



Mt Shuksan (*Ch'ésqen*) via Sulphide Glacier

Trip Report: 6-8 July 2025

A Pleasant Stroll Through Bucolic Alpine Meadows

Mt Shuksan has bounced around in a corner of my mind for probably 11 years now. Perhaps the first time I heard of this mythical beast was Snapp talking about “Shuskan” or gory tales of sucking chest wounds at the base of Winnie’s Slide during Niemeyer’s Wilderness First Aid. For various disappointing reasons, I’ve missed at least two opportunities to see Baker’s smaller twin in the northernmost regions of the North Cascades. No more. 2025 was the year to make it happen.

[sometime in late March...highly paraphrased]

Shonee: *Hey Gurley! What are you putting on the schedule this year?*

Me: *I’m thinking of Unicorn, Glacier, and (finally) Shuksan. Oh, and maybe Sloan.*

Shonee: *Really? I was going to post Sloan and Shuksan also.*

Me: *Cool! What dates for Shuksan?*

Shonee: *Early July, probably the 6th-9th. The Fisher Chimney route.*

Me: *You’re kidding....those are the dates I picked for Sulfide Glacier. Wanna race?*

And so the planning and negotiation and agonizing over team roster began. A planned team of 8 with 3 alternates was whittled down to a solid 6 by the final week. The Sulfide Six were: Geoff Maggi, Theresa Conley, Kaitlin Sommerfeld, Gregory Adelman, Liz Babbs, and myself.

Of everyone, only Theresa Conley had ever set foot on Shuksan, but then again, there is a special kind of thrill to set out on a climb not REALLY knowing what it will be like. Of course, even if you have been up a particular peak, can you 100% count on it being the same? Just ask Theresa.

Liz: *I’m a little nervous about the upcoming Shuksan climb.*

Theresa: *Nothing to worry about. I've been up there. It's totally chill; a short hike up through bucolic alpine meadows on an established trail. The glacier hardly has any navigation issues. Once you reach the summit block, you just scramble up super-solid 3rd/4th class rock.*

Liz: *Thanks. That makes me feel so much better.*

Narrator (in the deep dulcet voice of James Earl Jones): ***But...it would NOT be the "totally chill" climb that they all anticipated.***

SUNDAY, 6 JULY 2025

Geoff and I arrived at the trailhead first, just in-time to encounter two rangers exiting the trail. They provided the very welcome information that the lower bivy had running snowmelt water and...that they had just dug out the composting toilet. That settled it...lower bivy site it would be! They checked our backcountry permit and then wished us well. Not long after, the rest of the crew rolled up in Gregory's BMW that looked like it had about 4 inches of clearance. He checked the oilpan and declared that they made it unscathed up the heavily potholed road. We divided up the group gear and made final preparations. Had a very brief debate about leaving 2 of the snow pickets behind, but in the end decided they were light enough to warrant bringing all 6 of them (inadvertently, one of our luckier decisions).

The first half of the trail has one of the most consistent uphill grades that I've ever encountered. Seems like it was probably a forest road at one point in time. Gradually the "road" gave way to something more resembling a North Cascades trail, with heavily overgrown greenery, exposed tree routes, and swampy sections of mosquito-infested standing water. The temperatures started warm and only increased throughout the day. I kept assuring myself (and others) that once we got through the "notch" and out into the open, it would be smooth sailing and a short jaunt to our bivy site.

Narrator: ***It would NOT be a short jaunt to their bivy site.***

Trip Report Name Change #1: The Rolling Snow Hills of Demoralization

At first, it was wonderful to finally be out of the trees. Rocky outcroppings, well-trod snowfields, and blue skies greeted us. After traversing around several bluffs that obscured our view of the horizon, we finally came around a corner and saw...in the distance...tiny dots indicating tents and people. It was so much further away than expected. Still, objective in sight, we trod on. With each undulating dome of snow that we topped out on, the expectation was that we would nearly be at the bivy. Each mini-summit was a disappointment; never really seeming to make much progress.



Through the Gap and into open blue skies



A very agreeable bivy site

Finally, the mirage gave way to the final leg as we plodded off of the snow and to the island of dry rock that another group was perched on, enjoying their post-climb meal. We chatted briefly with them, then they mysteriously disappeared into their tents...never to be seen again. Our appearance must have been much more intimidating than expected. Water was nearby and gloriously clear/cold. After dinner we negotiated what everyone felt was a reasonable departure time and then retired to our respective tents and bivy.

Sunday, Jul 6, 8:02 PM (Text exchange between Shonee and Michael)

S: Do u have service at camp?

