these peaks in the early season, when it is best to travel on glaciers or snow (rather than scree or annoying boulder fields).

When the early prospectors chal-

lenged these rugged mountains in the late 1800s, they found themselves in awe upon arrival at Cascade Pass.

“After five days of weary plodding we reached the summit of the Cascade River Pass, and a more enchanting scene our eyes had never before gazed upon. Mountains piled upon mountains, stretching away in every direction, presenting the most startling scene imaginable. A silence that was impressive pervaded the scene, except on occasion when an avalanche of thousands of tons of ice, snow, and rocks, breaking from their anchorage in a higher altitude poured down the mountain side into some dark, invisible cavern, below. In the night, on the occasion of our visit one of these avalanches occurred, accompanied by a thundering roar so terrific as to awaken us from a sound sleep and lead us to almost believe that the world was coming to an end.” (Skagit River Journal, 1926)

From the Cascade Pass Trailhead, it takes about 34 switchbacks and 3.7 miles to reach Cascade Pass. Our group decided to do the early season climb in June, parking our car at the site of the road closure 3.5 miles below the Cascade Pass trailhead (the road is now reopened—see page 7 for details). The farthest you could drive the road was to the gated Eldorado trailhead at milepost 19.5.

We figured it would only be a few extra miles and little vertical gain. After parking the cars we started walking the road. Though I had been to Cascade Pass a handful of times, I had never stopped to think about all the vertical I was doing in my car. The road is steep and seemed quite long, but we arrived at the Cascade Pass trailhead in about an hour. Here we rested and got ready for the trip up to

Below: Sahale Arm and Sahale Peak in the North Cascades. Right: Getting up close and personal with the local residents, including black bear.

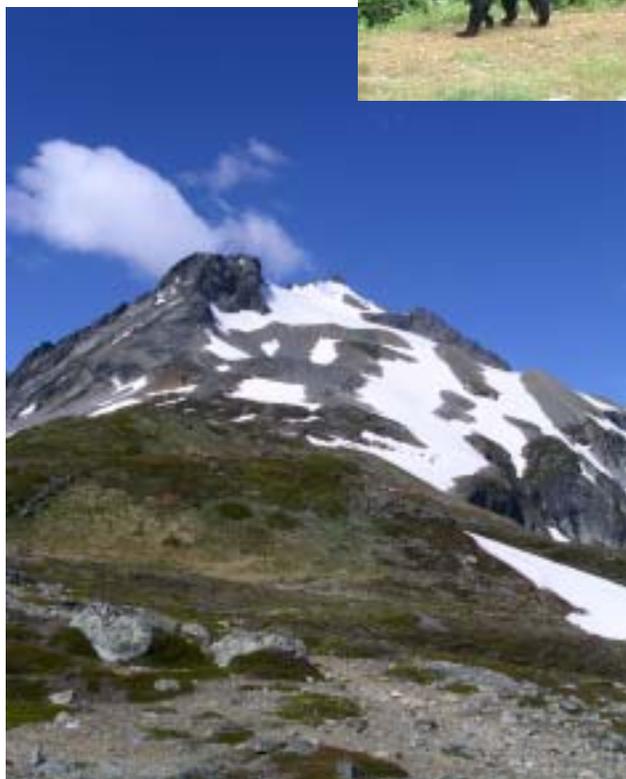


wind coming off the glaciers and snowfields nearby. We changed from shorts to pants and headed up toward Sahale Arm. The sign says that it is 2 miles from Cascade Pass to Sahale Glacier Camp, and this is one of the few that I must disagree with (I'd say it's closer to 3 miles). I guess I need to bring a pedometer next time I do this trip and prove them wrong.

The trail is narrow and steep in sections before gaining Sahale Arm, with several steep snow crossings that had not melted out. We finally gained the arm and slowly made our way to camp. We still had no views; overcast weather and clouds encircled us the entire day. We lost the trail and began the final half mile to camp in scree slopes and boulder fields. Not much snow had lingered this year, and snowmelt seemed earlier than usual. I had tossed around the idea of bringing my skis on this climb, but had received beta from a fellow skier that most of the run had melted out and would be worthless by the time we got up there. I was thankful for this information, as we did see a solo skier up there later the next day who did not look too excited at the small portion of skiing available. We finally arrived at camp six hours after we had left the trailhead, only to find an empty camp with some killer campsites available to us, something that would be much more difficult when the approach is shorter. We made camp, ate dinner, told jokes and prepared for the morning's summit bid.

The Sahale Glacier route has long been known to be a great introductory mountaineering route. The glacier is somewhat benign, with only a few crevasses, and a gentle slope that leads to easy, class 4 and 5 rock climbing to gain the summit. It is great training ground for anyone interested in learning more on a guided climb, or trying to figure out if this is the sport for them.

