

Backpacking in Mount Rainier National Park

– Dan Styer

In July 1965, when I was ten years old, our family went on a trip “out west”. Like all our father’s trips, it was fast paced: jet flight from Philadelphia to Los Angeles, Disneyland, Mount Wilson Observatory, Sequoia National Park, Kings Canyon National Park, Yosemite National Park, Lassen Volcanic National Park, redwoods, Crater Lake National Park, Oregon seacoast, Mount Rainier National Park, Grand Coulee Dam, apple orchards near Wenatchee, Washington, jet flight from Seattle to Philadelphia ... all in eleven days! We were in Mount Rainier National Park for about half a day. Our father took this photo:



*snowbanks and Avalanche Lilies, Paradise area of Mount Rainier National Park, July 1965:
from left are siblings Dan (age 10), Bill (age 11), and Ellen (in red, age 8)*

I still have the Park Service pamphlet we picked up on that visit. It says “If you are looking for wilderness adventure, the Wonderland Trail is a dream come true. Almost entirely in primeval surroundings, this 90-mile, around-the-mountain route winds through snowfields, meadows, and forests. It drops into deep, shadowy canyons, and climbs to ridges with panoramic views. ... We suggest that your goal for each day be about 9 miles. Maybe you believe you can hike farther, but remember, this is rough country. And to enjoy it thoroughly you should take time to look around. Ten days after hitting the trail you will have completely encircled Mount Rainier. Your experience will need no embellishment in the telling.”

But it wasn't until 2022 that I started serious planning to hike the Wonderland Trail. I applied for the lottery and won an opportunity to sign up for wilderness campsites, but my sign up time was so late that I couldn't put together a trip for the whole Wonderland Trail. I applied again in 2023 and didn't win any opportunity at all. I applied for a third time in 2024, won an opportunity, but again couldn't put together a trip around the whole Wonderland Trail. However I *was* able to piece together an eight-day excursion in the northern park of the park. I thought that although my plan was sub-optimal, I'd better jump on it while I could. So fifty-nine years after that first quick introduction to Mount Rainier, my brother Bill and I set out for a more intimate exploration, "a dream come true" that would "need no embellishment in the telling".

So, what did we see? Deep old-growth forest:



Flower spangled streams:



And within this stream (Lodi Creek), we saw eight American Dippers, wading in the rushing water and sticking their heads in.

We saw wildflowers: Bleeding Hearts, Sierra Corydalis, Twinflower, Rattlesnake Orchid, Explorer Gentian, Scotch Bluebells, Columbia Lily, Alpine Veronica, Green Corn Lily, Mountain Valerian, Single Sugar Scoop, Brewer's Lupine, Drummond's Cinquefoil, Alpine Goldenrod, Eriogonum, Partridge Foot, Vanilla Leaf, Yellow Fireweed, Fringed Grass of Parnassus, Brook Saxifrage, Pacific Sedum, White and Pink Heather, Tolmie's Saxifrage, Glacial Fawn Lily, Fanleaf Cinquefoil, Wilcox's Penstemon, Fireweed.

Wildlife: In Berkeley Park, Marmots, Pika, and a herd of 70 Mountain Goats:



Under Yellowstone Cliffs, a bear with two cubs. And in Spray Park, a single bear.

The Park Service wasn't kidding when it said "this is rough country." The upslopes were hard, the downslopes even harder. My three-word summary of the trip is "beautiful but brutal". Nor was the weather perfect: it thunderstormed for about two hours one night, and drizzled for almost all of one day. On the other hand, there were almost no mosquitoes, black flies, or other irritating insects.

And what dramatic alpine scenery! Here is a lake at Windy Gap:



Here is Mount Rainier itself from Skyscraper Pass:



And here is the toe of Carbon Glacier as it stretches down from Mount Rainier:



We met many open and welcoming and helpful people – Black, White, Native American, and Asian, more women than men – but none, I think, as old as we were.

And speaking of age, our very last day was Bill's 71st birthday. For seven days I had been carrying around and hiding from him two blueberry muffins and a candle. On the morning of our last day, at Eagle's Roost Camp, I lit the candle and sang "happy birthday, dear brother."



A dream come true indeed.

Itinerary

Wednesday, 14 August 2024

Mowich Lake Campground (car camping)

Thursday, 15 August 2024

walk 8.9 miles via Wonderland Trail
camp at Carbon River Camp, site #3

Friday, 16 August 2024

walk 4.1 miles via Wonderland and Northern Loop Trails
camp at Yellowstone Cliffs Camp, site #2

Saturday, 17 August 2024

walk 6.8 miles via Northern Loop Trail
camp at Fire Creek Camp, site #2 (two-hour thunderstorm at night)

Sunday, 18 August 2024

walk 4.6 miles via Northern Loop Trail
camp at Berkeley Park Camp, site #2

Monday, 19 August 2024

walk 10.1 miles via Northern Loop and Wonderland Trails
camp at Mystic Camp, site #4

Tuesday, 20 August 2024

walk 5.2 miles via Wonderland Trail (drizzle most of the day)
camp at Carbon River Camp, site #2

Wednesday, 21 August 2024

walk 6.5 miles via Spray Park Trail
camp at Eagle's Roost Camp, site #7

Thursday, 22 August 2024

Bill's 71st birthday

walk 1.9 miles via Spray Park and Wonderland Trails to Mowich Lake trailhead
depart Rainier