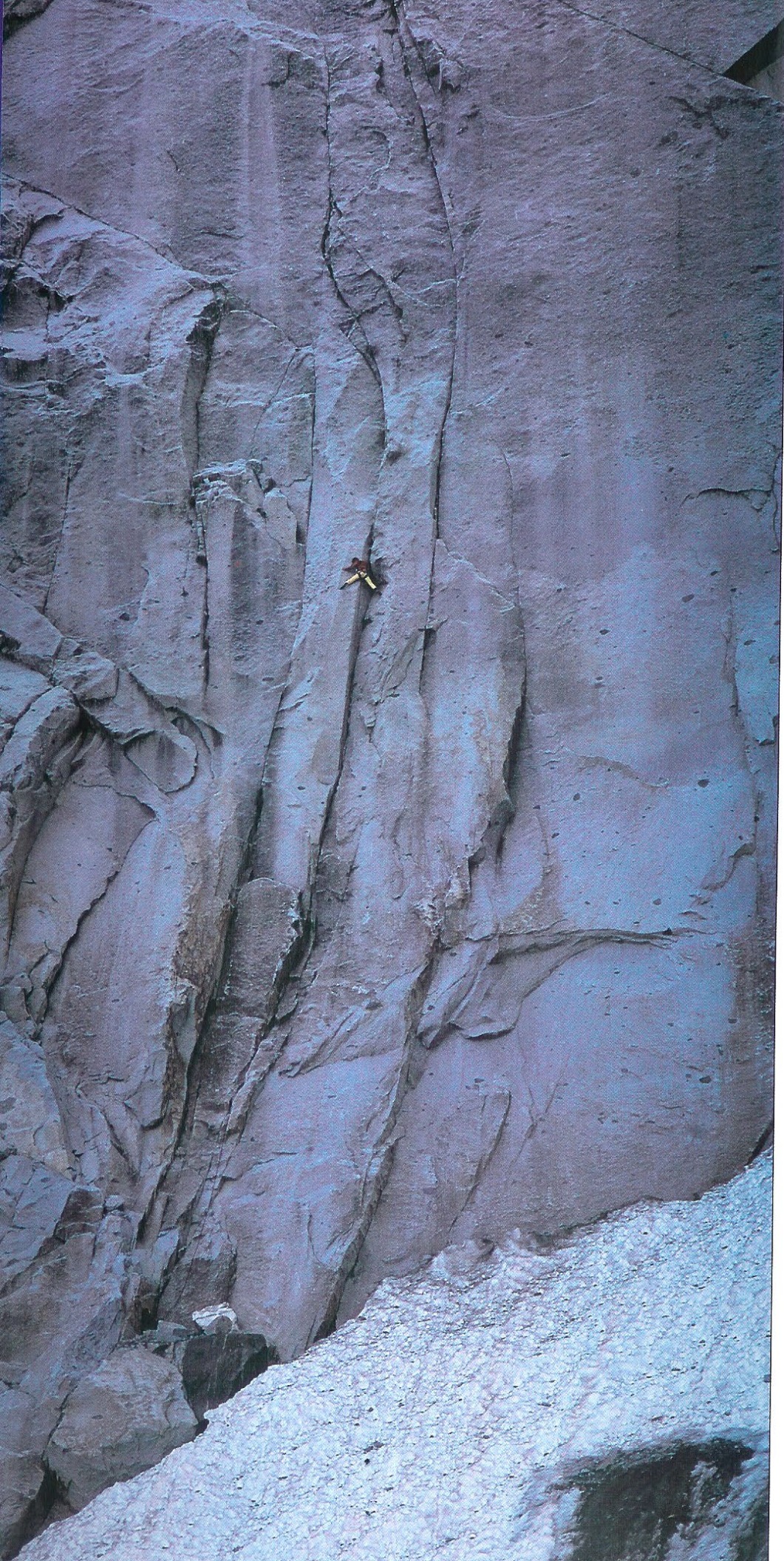


Rediscovering Washington's Cascades

by Fletch Taylor





I had never lived near mountains until I landed a job in Washington State, so I was really ready to head for the hills.

My wife and three kids hopped into the U-Haul and, several thousand gallons of diesel later, we ground up over Snoqualmie Pass, on the backbone of the Cascades. On sensory overload, neck craned, I began weaving across the road, the trailer swaying drunkenly behind the van. A dip in a nearby stream kept my head in check and we eventually reached Tacoma safely. I've been rapturing to my friends back in the Midwest ever since.

