P A R T I

THE NATIONAL PARK QUALITY OF THE NORTH CASCADES

A Description of the Scenic and Natural Features of the Area

Charles D. Hessey, Jr.

The North Cascades are characterized by mountains of modest elevation above sea level but of impressive vertical dimensions. Peaks rise abruptly from deep narrow valleys which penetrate this range on all sides. Many of the upper slopes, reflecting the heavy snowfall, are mantled with glacial ice. Attractive to visitors from other mountain ranges are the forests which cover steep lower slopes and narrow valley floors. Between the ice and the trees is an extensive Hudsonian belt of stunted evergreens in meadows of blueberry and heather. Small rock-rimmed tarns are numerous. Many larger lakes, most of them planted with trout, reflect the peaks or gleam in a dark evergreen setting. The sound of running water is everywhere.

The North Cascades are roughly defined by the Skagit River on the north, Lake Wenatchee on the south, the Sawtooth Mountains beside Lake Chelan on the east, and an escarpment in the vicinity of Darrington on the west. This area covers the main Cascade divide with its general north-south orientation. There are two notable exceptions to this polarity; at White Mountain south of Glacier Peak the crest makes a determined swing eastward for 12 miles to Mt. Chiwawa, and at Boston Peak near Cascade Pass an even stronger thrust to the east moves the divide over to a northern extension of the range which parallels Lake Chelan's eastern shore.

It is worthwhile to mention here that the drainage line alone identifies the main divide. The streams in the area flow in all directions, with six on the west eventually finding their way to salt water and six on the east flowing into the Columbia River. The six streams west of the divide are Thunder and Granite Creeks, and the Cascade, Suiattle, Whitechuck, and Sauk Rivers. Those east of the divide are the White, Chiwawa, Entiat, Stehekin, Twisp, and Methow Rivers. With high ridges separating these drainages, the divide is lost in a chaos of summits of equal height. This is not a simple mountain chain.

In the southwest corner of the area under consideration lies its highest point, Glacier Peak, at 10,528 feet. This old volcano sends all its meltwater westward through two rivers. The Whitechuck drains the western slope, and the

Suiattle drains the large eastside glaciers and the north slope, drawing a great curve through country north of the peak as it seeks its Skagit River confluence in a low coastal valley.

The Skagit River itself drains the northern portions of our defined area through important tributaries. The Cascade River enters the Skagit at Marblemount. Its South Fork parallels the divide for several miles, tapping two important bodies of ice, the South Fork and the Middle Fork Glaciers, before turning west. The North Fork of the Cascade River leads to Cascade Pass and the Stehekin, an interior valley sloping to Lake Chelan and an exit on the southeast corner of our area.

Thunder Creek pursues a northerly course to Diablo Lake on the Skagit. This silt-laden stream carries the season's accumulation of moisture from some of North America's most rugged terrain.

Draining drier but still spectacular mountain country in the northeast corner of the land in this proposal is Granite Creek, a stream of lens-glass clarity that is also a Skagit tributary through Ruby Creek. This valley is the route of the North Cross-State Highway, now under construction. Near its headwaters in Rainy Pass the main Cascade crest makes its turn northward toward the Canadian border.

The eastern boundary of our defined area includes only the very headwaters of several streams, but on the southern boundary, valleys again become important. From east to west they are: the Lake Chelan trench, which leads to the interior valleys; the Entiat watershed, born in the wild and rugged Fernow--Seven Fingered Jack--Maude Cirque; the Chiwawa, portal to the gardens of Buck Creek Pass; and the White River, which leads almost to Glacier Peak. The proposed area is now seen to be a unit from which streams radiate to the major compass points.

One of the charms of the North Cascades is the diversity attainable in short distances, either vertically or horizontally. Since prevailing winds are westerly, peaks west of the main divide first rake the clouds for the benefit of their own slopes. The eastern mountains squeeze out most of the lesser amount of moisture that is left, the difference in quantity declaring itself in size and type of

forest cover, incidence and size of streams, and in the shape of the peaks themselves as affected by the sculpturing of storm. Some of the largest glaciers in the 49 states (Alaska, of course, is excluded) lie on or west of the main divide, and small bodies of ice still survive on many of the peaks to the east. In this direction a point is reached where summer snow may be common but where ice no longer exists. Much of this area displays spacious emerald basins below gray granite peaks. These are beautiful floral pastures in early summer, and provide numerous high campsites with exceptional views of miles of ice-hung peaks to the west.

