Box Canyon to Panhandle Gap, WA

Vicinity Location: 95 miles northeast of Portland, Oregon in Mt. Rainier National Park.

Directions:
The road to this trailhead is generally closed from November to May. Check the Mt. Rainier National Park website for the Stevens Canyon Road opening and closing dates.

From Portland, take I-5 north for about 70 miles. Take exit 68 from I-5 to Hwy 12. Drive about 59 miles from I-5 to Packwood. Drive about 13 more miles to the junction with Hwy 123. Turn left onto Hwy 123 and travel about 5 1/2 miles. Turn left onto Stevens Canyon Road and go through the park entrance. Continue several more miles to the Box Canyon parking lot on your left. The total drive is about 150 miles and takes about 3 1/4 hours.

From Seattle, take Hwy 410 to Hwy 123. From Hwy 123, drive 12 miles and turn right onto Stevens Canyon Road and go through the park entrance. Continue several more miles to the Box Canyon parking lot on your left. The total drive is about 100 miles.

National Park entrance fee must be paid to enter Mt. Rainier National Park.

Flush toilets available at the Box Canyon parking lot

Length and Elevation:
15 Miles roundtrip, Elevation gain and loss total 8,000 Feet

Trail:
Wonderland Trail

Review: September 25, 2003
I called Longmire Friday afternoon to find out about reserving a campsite and Indian Bar. I would be going in at Ohanapecosh. The Ranger I spoke to thought I could self-register at the Ohanapecosh Ranger Station.

I arrived Saturday morning at the Ranger Station but there was nowhere to drop off my form. I was just about to jamb it into the door when a Ranger drove by. He was kind enough to take my form and I headed for Box Canyon.

I was the only car in the parking lot when I hit the trail at 9:30am. The trail to Nickel Creek is easy as it is relatively flat and wide. The recent flooding had not affected the bridge over Nickel Creek or the campsites. I headed up the switchbacks and was relieved to find the yellowjacket nest that was beside the trail in August is now gone. Climbing into the alpine meadows I had clear views of Mt. Rainier, Mt. Adams, and other mountains to the south and east. There was plenty of places to get water along the trail because of the recent snow melt. On the descent to Indian bar were places where a lot of water had run down the trail . The trail was a little washed out in one spot so I threw some rocks around so it wouldn't wash out further. The Ohanapecosh river at Indian Bar had seriously flooded the meadow north of the creek. The trail held up well but some new gullies were apparent.

I picked a campsite with a great view looking up the valley. I set up camp at 2:30 and hiked on up to Panhandle Gap with a much lighter pack. Beautiful views abounded as the trail quickly gains elevation and leaves the trees behind. There were excellent fall colors in some areas and the leaves

had already fallen in others. About two miles from Indian Bar the trail crosses a couple of small but permanent ice fields. I had to look carefully for the trail in this area because of the flooding.

The trail through Panhandle Gap was excellent and there was only a small patch of snow on the trail. I returned back to Indian Bar camp at dark. The sky was perfectly clear and there was a light frost on the ground in the morning. I took some pictures at Indian Bar and headed back up the trail about 9am. The views on the way back were just as spectacular as Saturday. I met a group of four people who got a late start and had to camp along the trail. They were just about out of water but I assured them they would find water soon. I saw two other men hiking towards Indian Bar. You hear the noisy rush of water from many streams and waterfalls all along the trail. I had lunch along a seasonal stream in the switchbacks down to Nickel Creek. It was a great hike with not biting or stinging bugs. I got back to the parking lot at about 1:30pm. I think the section from Nickel Creek to Panhandle Gap and on to Summerland is one of the most scenic stretches of the Wonderland Trail because it is right at the treeline for much of the hike.

Switchback Steve