

# On Trail

## Northwest Explorer »

# The Lost Trail

Kim Brown

An easy hike has turned into a major expedition, thanks to washouts

## Kim Brown & Jim Kuresman

Kim and Jim are avid hikers from Seattle.

### Why Hike a Washout?

For years, George Winters, a ranger with the Darrington District of the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest, had been trying to save the old Kennedy Hot Springs Guard Station cabin from decay. It was slowly succumbing to gravity and age, and George could only do so much. He used his hands and brawn to brace the slumping walls with hand-cut logs, and kept the place in good order. But as time passed, he knew he was fighting a losing battle. Faced with having to dismantle this beloved structure that had stood there since the 1930s, George was heavy hearted.

On October 20, 2003, Mother Nature took the

dreaded task off his hands. This storm, one of those increasingly common "one hundred-year flood events," wiped out the Kennedy Hot Springs cabin, burying it under tons of rock. It also swept away the hot springs, the large bridge that led to the hot springs, the lower campground, the Whitechuck Trail, and the White Chuck Road. While these events did not make him particularly happy, at least now George did not have to tear down the cabin.

The floods of November, 2006 added more damage to what was left in the Darrington district.

WTA has worked steadily on the Suiattle trails of Darrington District for many years: Huckleberry Mountain, Green Mountain,

Downey Creek, Sulphur Hot Springs, Suiattle River Trail and Milk Creek. On the White Chuck River side, crews have worked on the White Chuck River Trail and White Chuck Bench. Other trails in the district—Circle Peak, Sulphur Mountain and the Meadow Mountain Trail—have been loved for generations.

*None of these trails are accessible today.*

If you want to get to Circle Peak and Meadow Mountain, you must work for it. It's about as close to a frontier as can be had nowadays. For this trip, I solicited the advice and companionship of my friend, Jim Kuresman, who contributed heavily to this article.

The White Chuck Road is pocked with seven major washouts. Boundary Bridge, off the Suiattle River Road, is now too short for the wide swath of riverbed the Suiattle has made for itself, rendering the Circle Peak Trail inaccessible. Access to the area south of the Suiattle River and west of the White Chuck has been cut off.

Jim enjoys a trip with a lot of bang for the buck; I'll take anything. Jim is the king of the Teanaway; I love rain. Like anyone else, Jim likes good weather for solid views, a well-thought-out route, clear beta, and no big hassles. The trip I proposed promised none of these. Glacier Peak is known for poor weather, and there were no recent reports on the Meadow Mountain traverse. All I knew was that the Fire Creek Trail was reportedly choked with blowdown. (I have to admit I replaced the word "choked" with "quite a few" when I pitched the idea to Jim.)

We were excited when we learned from the Darrington ranger station that the new trail from Crystal Lake to Circle Peak had been completed. One trail crew had hiked Meadow Mountain, but not much information on the route was known by our informant.

A few days before the trip, Jim couldn't contain the desire for Teanaway-like sunshine, and his jawbones began to jangle. This threatened to mar my plans, so I came up with an all-encompassing response that illustrated my blind determination for this trip.

Jim: "The weather forecast is only so-so. Is there a backup plan?"

Me: "No."

## Day 1

We peered down at washout number one on the White Chuck Road (FR 23) and exclaimed how glad we were that we decided against bringing our bikes. We started walking the lonesome road. (The weekend before, we had tested the reasonableness of using bikes on the road, but they made the washouts difficult to negotiate and not worth the extra effort.)

We continued walking, and to circumvent washout number two, we turned right onto flagged road FR 2311 and followed it as it climbed above and around the washout. There's

a flag to a good boot path leading back to the White Chuck Road.

Washout number three (new in 2006!) is short, has the least elevation gain, but is fairly unstable. Washout number four exposed a nifty old wooden culvert and bridge. In September, this washout was an easy rock-hop across a creek.

With those four washouts behind us, it was smooth sailing to the intact bridge over the White Chuck River. Here there's a wonderful viewpoint that demonstrates how swollen the river was during the 2003 floods. The riverbed is very wide, yet the river now uses only a fraction of it.