M: Who is this? Sorry, wrong number. 😊

S: Lol. Go to bed! We're leaving camp at 3am.

M: Hmmmm, we aren't until 5. Totally chill. We'll keep our eyes out for you. Good luck!

S: We need several extra hours for the ridge. You'll probably summit first. Good luck!

MONDAY, 7 JULY 2025

The negotiated time of 5:15 ended-up being more around 5:30, with the advantage of an early sunrise. Headlamps not needed. The two rope teams of 3 climbers each aimed for the upper bivy site, gaining the glacier proper, then followed the upper edge of the Sulfide in a long gentle arc, aiming roughly for a feature just to the SW of the Shuksan summit called The Hourglass. The snow was still firm even though temperatures hovered around 40 degrees through the night. The Shannon Ridge was easily navigable and we were able to steer well clear of some visible parallel cracks well off to the east. We were making excellent progress and once we gained a full view of the summit block, the Fisher Chimney team could be seen already traversing along the base, FAR ahead of our position. Dang, they made great time getting up onto the glacier! Shonee's voice came out over the radio, "Laurie, head for that notch in the ridge." Oh well...maybe we would cross paths on their descent.



Crossing the Sulfide Glacier, aiming for The Hourglass



First snow-rock transition

As we got closer, the summit block and our gully objective never really seemed to lessen in steepness. Surely this was a trick of perspective. Reaching the base, we held a brief conversation about how "doable" it would be. Seeing how much snow still filled the route, it was decided that it would be best to simply take it slow, steady, and constantly reassess. The expectation was set that we may be forced to transition from snow-rock multiple times, depending on what we encountered. Sure enough, after a short, sharp

snow ascent of the lower section (following a quick blue bag break on a rock island...thanks to an overabundance of Fig Newman consumption) we ran out of snow and had to carefully remove/stow crampons, rope, and ice axes in order to continue.

Trip Report Name Change #2: Where is all the 3rd and 4th Class Rock?

If you asked each individual on the team which part of the gully ascent they liked the least, you'd get a variety of answers. The next section was NOT my favorite. This did not seem like 3rd, much less 4th, class rock scrambling to me. I kept looking longingly at the snow further up and hoping we could get back on it. It was definitely a choose your own adventure sort of climb. Undoubtedly the easier climbing was buried under the sketchy snow patches on climber's right that we were paralleling. To everyone's credit, they carefully and doggedly picked their way up, supporting each other by calling out information to those below about hand/foot-holds, loose rocks, etc. I was glad I was up front...so that no one could hear me whimpering softly to myself. We were also distracted (in a good way) and entertained, by listening to the other team's progress over the radio. From what we could tell, they were making steady progress up the SE ridge and seemed in great spirits.



Carefully making our way up the gully

FINALLY! About ½ way up, the opportunity presented itself to get off of the sketchy rock and hopefully push all the way to the summit on a long snow finger that had been visible on the approach. There was just enough room on a small ledge for each team of 3 to rope up and step out onto the snow. It was steep, but the snow was soft enough to kick nice big buckets. Again, we took it nice and easy. It was definitely getting warmer and the snow seemed to get softer by the minute, but it thankfully took pickets. A running belay provided just the right amount of mental and physical security to boost everyone ever upward. Remember back at the trailhead when we considered taking only 4 pickets? At this moment we were all glad that we brought the full 6 after all.



Yes, it really was that steep.

The snow finger ended. As I stood there considering the next section, Shonee's voice called cheerily from above.

S: *Hey Gurley! You're almost there.*

M: *Please tell me that it's just a walk up from where you are.*

S: *Yeah, the summit is just about 30' above me.*

M: *Thank god...*

S: *Do you have any rock gear? I feel like I should drop some down to you.*

M: *Nah. I have 2 alpine draws, but to be honest, this last bit of rock looks WAY easier than what we encountered earlier.*

