Northern Loop, WA

Vicinity Location:
About 58 miles southeast of Seattle, WA in Mt. Rainier National Park.

Directions:
From Seattle: Follow I-5 South for 25 miles and take exit 142A to merge onto WA Highway 18 East towards North Bend/Auburn. Drive 4.4 miles and take the Auburn Way/WA Highway 164 East exit toward Enumclaw for 0.2 mile.

Make a slight right at 6th St SE then turn left at Auburn Way S/C St SE/WA Highway 164.
Continue to follow WA Highway 164 for 14.7 miles then turn left at Roosevelt Ave E/WA Highway 410.

Continue to follow WA Highway 410 for 37.3 miles.
Make a slight right at Sunrise Park Rdand follow it for 15.0 miles.

From Portland: Take I-5 North towards Seattle and drive for about 75 miles.
Take exit 68 for US-12 East. At the top of the off ramp, turn right onto US-12 and travel about 71.8 miles. This takes you past Morton and through Packwood.

Make a slight left onto WA Highway 123, driving for 16.1 miles. This road is seasonally closed.
Continue straight onto WA Highway 410 for 3.5 miles.

Make a sharp left onto Sunrise Park Rd and follow the road for 15 miles to the Sunrise Visitors Center.

The road to Sunrise is usually only open from July through September.

There are bathrooms and water at the trailhead.

Pets are not allowed on the trails in National Parks.

A permit is needed to enter the National Park.

Trail:
Sourdough Ridge Trail, Wonderland Trail, and the Northern Loop Trail with connections to Huckleberry Creek Trail, Burroughs Mountain Trail, Lake Eleanor Trail and various other trails.

Trail Maps:
Topo Map, National Park Service Map

Length and Elevation:
About 40 miles round trip. Elevation gain of 8,500 feet and loss of 8,500 feet roundtrip. Elevation at the trailhead at 6,400 feet, highest point is at 6,770 feet. Lowest elevation is 2,840 feet. Ipsut Creek Campground is 2,320 feet.

Review: July 19th, 2009.
Park at the Sunrise Visitors Center Backpacker Parking area and perhaps take in the exhibits at the Visitors Center.

7/19 – We requested our permit back in April and we got the dates and camps we wanted. I took our confirmation and showed up at the White River Ranger Station to get our permit. I found out that you could not get your permit at Sunrise because the rangers aren't there very often anymore. I talked to the ranger about our hiking plans and he said that though the bridge was out over the White River, there were enough fallen trees to cross on. I provided the rest of the information to the ranger and was given our hiking permit to attach to my pack or tent. There were a number of parties registering to climb Mt. Rainier. I guess the good weather forecast for the next week brought them out for a try at the summit.

The rules for getting a permit issued for a reservation is that you have to pick up your permit in-person no later than 10am on the first day of your scheduled trip. You get to make one set of changes free, then the next change is $20. As long as you have the printed confirmation, it can be a different person picking up the permit than who the reservation was made for.

I got the permit and went day-hiking because Drew, Zach, and Sarah were to meet me that night, Sunday, at the Sunrise walk-in camp. I finished my day-hike and had dinner at the Sunrise restaurant about 4:30pm. The grill closes at 7:30pm, so I didn't hurry to get my food order in. When I went back to my car, there was a crowd of people milling around. It took me a minute to realize they were in line to use the stinky vault toilets. I waited around and finally enough day-trippers cleared out of the backpacking parking area so that I could park in the area designated for backpackers.

I checked my food again to make sure I had enough for the trip and added a little extra for a safety buffer. I left a note for Drew and Sarah, put on my 35 pound pack, and headed to the payphone to call my wife and check-in with her. Then I remembered some directions for the trail that I had left in the car and I had to go back and get them.

Finally, I was off to camp, but first I stopped by the overlook of Emmons Glacier and took some pictures. I walked along the dusty trail to Sunrise Camp, passing lots of day visitors who were headed back home. There were flowers blooming along the entire trail. Mid-July is the best time to see flowers at Mt. Rainier.

I went to the west end of the camping area and found a spot, leaving a good place for Drew and Sarah to pitch tents. I walked up the Burroughs trail for a great view of Mt. Rainer and saw a family of Mountain Goats on the way back. It felt good to get in my tent away from the mosquitoes.