We awoke the next morning at 5:30 to find blue skies and incredible vistas we hadn't seen the day before. After



in a defensive posture. Then he started backing up. We did the same thing, back to the parking lot 15 feet behind us. This was the closest I had ever been to a bear. Last year I got between a mother and her cub near Clark Mountain, but those bears were 100 feet away.

It only took a few seconds for us to regroup and try to figure out what to do. The bear was blocking the trail and did not look like

Cascade Pass.

Having been here many times, I still like to think that these are some of the best views you can find at a trailhead: Johannesburg Mountain looms over you at 8,220 feet. The ruggedness of the mountain is raw, and the hanging blue glaciers just sit there, waiting to be released at any moment and avalanche into the valley below.

After a short break we got ready to go and headed up the trail. I was leading our group of seven climbers, and after just 15 seconds of hiking I turned a corner and almost shook hands with a black bear. I stopped in my tracks as the bear pounced at the ground between us with its front paws

he wanted us to pass. A few minutes later two park rangers who were stumped on how we reached Cascade Pass trailhead greeted us. We informed them of our encounter with the bear and they investigated skeptically. Within minutes they were alarmed that there was a bear in the middle of the trail, and proceeded to make the bear go away, using the universal bear deterrent call: "Go away, bear! Go away, bear!"

Before we knew it we were on the trail and headed up to the pass. The majority of the snow had melted so it was easy going until the last switch-back before the pass. Once at the pass we were greeted with a brisk easterly

breakfast and a short snow school for those who were rusty or new, we roped up and made our way up the Sahale Glacier headwall, which kicks back at 30 to 35 degrees. Once you top out, the glacier is relatively flat, so we booked on up towards the summit.

A few hundred feet of steeper snow got us past the moat and right up against the rock. One full pitch of easy climbing got everyone on top of the coolest panoramic vista in the area.

We relaxed and took in the views of the North Cascades, with Mount Buckner to the northeast, Baker to the northwest and Shuksan to the north. After a few minutes, we decided to head down as clouds kept forcing themselves on us. As we made our way back to the snow, I noticed that the glacier had changed, and that our ascent path had crossed right over a crevasse that was about to open up. There were also several other crevasses that appeared out of nowhere. We decided on a different descent path on the glacier.

On our way back to camp, we were happy to get in our one and only glissade, which provided us with at least 500 vertical feet of cold yet fast travel down the snow. Once back at camp, we gathered up our things and boogied out as quickly as possible. The descent seemed to take forever, but we rested at Cascade Pass and then at the trailhead. What seemed to take the longest time was the hike back down to the cars on the steep pavement. We finally reached the cars at 8 p.m., only 14 hours of hiking since that morning! Needless to say, all of us were trashed, burnt, or frazzled. In the end, we climbed an 8,700-foot peak, the 33rd tallest in the state, and everyone had a great time. ♦

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For more excerpts from the Skagit River Journal, visit www.stump-ranchonline.com/skagitjournal/

NIGHT HIKING

The unique pleasures of trails by moonlight and headlamp

By JOHN HOWELL

Always acknowledge the "shadow side" of the wilderness. Be prepared to cope with it without anger, fear, or judgment, for it complements the positive energies that pull us in and push us on. —Carl Jung

The shadow side of wilderness has always intrigued me. Night-time hiking opens up a whole different world. Nocturnal wildlife includes cougars, bears, bats, owls, snakes, frogs, voles and others. Want to see or hear any of these? You're likely to if you give night hiking a try.

A year ago I set up a plan to journey to the dark side. I wanted to experience easy and safe nighttime hiking, to listen for nocturnal activity and to compile a record of my findings.

Information on weather and times of sunset and moon rise became critically important.