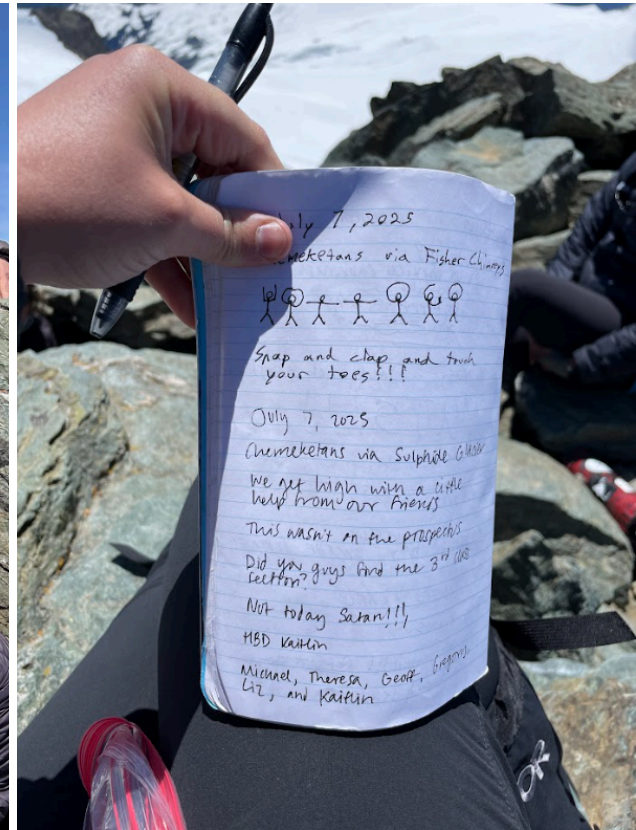
S: *OK...see you on the top!*

As it turned out, I did manage to sling one chockstone, reached the anchor at the top and then belayed each rope team up in-turn. It was a glorious moment to finally join the Fisher Chimney team on the summit.



As best I can tell, this was roughly our ascent. Green for snow, Red for rock.

Trip Report Name Change #3: Not Today, Satan!



Sulfide Six and the Summit Register

After giving the Fisher Chimney team sufficient lead-time, we prepared to follow them back down the gully. It's been covered in the other trip report, but worth reiterating what a long, slow process it was. We did a lot of perching at rappel "stations" studying the technique (and struggles) of the team below us. It is here that I must give a special thank you to Geoff Maggi. He shouldered the task of leading each and every rappel for our team. Big deal you say? Yeah, it was. The ropes decided that today was the day to twist, tangle, catch, and entwine at every opportunity. Geoff (hereafter nicknamed "Spaghetti Geoff") patiently and doggedly worked the ropes free; providing the rest of the team a smooth descent.



A few captured moments from the descent. Still plenty of smiles.

The third abseil presented the greatest challenge. It is typically the longest in the gully proper and some teams find themselves just a few meters short. We discovered our ropes were not quite the same length, so had to adjust accordingly. In addition, the lateness of the day and the high temperatures resulted in a first for most (all?) of us...that of rappelling down the middle of a rapidly flowing stream/waterfall. Everyone took it in stride and eventually we reassembled at the base of the summit block to rope back up for the trudge back across the Sulfide...which by this time was an endless expanse of suncups and glacier worms. Halfway across, my Garmin squawked at me. It was a message from Mike Pennington, scolding me for not having hit the check-in button for several hours. Apparently it was causing a bit of consternation on the home front. Ooops! My bad. I punched a quick message out assuring everyone that we were fine, just seriously behind the prospectus schedule.

Trip Report Name Change #4: The Prospectus is Merely a Suggestion

We arrived back at our bivy at 8:30pm; tired, hungry, and thirsty. A quick check-in with Shonee revealed that they had reached their camp at 8:00pm.



“Can someone PLEASE get me water and cook my dinner?”



Yes, Gregory’s legs really ARE that long.

The other team had vacated the bivy site and no new arrivals were there, so Kaitlin/Theresa and Gregory picked up their tents and moved them to dry platforms for the 2nd night. Due to our late arrival back to camp we negotiated a 0700 departure for the hike out.

TUESDAY, 8 JULY 2025



Morning stretches, calisthenics, and alpine yoga poses before leaving camp

The hike out was relatively uneventful. It was already getting hot and the snow rapidly softening, but before too long we were back through the notch and then below treeline. Some minor issues with briefly losing the trail and stinging nettles that we somehow avoided on the way in. Driving along Baker Lake, Gregory suddenly swerved off into a pullout. Theresa and Liz jumped out of the car, ran down to the shoreline, and jumped into the lake for a suped-up version of “splashies”. They said the water was glorious. The plan was to find a Burgerville off of I-5, but by chance we stumbled on the Birdsvew Brewing Company, which turned out to be one of my new favorite post-climb spots; with a great menu, tasty food, and shady outdoor seating options.

Final Notes:

- No matter how much research, beta, experience you have...things can be different than expected. Ability to assess and adapt as a whole team is priceless.
- The Shuksan Six was one of the best teams I've had the pleasure to be part of; solid, positive, cooperative, and supportive. Thank you for making this one of my most memorable climbs.