Drew and Zach showed up about 9:30pm and said that Sarah was too busy to come. I was sorry she was going to miss the trip along with the flowers and our company. I will have to wait to catch up with her on events.

If you start from the Sunrise Visitor's Center, the trailhead is on the north side of the main parking lot. Follow this uphill and after .1 mile, keep left at the next two junctions leading to the Sourdough Ridge Trail. Follow the signs west towards Frozen Lake, passing the junction with the Huckleberry Creek Trail. This first part of the trail is the busiest, still you may see a marmot along the trail gathering food for the long winter. Winter in this part of the park can last from October to July or longer and the marmots hibernate through the winter in groups of up to 10, waking up now and then throughout the winter.

This first part of the trail has a continuous view of Mt. Rainier and views down into the shallow valley below the trail. There is a very rocky portion of the trail but trails near the visitor's center are wide, well maintained, and heavily used.

1.4 miles from the trailhead, continue straight, past the 5-way junction at Frozen Lake, towards Berkeley Park. This is the highest elevation on the trail and a good spot to start looking for mountain goats on the hillsides and marmots along the trail. Frozen Lake is fenced off because the lake is the water supply for the Sunrise area. This is a turning-back point for many tourists and from here the foot traffic really drops off.

7/20 – The mosquitoes were waiting for us and wanted breakfast. We didn't want to serve them and put on bug spray, jackets, and I put on a bug net. I found out that you shouldn't peek at your stove burner with he big net on. Lucky for me only a tiny hole was melted in the netting.

We finished breakfast, packed, and left about 7:45am. The first part of the trail from Sunrise Camp is fairly gentle, but it gets pretty steep once the trail reaches the hillside. We navigated our way over a few large snow patches, then passed Frozen Lake. , down to the campsite at Berkley Park. I made sure to stop at my favorite spring along the trail, dump out that city water, and fill up on the wonderful cold water.

From the 5-way junction, the trail heads down an old road that has been converted to a trail. You may see people hiking along the tops of the cliffs on the Burroughs Mountain Trail up on the left. The Northern Loop trail descends moderately to the junction of the Wonderland Trail and the Northern Loop Trail at 2.4 miles from Sunrise. Take the right fork for the Northern Loop Trail and descend more steeply, keeping an eye out for marmots and ptarmigans.

In the summer, the next couple of miles of the descent offer fields of wildflowers along the sparkling Lodi Creek. Along the way, stop at the large spring next to the trail and sample the icy-cold water. Mt. Fremont is on the right and Skyscraper Mountain is on the left.

Continuing down along the creek, the trail enters trees and after 3.9 miles you reach Berkeley Camp. At Berkeley Park, the campers told us the bugs would get worse as we continued to Grand Park. You have to put up with the bugs to see all the flowers carpeting the ground.

The trail continues down through the forest, leaves the creek and climbs up to Grand Park. Near Grand Park, enjoy the views at an overlook of the West Fork of White River and Mt. Rainier.

When we got near the cutoff to Grand Park, Drew hurt his calf muscle and we walked slowly to Grand Park for a snack break. At 6.9 miles from Sunrise is the junction to Lake Eleanor on the right. Grand Park is a 3 mile long flat pumice plain with spectacular views of Mt. Rainier. The only water in Grand Park is the early season melt pools, a couple of small lakes at the north end of Grand Park, and Lake Eleanor. Watch for elk and black bears in this part of the park.

We walked into Grand Park on the Lake Eleanor Trail for about .3 mile or so for spectacular views of Mt. Rainier. We found a shady spot to sit and the mosquitoes buzzed all around us. It has been several years since I saw so many blood-thirsty mosquitoes swarming. The insect repellent held them off, but they quickly pierced any unprotected skin. We had our snack and took in the views of Mt. Rainier, but didn't linger. As long as you were moving, the bugs weren't bad, but they were waiting for any slow or resting hikers.

Just a little past Grand Park on the Northern Loop trail is a fantastic overlook of the West Fork of White River with Mt. Rainier as a backdrop. Later, we were told that you can see Natural Bridge from here in the morning. From Grand Park the trail goes for 6.3 miles and drops down switch-backs a few thousand feet from about 5,650 feet down to 3,150 feet to the West Fork of White River. We encountered a lot of deadfall on the trail and walked by the junction to Fire Creek Camp. Some of the downed trees you could slide over, some crawl under, and others you just had to detour around.