It is not profitable to attempt to discover within this region a single scenic core, for the Range itself in its impressive reggedness, its extensive glaciation, and its unspoiled wilderness character, is its own climax. There are three areas notable for the concentration of ice. These are: the Clark Mountain-Glacier Peak group, the Dome Peak company of summits, and the Buckner-Eldorado-Snowfield complex. The last named group, which lies between Cascade Pass and Diablo on the Skagit River, is unexcelled in those features which contribute to Alpine grandeur, as are the others, and boasts an extra dimenstion of mystery because of its virtually trail-less condition.

In the southeast corner of the defined area is Lake Chelan, a natural wonder of America, unique in several respects. The lake lies in a canyon nearly 9,000 feet deep--one of the world's deepest. The low point in the canyon is over 400 feet below sea level. Fifty miles long, the lake is rarely over a mile in width. The town of Chelan, at its outlet, enjoys a climate featuring barely eight inches of rain a year. Stehekin, at the lake's head, where the mountains rise 7,000 feet above the water's edge, has nearly 35 inches of precipitation annually, most of it as snow. Lake Chelan is a magnificent waterway leading into the heart of giant mountains from a beginning in low orchard-patterned hills.

The lake surface is at 1,100 feet above sea level. The Stehekin valley leading into the lake is narrow and deep, its floor gaining only 2,000 feet in elevation in 23 miles. There at the Easin Creek crossing, the glacier and terraces

of Horseshoe Basin fall steeply from peaks towering more than a vertical mile above.

Fifteen miles above Lake Chelan, Bridge Creek enters the Stehekin River from the east. Since the main Cascade crest makes a great swing eastward at the Stehekin headwaters near Cascade Pass, Bridge Creek also drains much of the crest country in this area. Valleys such as the North Fork penetrate to steep flower-strewn meadows laced with leaping streams, where blue-green tongues of ice bulge over polished rock and plumes of falling water waver in the updrafts.

Topographically, the Stehekin valleys have much in common with other valleys in the North Cascades, but as camping country they know few peers. The dry summer season comes earlier to them and relinquishes its hold more gradually as the season wanes. While this is true in the valleys, the bordering peaks partake enough of the more prevalent western cloudiness to keep the alpine meadows fresh.

Valleys and mountains are interdependent, and to praise one valley is to laud a variety of mountain forms. Contiguous valleys do, of course, often share the same mountain. This is done most impressively by the White River and the Napeequa, which is its north fork. The two streams run roughly parallel for some distance, holding Clark Mountain between them before joining forces for their penetration of Lake Wenatchee. The White River valley is indebted to Clark Mountain for an unbroken sweep of slope exceeding 6,000 vertical feet, and the mountain has used unfailing winter avalanches from its magnificent height to keep the land clean and clear for viewing. Flowered meadows rise to steep rock, to higher meadows, to summer snow, talus, and cliff.

The Napeequa is a hidden valley, accessible only by a climb of 4,000 feet and a 2,500 foot descent. There is no more beautiful a valley in America, and contributing substantially to its quality is the same Clark Mountain. The Napeequa side of the peak is cloaked with a large glacier which thrusts lobes of ice toward a variable tree-line. The trail along the valley floor is brush-free, in open meadowland most of the way, bordered on the left by a five mile spread of ice, and on the right by the massive lavender cliffs of Buck Mountain.

The unrelenting search for the great trees of the virgin forest has pushed the boundary of that forest pretty well back into the mountains, where slopes are very steep and the stream bottoms narrow. A notable exception to the typical terrain still covered by the original forest is the Suiattle river basin east of Glacier Peak, where the broad pumice covered valley has produced a forest to match the beauty of the mountains that rim it. Several species of fir, hemlock, some giant cedar, and the timberline types--mountain hemlock and alpine fir--are preserved in this wilderness setting. Here, too, in the rocks at timberline, are a few of the rare Lyall larch, although these trees are found more abundantly to the east of the main Cascade divide.