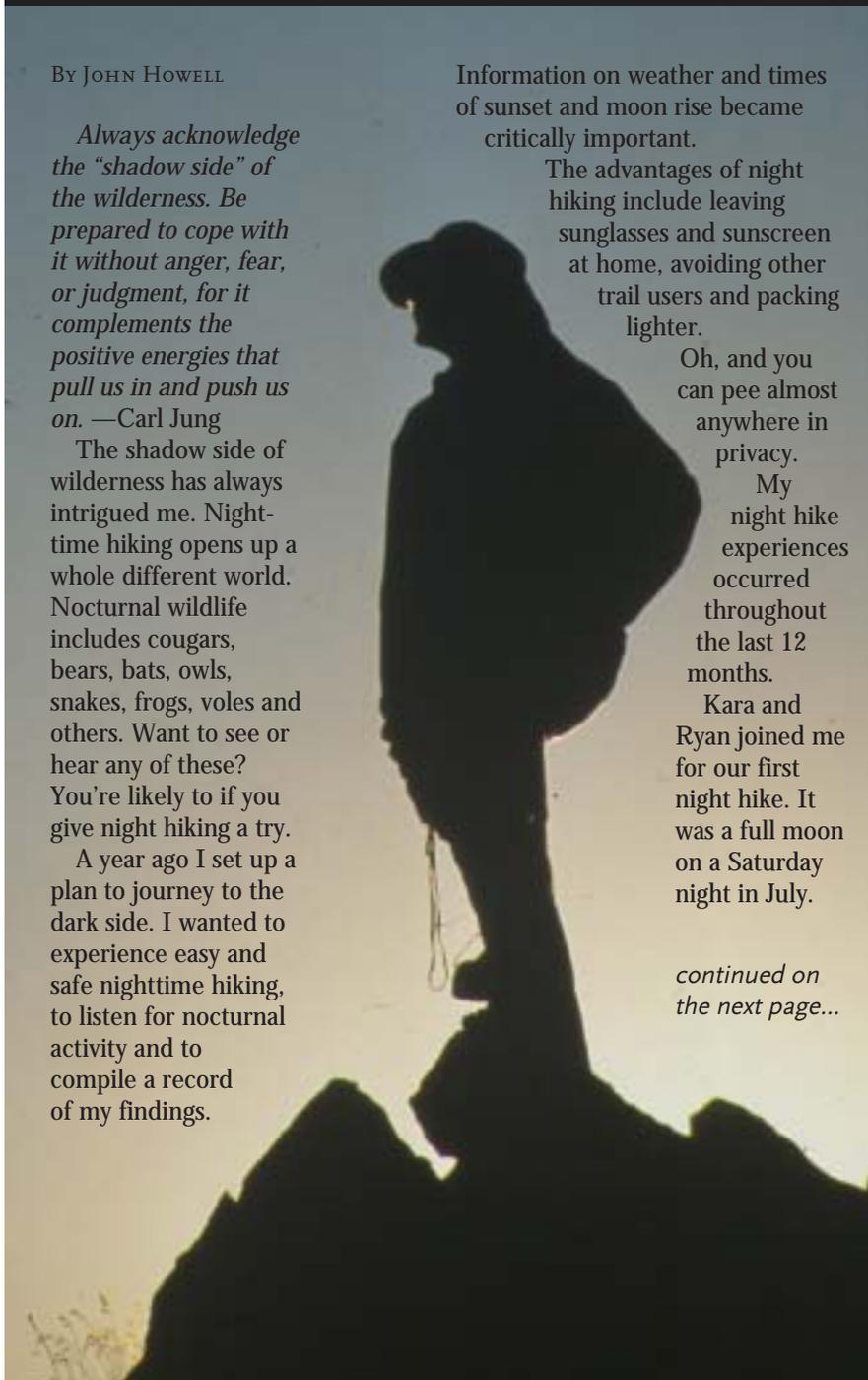
The advantages of night hiking include leaving sunglasses and sunscreen at home, avoiding other trail users and packing lighter.

Oh, and you can pee almost anywhere in privacy.

My night hike experiences occurred throughout the last 12 months.

Kara and Ryan joined me for our first night hike. It was a full moon on a Saturday night in July.

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NIGHT HIKING

Unexpectedly, clouds and a light shower moved in. From U.S. Highway 2, we drove 13.5 miles north on Sultan Basin Road 61 to Olney Pass (Green Trails 142). We turned west on Blue Mountain Road and drove the rough, one-lane dirt road 2.5 miles to a turnaround spot and parked. We were on a ridge with views to the north and south. In the valley to the south, Sultan was having a festival with carnival lights and fireworks. Our hike began under cloud cover at 10:10 p.m. We continued west on the old DNR road with lights turned off. As our eyes became accustomed to the dark, we could see puddles in the road and tree branches extending into the road at places. Then, there was a rustling sound in the brush near the road. We turned lights on, watching the brush move. Soon a vole (a nocturnal rodent) walked onto the road, past my boot and back into the brush. It seemed unimpressed with our presence.

Farther on, there was a radio tower in an opening. We explored the area, noting large vehicle tracks. Beyond the tower, the road narrowed as trees closed in from both sides. It descended into greater darkness. We turned around and walked back, all the while having enough natural light to see the way. We thoroughly enjoyed the night experience.