The only water available between Van Horn Creek and Berkeley Park Camp is to take a side trail and drop down to Fire Creek Camp.

Eventually we made it to the crossings for the West Fork of the White River and saw the flood damage. After picking our way, we found the river had cut a new main channel very near to Van Horn Falls. Luckily there was a trio of fallen trees to use to get across the river. You can now see Van Horn Falls from White River because of the river flooding.

From Van Horn Falls, the trail climbs many, many steep switchbacks. About a mile from Lake James, the trail crosses a level bench and then climbs more steep switchbacks. There are only trickles of water between Van Horn Falls and Lake James. The trail pauses on the edge of a lightning caused forest fire that closed the trail in 2005.

The fire was burning slowly and the terrain was too steep to fight so it burned until the fall rains put it out. Once the trail finally levels out, Lake James Camp soon appears on the right. Two of the sites have partial views of the lake. We liked site number two the best. Only the bear pole near the group site had been put up because the base for the other pole had only recently melted out.

We went to the lake and looked up to the Natural Bridge. Fish were jumping as we filtered water and sat in the sun. There were less bugs at the lake than there were at camp. Lake James Camp used to be here at the lake about 10 years ago.

7/21 – We broke camp and filtered water, then headed up the trail. The trail gains about 1,300 feet to Windy Gap. After about a mile of steep Switchbacks and deadfalls, we came to the junction to the junction to the ranger cabin. The trail to the cabin is an avenue of destruction. A large storm blew down dozens of trees on the trail and in the area. The cabin is undamaged and Zach checked on the outhouse. I took a picture of a waterfall on Van Horn Creek as it drops down the mountainside across the valley from the cabin.

Back on the trail, we climbed multiple switchbacks for 1.3 miles to the junction for Natural Bridge. The trail leaves the trees after about a mile from the cabin and there are good views of Sluiskin Mountain on the left.

We had hid our packs in a little grove of trees and walked the .9 mile to the overlook of the Natural Bridge and Lakes Ethel and James. The Natural Bridge is about a 120 foot wide arch of volcanic rock. The Natural Bridge is only about six feet wide. You can see where some people have walked down the hillside and out onto the arch. There was no way we were interested in taking a show-off risk like that. From out last trip, we had forgotten the trail drops from about 5,550 feet down to 5,200 feet, but we still thought the views were well worth the trip.

We filtered water at the small lake at Windy Gap. The lake was only about 1/3 melted out in late July. This is the only water along the trail until Carbon River Camp or Ipsut Falls, unless you make a side trip into Yellowstone Cliffs Camp. From Windy Gap you can see Tyee Peak and Yellowstone Cliffs up above on the right. At Windy Gap we took about a .8 mile side trip up to a beautiful overlook of Crescent Lake and Crescent Mountain. From the gap the trail starts dropping from about 5,400 feet down a bunch of switchbacks, re-enters the trees, and passes the junction to Yellowstone Cliffs Camp, 1.4 miles away.

At the junction to the camp, you are directly below Yellowstone Cliffs. Drew said that there are 52 switchbacks through the increasingly dense forest down to the north junction across Carbon River, 2.7 miles away. This is the lowest point on the Northern Loop trail at about 2,900 feet in elevation. None of us want to do the Northern Loop clockwise and have to go up these switchbacks. The last

time we backpacked this trail, we met a guy going up the switchbacks with a full-sized aluminum lawn chair strapped to his backpack and enough fuel to boil all of his water.

Down at the river, we made the .3 mile crossing over the untamed Carbon River using several brand new log bridge crossings. The freshly hewn logs and railings smelled very nice.

The Wonderland Trail between this crossing and Carbon River Camp is closed until mid-August because of a washout.

Our camp was at Ipsut so we walked two more miles and lost 700 feet in elevation to about 2,350 feet above sea level, the lowest point on the Wonderland Trail. Ipsut Campground is no longer accessible by car because the Carbon river has washed out the road in a few places, including at the entrance to the campground. The streambed at the bridge is totally jammed with logs, the ranger cabin was taken to Longmire, and the campground is reservation walk-in only.

We found a spot, filtered water near Ipsut Falls, and had dinner. The bugs weren't bad here, but we were tired and soon went to bed anyway.