In other of the deeply indenting western valleys, as on Sulphur Creek, are still to be found a few trees of rain-forest proportions. The forest as a whole, while clearly reflecting the tremendous winter precipitation, finds its highest value as an indispensable part of the massive wilderness mountain complex. How much the forests mean to the scenic quality of the peaks can best be learned in those few places (as on the Cascade River) where logging was allowed near the very headwaters of a western valley.

The typical evergreen of the drier east side of the Cascade Range is the ponderosa, or yellow pine. Most of this forest lies well beyond (to the east of) the defined area, but stringer stands occur in some of the valley bottoms, as on the Stehekin, where the Mt. McGregor trail ascends through a dry ponderosa belt, thence through wet forest and timberline varieties to a rock pinnacle that throws its afternoon shadow across the Sandalee glacier. Only in this particular area is it common to find yellow pine growing on the lower slopes of glacier-bearing peaks.

The mountain flora of the Cascade Range has become world famous through the alpine gardens of Mt. Rainier National Park. High gardens which rival Rainier's finest occur throughout the North Cascades, and are usually at their best from mid-July to mid-August. However, there always seem to be flowers--from the springtime emergence of trillium through receding snowbanks, to the normal October

demise of the hardy gentian under attack of the season's first big snowstorm.

The common pairing of blooms in alpine meadows of the North Cascades is the red Indian Paint-brush, and blue Lupine. West of the main divide the high pastures sometimes feature other combinations no less attractive. There is an outstanding example of this in the Hidden Lakes Peak region where a mixing of two of our showiest flowers occurs. Here is a sweeping display of Columbine and Tiger-lily that will both delight and astonish anyone who is charmed by mountain flora.

This violently segmented wilderness with its forests, streaming waterfalls, and ice-draped summits, supports a diverse wildlife population that includes both shrew and cougar. Fox, fisher, marten, beaver, mink, weasel, otter and coyote--these, with lesser rodents, constitute most of the smaller mammal population. The large timber wolf is rarely seen. Rumors of occasional grizzlies are persistent, and one tributary of Bridge Creek is named for the animal. Black bear are abundant in the forests of the west side, but are becoming rare in some of the eastern areas, warranting protection. Deer are common throughout, with the large mule deer grazing eastern slopes and the smaller blacktail inhabiting western slope forests. Actually, blacktail are common on both sides of the divide.

Recently, a moose wandered down from Canada to astonish the residents of Stehekin, and at least one American elk has wintered on the Stehekin. Unfortunately, he chose one of the severest winters on record for the experiment and can no longer be counted with the contemporary wildlife population of the valley.

The one animal which best typifies the North Cascades is the Mountain Goat, who finds in the Cascade mountains his finest habitat. The high parks around Glacier Peak sustain several herds. Winter trips on Lake Chelan feature close-up views of goats near the water's edge, and along their secret pathways across the cliffs. Their numbers are kept in check by the few cougar which still prowl the region, and by the unique combination here of very deep snow and much vertical rock at low elevations. This is avalanche country, and the bleached skull and the stilletto-sharp horns of goats are often found among the rocks of talus fans.

The North Cascades are the finest example of classical alpine scenery we have. Not so high by nearly a vertical mile as their European counterparts, they do display similar phenomena at more comfortable elevations. Their forests are superior in size and diversity, their wildlife richer in species. Finer, too, is the summer weather. In the European Alps, the glaciers are maintained largely through the shielding of the summer sun by persistent cloudiness. Here, they are sustained chiefly by the huge winter snowfall.

A man who had just visited these mountains for the first time commented, "If, at the time the National Park idea was born, an inventory of America's mountain scenery had been at hand, probably the first National Park to be dedicated would have been a generous chunk of the North Cascades."

His opinion defines the quality of the range.