In August, our editor Andrew and I went on a three-day hike in the Goat Rocks Wilderness. Under a full moon and clear skies, we ventured off for a night hike. Even in thick woods we could see the trail without headlamps. Suddenly, a loud crashing sound pierced the darkness to our right. We stopped to listen, frozen in place. Absolute silence! What was it? It had to be a large animal. Andrew said he was 17 percent positive that it was a cougar. Hearing nothing more, we continued on, enjoying the night air.

In early September, five of us

camped at the base of Mount St. Helens before the next day's assault on the mountain. We planned a short night hike, but an approaching storm curtailed the hike. Before it rained, we heard a cracking or snapping sound high in a nearby tree. Then more cracking sounds occurred at random times and locations. It almost sounded like giant Rice Krispies in the forest. We never solved the mystery of the cracking trees.

From Granite Falls, six of us drove 6.9 miles east of Verlot to the Mallardy Ridge (Walt Bailey) Road. Just before the Red Bridge, we turned south on Road 4030. A vole crossed the road in front of the car. In 4.4 miles, unsigned Road 4030-040 was on the left, a good area for cougars

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and bears.

This old logging spur road gains 240 feet in a mile. There were dips in the road and alder branches reached out to brush against us. But as our eyesight adjusted to the darkness, we could see them without using lights. Piles of old logs appeared in a landing at one mile. We explored a few short side trails seeking wildlife but saw and heard none. At one point, we stopped to listen and experienced total silence. It was so still you could hear a gnat sneeze. It turned out this was the quiet before the storm. It rained on the way home.

In mid-November, Kara, Ryan and I took advantage of a full moon to hike abandoned Road 6310 north of Index. We parked at a gate 3.9 miles north of U.S. 2 on the east side of Road 63. Road 6310 gains elevation gradually and was in very good condition. In 2 miles, boulders were strewn across the

road. There was a small waterfall nearby. At 2.5 miles, we came to a beautiful viewpoint. The full moon became visible, lighting the North Skykomish River Valley and the town of Index below. The view of rugged Mount Index bathed in bright moonlight was stunning!

The three of us also hiked the easy John Wayne Trail east from Rattlesnake Lake (Green Trails Bandera 206). Several bats swooped down to greet us. In about 2 miles we passed a frog pond on the left. The nighttime chorus was the loudest I have heard. In a few hundred feet, it was quiet again. We observed the planet Saturn following the moon on our right. On the return, bright Venus and reddish Mars were straight ahead in the west.

Ryan stopped abruptly and turned on his light. He had almost stepped on a frog in the road. It was far from the noisy frog pond. Ryan has good night vision.

The three of us were becoming

experienced night hikers. Our last night hike was on Road 6334 north of Index. From US 2, we drove 9.2 miles north on the Index-Galena Road 63. Just past Howard Creek bridge, we turned west on Salmon Creek Road 6330. At 1.4 miles, we parked at the junction with Road 6334. The hike is a gradual ascent on fairly good road.

Again, bats swooped down on us, the only wildlife we saw that night. Open spots provided views of Mineral Butte, Monte Cristo, Mount Index and other peaks in the moonlight. In the dark we heard gunshots along the North Fork Skykomish River far below. The moon to the south and Venus to the west were our navigational aids. Knowing you can navigate at night is very rewarding. At 4 miles we turned around and hiked to the car, experiencing another exhilarating

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Night Hiking

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night hike.

Besides developing our night vision and building confidence, we learned:

1. It's best to get to the trailhead before dark. Unsigned back roads and trails are easier to find in daylight. Also, you may see animals feeding at dusk or catch a beautiful sunset.

2. One or two hiking partners are best for listening for nocturnal activity.

3. Try to use starlight and moonlight, saving your headlamp for when really needed. Your eyes will adjust to minimal light if given the chance.

4. After you have gained night hiking experience, a full moon usually provides too much light. A half moon or starlight provides sufficient light. Less light is thought to produce more nocturnal activity, except for werewolves.

5. Spend about three hours in the woods at night. Your time spent listening and looking is far more important than the distance hiked.

6. Night hikes provide good exercise and fresh air without being too tiring. Almost anyone can do them.

7. Driving, parking and hiking in near solitude are at their best.

8. Looking at the sky, we saw satellites and learned to navigate by the moon and planets.

9. Meteor showers last up to five weeks and are best viewed after midnight. Annual meteor showers include the Delta Aquarids which peak in late July. The Perseid meteor shower can be seen from July 17 to August 24. The Leonid meteor shower arrives in November, and the Bielids shower occurs in early December.

Visit www.sunrisesunset.com to find times of sunset, moon rise and moon set, plus phases of the moon for any date at any location.

Once people realize they can see in the dark, their fears of the night are relieved. Night hiking builds confidence. You become part of the night. It's exciting! All you have to do is try it — and acknowledge the “shadow side” of wilderness. ♦