



Climbing Notes

1997 Season

North Cascades National Park/Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest



Mount Terror from Picket Pass, from photo by R. W. Tabor; illustration by Ed Hanson, courtesy of The Mountaineers, Seattle, WA.

What's wrong with this picture?

The above illustration is taken from a 1968 publication which is now out of print. It suggests that mountaineers who sought trips into the remote reaches of the North Cascades in this era weren't yet thinking about the collective impacts from camping in the subalpine. Use statistics for climbing activity in the Pickets in past decades are sketchy. But recent park permit data shows a 300% increase in number of parties camping in crosscountry areas in the Challenger quad from 1991 to 1996! With that trend not likely to change, the importance of practicing Leave No Trace (LNT) principles increases as well. The 1990's version of a camp at Picket Pass (or any other fragile site) would follow the second principle of Leave No Trace: camp and travel on durable surfaces, with a camp on rock or snow. To check out the five other principles and get LNT literature specific to climbing, ask at the Wilderness Information Center in Marblemount.

1996 Search and Rescue Incidents

There were 36 incidents that generated response from search and rescue (SAR) crews in North Cascades National Park during 1996. Almost half of those were caused by climbers who failed to complete their Voluntary Climber Register at the end of their trip. Total cost to the park for incidents that developed into on-the-ground SAR's was \$6336. This does not include expenses covered by volunteer rescue teams, sheriff departments and military response.

With only two serious climbing injuries and no fatalities in 1996, the decline in mountaineering accidents in North Cascades National Park that began in 1992 is five years strong now. Accident numbers were low also on the neighboring Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest last year. According to Bellingham Mountain Rescue (BMR) president Sam Gardner, 1996 was likely their lowest year for SAR responses in the past decade. BMR is the volunteer group that is active on most Mt. Baker and other Whatcom County incidents.

Several searches were required for parties who became lost after pressing on in difficult weather conditions or had underestimated the time for the planned trip. Four of the significant incidents involving climbers are summarized below.

Mount Shuksan, March 18; Climbers disoriented/delayed in whiteout

A climbing party of five was several days overdue from an ascent of the North Face with a planned Fisher Chimneys descent. The group was located by helicopter and stated they had experienced route-finding difficulties due to whiteout conditions. One climber had suffered a long fall while descending, remaining uninjured, but losing gear as they attempted to travel at night to make up lost time.

Mt. Baker, June 23; Climbers lost, rescued off-route

A party of six were hit with deteriorating weather near 9600 feet on the North Ridge. Four members of the group turned back before ascending the ice wall, while the other two climbers attempted to complete the climb. When the two did not return to camp that night as planned, and were still overdue the next morning, the party sought help. A large-scale search of Mt. Baker found the lost pair at treeline below the Deming Glacier. They had reached the summit, but in whiteout conditions became disoriented and descended an unplanned direction. The two soon encountered difficulties and knew they were off-route, but due to severe weather continued to treeline. Not knowing their location and out of food, the climbers stayed put for two days until rescuers evacuated the pair.

Ptarmagin Traverse, July 21; Injured climber

Midway into a 5-day trip along this alpine traverse, a climber suffered a knee injury while negotiating the Spider-Formidable Col. After travelling another day on the route the climber became immobilized by the injury and the party of two made a

Continued on back

Eldorado Creek Restoration Begun

For years North Cascades National Park has monitored impacts created by climbers accessing peaks and alpine traverses. One of the most severe scars in the wilderness of this park, in the Eldorado Creek drainage, was selected for restoration. Subalpine sections of this route, which climbers take from the Cascade River Road through forest, talus fields and meadows to reach the popular Eldorado Glacier route, had become deeply rutted and were suffering severe erosion.

After an environmental assessment which included public review of alternatives, work began on site in the fall of 1996. These efforts will continue in 1997 and include rerouting a section to divert climbers to more resilient terrain which should withstand impacts

the wetter area could not. Approximately 1300 feet of the old route will be filled in and revegetated in hopes of stopping further erosion.

Climbers planning to travel this route will be alerted to these rehabilitation efforts when receiving permits for Eldorado cross-country zone. The area of concern begins after ascending the long talus field. Climbers are asked to look for cairns beginning near 5100 feet that mark the detour away from the impacted section. After climbing, it will be especially important to remember to descend the new route also.

The Eldorado restoration project is the first attempt by the park to rehabilitate recreational climbing impacts in a cross-country (non-trailed) area. There is much concern that just a few parties travelling

Continued on back

Climbing Safety: Our Concern, Your Responsibility

The North Cascades are a wilderness mountain range that offers the mountaineer and technical climber a myriad of alpine challenges from simple scrambles to multi-day climbs. Most involve a combination of snow, ice and rock.