At 3.8 miles along the White Chuck Road, we took Straight Creek Road and walked approximately 2.4 miles to the Meadow Road (FR 27), now a road-turned-trail. When Meadow Mountain Road was closed in the early 1980s, it added 5 miles to the Meadow Mountain Trail, and visitation declined. There is no trailhead sign; look for a small berm. The trail is overgrown, but not bad, as far as abandoned roads go.

We reached Crystal Lake road-turned-trail (FR 2710), which is much more overgrown than Meadow Mountain Road. While the brush is nearly ten feet tall in some sections, the tread is clear. It's as if the upper half of your body is dancing The Swim, while your lower half waltzes. After much cussing and thrashing, you'll find yourself on the old fireline trail to Crystal Lake (4,485 feet), prettily nestled within a lush meadow.

After 11 miles of road walking and and 3,600 feet of elevation gain, battling washouts and fighting brush, we turned in. Soon afterwards, it began to rain and continued for several hours. That proved to be the last rain of the trip.

## Day 2

Saturday morning we set out for Circle Peak.

Northwest Explorer articles describe backpacking trips in the Northwest and beyond. Want to write about your trip? E-mail editor@wta.org.

Kim Brown

**Opposite page: Glacier Peak and fields of false hellbore from the Meadow Mountain Trail. This magnificent hike in the Darrington Ranger District has become an arduous trek because of washouts on the White Chuck River Road.**

**Above: Jim looks back at a sizeable washout on the White Chuck Road.**



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**Jim literally skips down the trail on the Meadow Mountain Traverse. If you want solitude, now is the time to explore the Meadow Mountain area. Just be prepared for brushy trails and washouts that take an hour or more to navigate.**

The new trail is great! It was so new that the trail crew's bootprints were still visible in the tread. The trail rounds a ridge and meets the original trail near the trailhead. This portion is being rebuilt, but some charming old puncheon remains there.

We broke out of the trees and entered a lush meadow that rises to the summit of Circle Peak. The meadow theme of this trip was now firmly established and would continue until we exited our ridge hike the next day at Fire Creek, 11 trail miles. We chose not to look for the exposed route to the true summit and enjoyed the view from an obvious stopping point.

What views! Glacier Peak, White Chuck, Pugh, Sloan, Black, Green, Red, Buckindy and

Dome. Plus, Three Fingers, Whitehorse, Baker and Shuksan. Wow. This is one of the best summit viewpoints we've been to, and it's only 5,983 feet high. We rested and soaked in it.

The trail from Crystal Lake to Circle Peak and back is 8 miles, approximately 2,700 feet of gain. We returned to camp, packed up and relocated to Meadow Lake.

The route from Crystal to Meadow has changed since 2003. It's choked with downed trees—big, inconveniently-placed downed trees. Scrambling the perpendicular-to-slope, reclining trees was tough, but fun.

Meadow Lake has a marshy shore and is not

a destination lake, yet it had received heavy use from campers. It needs this much-needed rest from humans.

### Day 3

Today the hard work really paid off! We hit the Meadow Mountain Traverse at the site of a long-gone shelter, and Jim, lighthearted, began to skip (this was before he found out about the washout). The terrain alternates from meadows to forest, then meadows again. There are many ups and downs, but none very steep. This is a well-constructed trail, and it's in great shape. It has seen little use since the 1980s, and likely no users since the 2003 flood, save for Matt Riggins of the Darrington district, who hiked it a few days before we did.

At 5,600 feet, the views return. Pugh, Whitechuck, Lost Creek Ridge, Sloan and an up-close view of Glacier Peak, over which hovered two lenticular clouds. Farther along, the forest thins and the meadows expand. Big meadows, bigger meadows and then huge meadows! There are more shades of green here than imaginable. A view down the White Chuck River Valley shows a wide mass of brown mud surrounding a forest of dead trees; this is all that remains of the Kennedy Hot Springs area.

We switchbacked up the largest meadows of the day to the high point of our trip, where the trail touches the ridge at 6,000 feet.