As a novice to alpine climbing, I naively assumed that I could just stroll up and tick off Cascade routes one by one, like I had one- or two-pitch climbs back East. I reasoned that if I'd been able to climb hard there, I could do climbs of equal difficulty here. In mid-August, I set off for my first choice: Liberty Ridge on Mount Rainier, a classic by any standards. During the approach, I struck up a conversation with climbers out to do Pyramid Peak. They casually mentioned they'd tried Liberty Ridge a month earlier; faced with a difficult glacier approach through a maze of crevasses and constant strafing by rockfall (one stone had actually impaled the leader's backpack), they decided the route was "out of condition." Out of condition? I had never heard that term before (but it didn't sound good), so this flatlander swallowed his pride, stuck his tail between his legs and backed off.

A large percentage of failures and accidents in the Cascades are racked up by new arrivals like myself. According to Gary Olsen, a Cascades climber and rescue operations ranger, these people often have the necessary technical expertise and stamina, but lack a working knowledge of the area. So to increase your chances for success, consider some realities before planning your climbing trip to Washington's Cascades.

WHAT WE'VE GOT

The Cascades provide every imaginable

PRECEDING PAGES: THE NEW LOOK OF MOUNT ST. HELENS, MT. RAINIER IN DISTANCE.
PHOTO BY ALAN KEARNEY

LEFT: JIM RUCH ON THE 5.10 FIRST PITCH OF THE BOVING ROUTE, DRAGONTAIL PEAK.
PHOTO BY LARRY KEMP

OPPOSITE PAGE: WADE OIEN ENJOYING THE VIEW FROM THE SOUTH RIDGE OF KYES PEAK.
PHOTO BY DAVE WINTHROP

TABLE OF CONTENTS: MOUNT SHUKSAN FROM THE NORTHWEST.
PHOTO BY ALAN KEARNEY



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type of climbing situation—even for an average weekend warrior like me. Climbs range from easy to desperate, on everything from granite to pumice, from *verglas* to *firnspiegel*. Alpine routes are the Cascades' claim to fame. After all, this is the playground of some of America's greatest alpinists.

The Cascade Volcanos—Mount Baker, Glacier Peak, Mount Rainier, Mount St. Helens, Mount Adams and Mount Hood—offer long snow/glacier routes—and can be as challenging as you wish. Classics include the North Ridge of Mount Adams, Liberty Ridge on Mount Rainier and the North Ridge of Mount Baker.

The established climbs on non-volcanic peaks number in the thousands, many of them mixed routes of rock and ice and snow. Steep snow/ice classics (depending upon the season) include the North Face of Maude, the Scimitar Glacier on Glacier Peak and Shuksan's North Face and Price Glaciers. While moderately steep summer alpine (firn) ice abounds, there aren't many extremely steep, sustained alpine ice climbs. Notable exceptions are the Northwest Face of the North Ridge of Forbidden Peak, Buckner's North Face, Rainier's Nisqually Ice Fall, Mount Maude's North Face and Mount Adams' North Lyman Glacier.

Some of America's best and most scenic alpine rock can be found in the Cascades, but you have to know where it is, as much of the rock is metamorphic, badly fractured granite or horrendous volcanic rock. However, the Washington Pass area, including Liberty Bell and the Early Winter Spires, has granite that's easily as good as Yosemite's.

Imagine a big wall in an alpine setting, complete with snowy scenery and mountain goats waiting to lick the sweat off your face at the top of the climb. This is Liberty Crack, with sustained climbing ranging from 5.7 to 5.11 and up to A2 (hammerless). Nearby is Silver Star Mountain and the surrounding Burgundy Spires, providing more long, scenic free climbs in the 5.6 to 5.9 range.

The Stuart Range, a huge geologic uplifting of quartz diorite (a type of granite) between Ingalls and Icicle Creeks, includes The Cashmere Crags, Mount Stuart, Dragontail, Little Annapurna and McClellan Ridge. Mount Stuart is believed by some to be the single greatest mass of exposed granite in the United States, with a long, aesthetic North Ridge route offering pitches ranging from 5.4 to 5.9. Mount Temple Ridge provides airy granite from popular Prusik Peak to a variety of interesting towers nearby.