Climbers must be properly equipped, experienced and prepared to face extreme weather, unstable snow and ice, avalanches, glaciers crisscrossed with crevasses, and many other dangers inherent in this range. Every year, novices and experts alike experience mountaineering accidents in the Cascade range. Three of the most common contributing causes are:

NOT RECOGNIZING HAZARDS

Safe climbing in the North Cascades range requires experience and good judgement in route finding and evaluating alpine hazards. Common mistakes include:

- * Not being alert to impending changes in the weather and getting caught without protection from exposure or a reasonable retreat route.
- * Unfamiliarity with snow conditions and stability related to slope, terrain, and exposure to sun.
- * Inattention to avalanche danger. Passing through avalanche zones when snow, rain or daytime temperatures are destabilizing snowpack.
- * Fatigue. Not turning back after failing to summit during the expected time frame. Getting injured during a descent when tired and offguard.

Judgement is something that can't be learned in one season or from a book. If you don't have recent mountaineering experience or experience in the Cascade range, go with someone who does.

UNDERESTIMATING TIMES

Climbers in the North Cascades routinely underestimate the amount of time that it will take them to complete a route. The approach often takes longer than planned because of stream crossings, blowdowns, and thick brush. Such factors as fog, bad weather, unstable snow and ice, or difficulty negotiating crevasses causes additional delays. These delays often cause fatigued climbers to

make bad choices: not using protection, ascending unprotected gullies or crossing hazardous avalanche zones in the heat of the day, or descending after dark.

Fred Beckey is a living legend and his *Cascade Alpine Guides* are practically indispensable, but it is important to remember that they are guides. As Beckey himself conveys in the preface, his climbing times are from the first ascent party or are amended estimates. "It is always wise to study routes and one's progress in relation to weather and remaining daylight. No amount of words can substitute for good mountaineering judgement."

EQUIPMENT PROBLEMS

Lack of equipment, inaccessibility, or not knowing how to properly use equipment causes or adds to the severity of accidents every year.

- * Wear a helmet when rock climbing.
- * Carry ice axe, crampons (adjusted for your boots) and a rope when traversing steep snow, ice or glaciers - but know when it is appropriate to use this equipment. Climbers new to the Cascades often believe that strapping on crampons is an absolute anytime you cross a glacier. While crampons are a must in late-season, icy conditions or on many early-morning starts, they can be adverse to safe travel in early season when abundant soft snow "balls up" underneath them.
- * Carry adequate gear for effecting a rescue on all technical terrain to be encountered. For crevasse rescue *each* member must carry protection suitable to make an effective anchor. When crossing glaciers, wear clothing suitable for crevasse conditions. Make sure needed gear will be accessible, even when hanging upside down in a crevasse.
- * Be prepared for cold and wet conditions at any time. Carry adequate camping equipment including extra food for an unexpected bivouac. Also being prepared "mentally" for a bivouac may prevent an ill-fated rush to descend from a climb or get out of the mountains.

Anyone venturing into the wilderness of the North Cascades should accept responsibility for their own safety. It can take days to receive outside help. Please don't endanger your own life, your climbing partners' lives, or those of rescuers (many of whom are volunteers). It is our concern that climbers in the North Cascades adhere to the above safety issues. As climbers it is your responsibility!

Accidents — continued from front page

bivouac to await rescue. Alerted by the pair's overdue climbing register and scheduled pickups, park rangers conducted a search of the planned route. The two were evacuated from upper West Fork Agnes Creek, after searchers spotted their smudge fire, and two brightly-colored, improvised "flags."

Mt. Shuksan, July 30; Injured climber

After summiting Mt. Shuksan via Fisher Chimneys route, two climbers separated after descent of the Chimneys, planning to meet at their car. While descending non-technical but rough terrain, one climber fell into a moat between rock and snow, losing consciousness, and suffering a lower leg fracture and head lacerations. After re-gaining consciousness, the climber was able to crawl close enough to the route to be found by another climbing party. They alerted authorities, initiating helicopter evacuation of the injured climber.

Eldorado — continued from front page

the restoration area in mountaineering boots could thwart the revegetation effort. New plants will be the most fragile this and next year. Climbers can help the success of this project through awareness and practicing Leave No Trace techniques.

Record Winter Snowpack

Those who recall the storms of last winter will find it no surprise that North Cascades mountains are holding a near-record snowpack, as measured by various methods in the spring of 1997. The Natural Resources Conservation Service, which measures snowpack for water supply conditions, reported the statewide May readings well above average at 185% of normal snowpack (averages since 1961).

North Cascades National Park also documents the snowpack through an ongoing study on the mass balance of selected glaciers. In its fifth year, the study is showing an overall loss of glacier volume. (It is suspected that North Cascade glaciers have been shrinking since the 1970's.) But snow depth data from this spring on some glaciers is twice that of recent years. The study includes taking measurements of snow depth on top of the ice layer of selected glaciers several times between May and October. Data taken in May 1997 on three glaciers (South Cascade, North Klawatti and Noisy Glacier) are shown below.

What does this mean for the climbing season? Climbers have observed tremendous cornices on peaks and ridges and should expect avalanche conditions to be of concern much later in the season than usual. Approaches and rock routes may have snow on them much of the climbing season. Anticipate what this might mean for your climb!