The Monte Cristo peaks appear over Lost Creek Ridge. Now we could see Baker, Buckindy, Green, Snowking and Dome. Across the valley was Lime Ridge, which looks even more meadow-draped than Meadow Mountain, if that's possible.

The trail rolls through many basins, crossing low ridges in between. Fire Mountain and Fire Creek come into view, named from a fire that raged through here in 1915. Unfortunately, this meant the end of our meadowy dreamland, and we prepared to descend into the trees.

I reminded Jim that it had taken Matt Riggins about an hour to negotiate the Fire Creek washout on the White Chuck Trail.

"[Expletive deleted]!" Jim exclaimed.

"Hmmm..." I thought. "Must've forgotten to tell him about that."

It was getting late, and since we had a log-choked trail ahead, we had to hustle to our own navigation of The Washout.

We passed by the remains of the old Fire Chief shelter, and our 2,400-foot descent to the White Chuck Trail began. We entered forest and said good-bye to an amazing two days of meadows. This trail is in good shape, too: well-graded, with no steep sections. We were glad the 57 downed trees on this 3.5-mile section of trail were no problem to get over, under, or around.

There is no bridge at the first Fire Creek crossing, but there are several logs that have

been there for years. On the other side of the creek, the terrain flattens. The thick moss is absolutely incredible here. A second look at some biomass lumps in the trail revealed they weren't just biomass lumps—they were puncheon bridges. The puncheon was so old we made footprints in it. This section of trail is rife with frogs and huge mushrooms, two more themes of this trip.

At about 3,200 feet is a broad, flat area. On the left, at a sharp, right-turning switchback, is the faint tread of the long-abandoned Glacier Way Trail.

Finally, we reached the intersection with my old friend, the White Chuck Trail. This once popular, meticulously maintained trail now lay silent and ravaged. To see it in this condition is heartbreaking. We crawled over and under log after log to the intact bridge over the second crossing of Fire Creek.

Shortly after, we reached The Washout: a gaping, unstable maw. It was now 6:40 p.m. We followed the flagged route, up, up, up. We finally began to traverse, but the slope was choked with long, girthy downed logs to clamber around and over. The slope is steep, but there is soft duff that allows purchase. Progress was painstakingly slow. Jim managed to get wedged between two trees at one point, and the sound of our laughter echoed in the lonely forest. At times the only option was to jump from one tree branch to another.

It took an hour to traverse The Washout. Later we discovered we had been following flags for a proposed new trail—it took Matt an hour because he was rearranging flag locations. There is no flagged route around The Washout.

We took photos of the trailhead register with names and comments hurriedly scratched thereon, then set up camp at the little campground at the quiet trailhead.

### Day 4

The trailhead is poignant. The outhouse, installed around 2001, is now crowded with alders. Jim observed that it looks like an ancient Mayan ruin, and mused that in 10 years, a bushwhacking person might rediscover it. On any summer weekend before 2003, this parking lot would have been full. Today we were the only people within miles. We slowly walked the 8.3 miles back to the truck, marveling at three more easily-negotiated washouts and the silence of this beautiful, once-busy road.

Of this trip, Jim said the meadows were sublime and the views were among the best he has ever had the pleasure of seeing.

Thanks to Jim for agreeing to join me. It's so remote here in this new frontier that I would not have gone alone. I very much wanted to visit Meadow Mountain—and to walk the White Chuck Trail again.

The total trip was 41 miles, 9,900 feet of elevation gain. ♦

## A Trail at Risk

The Circle Peak/Meadow Mountain Trail is included in Washington Trails Association's 2008 list of Endangered Trails. You can find out more on page 14 about this report on trails threatened by flood and fire damage, lack of funding and other problems.

The U.S. Forest Service recently released a scoping letter on repair of the White Chuck River Road (FR 23) in May.

You can read the letter and learn about the proposed repairs online at [www.fs.fed.us/r6/mbs/projects/](http://www.fs.fed.us/r6/mbs/projects/) and then click on "White Chuck Road 23 Scoping Letter."