Many other isolated peaks have superb rock, including Forbidden Peak, Mount Goodes' Northeast Buttress, the Northeast Ridge of Mount Triumph and Early Morning Spire, to name a few. Shorter, less committing alpine rock also abounds.

Like me, you may lust for the adventure of doing new routes. There is enormous new-route potential in the Cascades—all that's required is a little spirit of adventure.

CONTENDING WITH CONDITIONS

Three factors often discourage visiting climbers: the long winters, the capricious maritime weather and the variable "conditions" of the routes themselves.

Cascades weather is most stable from mid-July through the end of September. Late spring and early summer are best for alpine routes involving a lot of glacier travel and ice climbing. By late summer, crevasses are too numerous, rockfall hazard increases and snow becomes ice. Early spring weather patterns are unpredictable.

In general, routes on the north side of a peak will stay in condition longer than their sunny south-facing counterparts. While the western side of the Cascades can be wet, the eastern side may be dry, even sunny. In addition, southern Washington sometimes escapes the bad weather present further north. There is often better weather within an hour's drive.

Mid-winter has its own special challenges, because the weather can be snowy for weeks at a time, but it's more constant than that of fall or spring. Some routes (like the Willis Wall on Rainier) are safest in the winter following a period of low snowfall. Many out-of-state climbers choose winter to climb the volcanoes.

Route conditions describe the "climbability" of a given route on a given day. In the Cascades, these conditions vary from month to month, even from morning to afternoon. Crawling out of my bivouac at 7:00 a.m. one June morning, I continued through the "technical" portion of a route on Mt. Shuksan. By 2:00 p.m., with the ice climbing behind me, I was sinking to my knees in soft snow and sucking wind like the flatlander I really am. My mistakes were that I was attempting the climb too early in the season and/or too late out of bed. Call the nearest climbing shop or ranger station to ask if your proposed route is "in shape."

Fred Beckey's definitive three-volume *Cascade Alpine Guide* has no peer. *The Intermediate Climbers Guide* (also published by the Mountaineers), includes year 'round tables of route conditions on the most popular rock, ice and snow climbs.

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CASCADE CRAGS



The Washington Cascades' generally wet climate has often discouraged cragging. Yet there is a growing wealth of non-alpine rock to enjoy, and summer and early fall afford many days of glorious weather....



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LOWER TOWN WALL—One of Washington's finest and most accessible crags. Mostly trad climbing on steep, clean granite, from 5.6 through 5.13. New sport climbs slowly being established.

UPPER WALL—Steep, long trad and sport climbs.

Sultan

STATIC POINT—Logging-road access to slab climbing on moderately steep granite. One- to six-pitch climbs, often with old, widely spaced bolts. Isolated, aesthetic setting full of new-route possibilities.

Darrington

ALL AREAS—Vast undeveloped potential, in spite of accessibility. A variety of long climbs on slabby granite, often with old, widely spaced bolts. Beware of fickle subalpine weather and occasional runouts.

North Bend

LITTLE SI—Mostly one- and two-pitch bolted sport climbs up to 13a (and crack climbs) on solid metamorphics. This is a quickly developing area, with potential access problems due to lack of parking and the residential setting. See Brian Burdof's guide, *Exit 32*, for further information.

Leavenworth

Located on the east side of the Cascades, the Leavenworth region is blessed with a drier climate.

TUMWATER CANYON—Steep, solid granite crags scattered throughout. Mostly one- and two-pitch trad climbing; some new sport climbs.

ICICLE CREEK CANYON—Similar to Tumwater. New sport routes going up fast.

SNOW CREEK WALL—Two-mile hike to excellent, steep granite, up to seven pitches high. Cracks and knobby slabs, with mostly natural pro.

PESHASTIN PINNACLES—Easily accessible, pleasant climbs on sandstone slabs, with most routes 5.11 or easier. After a five-year closure, re-opened in April, 1991, complete with new bolts and some regulations. Mainly one- and two-pitch sport climbs.

For cragging in Washington, refer to *Washington Rock Climbs*, by Jeff Smoot, which also includes some of the longer alpine climbs in the Washington Pass area, and *Leavenworth Rock Climbs*, by Victor Kramer.

—Fletch Taylor

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THIS PAGE: RON FARRELL LEADS ABORIGINE (11D) AT LITTLE SI.
FACING PAGE: MAX DUFFORD ON CLAY (11C), UPPER INDEX TOWN WALL
PHOTOS: LARRY KEMP



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