7/22 – We realized we barely had enough food for our trip, so we started pooling our food to last until we got back to the restaurant at Sunrise. We walked the two miles back to the crossing and I talked with a woman on a trail crew about the trail washout. She also told me they saw a black bear along the trail the day before

Back on the Northern Loop, we walked the 1.1 miles upriver and walked across the suspension bridge for our 10am break. We sat on the glacier gouged rock at the west end of the bridge and listened to the thundering sounds of rocks rolling down the river while we ate. From ere, the trail climbs steeply for .8 miles and passes some exposed areas, and leads up to Dick Creek Camp. We took a bathroom break here. The toilet spot has a good view of the Carbon Glacier and a unique sign on the toilet for the guys. The Wonderland trail also has a wonderful stream to filter water right at the junction to the camp.

From Dick Creek, at 4,140 feet, the trail climbs steeply until Moraine Park, at about 5,700 feet. Be sure to look for marmots hanging out in the meadows and hope for a clear day for a spectacular view of Mt. Rainer as you pass through the park. From the south end of Moraine Park it is another short slog up to a saddle at 6,100 feet. Early in the summer, make the short side-trip to a nice pond just to the right of the trail in the saddle. You'll see plenty of tadpoles or frogs, depending on the passage of the summer. This pond pretty much dries out in late summer.

From the saddle, drop steeply down switchbacks to a meadow and Mystic Lake at 5,700 feet. You can take the .2 mile walk to the ranger cabin, but it isn't much of a view compared to the top of the saddle. Drop down another .3 mile to Mystic Camp, which is only 3.6 miles from Dick Creek Camp, but feels much farther than that. Deer always seem to come by the camp so keep a lookout for them in this area. Remember not to leave food out or unattended because black bears are also commonly found in this area. While we were at Mystic Camp, Zach and I put moleskin on our toes that were taking a beating from the downhill portions of the trail. By the fourth day my socks could just about stand up on their own. I bet the bears could smell my socks 5 miles away.

We stopped here to make our breakfast and went down from 5,600 feet at Mystic Camp to 4,600 feet at Winthrop Creek. The trail washed out along the White River several years ago and the re-route is the nicest section on this Northern Loop/Wonderland route, outside of the Sunrise area. The re-route rejoins the old trail and comes to a washout by Winthrop Creek. You have to go partway down the slope to the creek bed using a rope to hold onto. The trail crosses over raging Winthrop Creek on a

log bridge and past Garda Falls, start the long climb through the forest to Granite Creek at 5,850 feet and 4.1 miles from Mystic Camp. This is another great stream for filtering water and it is a pleasant place to take a break and listen to the stream splashing down through the semi-open forest. The trail continues to climb fairly steeply up another 800 feet in elevation to Skyscraper pass at 6,650 feet, and about a mile from the crossing at Granite Creek. We took a break just below Skyscraper pass and finished off the last crumbs of our food.

Zach was thinking about getting a cheeseburger at Sunrise and was setting a sweat-off-the-brow pace. There are more great views from the pass and some people make a .5 mile side-trip up Skyscraper Mountain. We were now psyched for burgers and there would be no more side trips today. Sometimes there is a marmot that hangs around the pass, but not today so we dropped down to the junction of the Northern Loop Trail at 6,400 feet, 1.3 miles from Skyscraper Pass.

It is an easy .7 mile climb up to Frozen Lake at 7,000 feet. The wind was blowing about 30 miles per hour and you could see several tourists in their cotton T-shirts and shorts, unprepared for a cold wind. We hurried past them for the last 1.2 miles, gaining a bit more elevation, passing by one more exposed scree slope area, and then quickly dropping down at a rate of a tourist per every foot of elevation lost down to Sunrise at 6,400 feet.

We finished about 2pm and ordered our well-deserved bacon cheeseburgers and sodas. The smell of cooking bacon wafted through the dining area and we knew our orders were almost done. We placed our orders just in time because as we were savoring our burgers the kitchen ran out of cheese.

Now we had returned to civilization and now our hike was quickly becoming a memory that becomes fonder with time.

This is a fantastic wildflower backpack in early to mid-July. It is a “Must” hike during the peak season of the Lupines and Avalanche Lilies flowering. There are steep slopes and exposed scree fields along the trails, so hikers must know their limits and stay back from cliff edges.

Enjoy the photos!!

Gallery Pics

Switchback Steve