

Mount Olympus—Blue Glacier/North Ridge

Awe, Awesome, Aw Shit

The July 29-August 1, 2025 Mount Olympus climb included moments of awe, awesome experiences, and a few aw shits.

Photo album: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/tDDjuaJmaubGbYTW6>

Awe

Most Chemeketans, of course, will remember the British blues rock band *Blodwyn Pig*. As a climber, a line from one of their songs has always stuck with me: “climbing mountains without even looking.” It’s easy to blast through the approaches and the exits with heads down. Taking a moment to look around makes the climb and life better.

The Hoh Rainforest receives 140 inches of precipitation per year. It has been protected from logging, and its ecosystems are intact and extraordinary. About 1,500 types of plants grow in the Olympics plus hundreds of species of non-vascular mosses, liverworts and hornworts. Yes, even liverworts! Sitka spruce and western hemlock are the dominant species with some reaching over 300 feet in height and 23 ft in diameter. Mosses, ferns and lichens adorn tree trunks and branches. Many seedlings germinate on fallen, decaying trees—nurse logs. The odd shapes of trees growing that way remain for decades. It is impossible to adequately describe the complexity of the forest.

As our group hiked through the forest, they hugged trees, craned necks looking up at 300 foot trees, marveled at the scale of things, admired the tiny plants (even the liverworts), and stopped on and off to gather the newly ripening huckleberries and salmon berries.



Ping and Liz experience the largeness and largess of the Hoh Rainforest

Aw Shit (number 1)

Going back to the beginning of the trip, it was a Tuesday and yet there was a line of cars waiting to enter the park. On a Tuesday! As recently as 2017, groups I have been with have simply driven into the park, easily found parking in the backpacker lot, walked to the wilderness center to get permits, and started hiking. All that has changed. We waited an hour in line to enter the park. On a Tuesday!



On a Tuesday!!!

Awesome

Day One

Finally in the Park and finding parking spots, our group switched gears from the six hour drive to get to the Park that morning, to preparing to hike nine miles to our first camp that afternoon. Hitting the trail an hour later than planned (see the aforementioned aw shit), we worked our way through the strolling tourists who generally disappear after a mile or so. The hike was routine with hourly stops to redistribute group gear and more random stops to admire trees, ferns, liverworts, and so on.

This portion of the trail required two river crossings on snags—the first more difficult, the second straightforward. At the first crossing, wading was an option and Liz quickly removed her shoes and headed in. The rest of us, for some reason, chose to try to find the pile of logs upstream that would keep our feet dry. This endeavor, which included something near a 5th class move, took a lot more time than taking shoes off and putting them back on.

We arrived at the Olympic Guard Station early evening, found a set of camp spots close to each other, dealt with the routines of water, tents, cooking and off to sleep.

Day Two

Departing at a not too early time, we headed off for the second nine-mile segment. This one includes a considerable amount of elevation gain (about 3500 feet). Gain that made our packs talk to us especially when one rope in particular had to be added. Huckleberries and salmonberries appeared in this segment along with magnificent stands of Alaska yellow cedar and western red cedar.

This trail segment also includes the infamous ladder. The ladder, is installed on a section of the trail that washed out a number of years ago. Known to some as the *Jemrod Gully Ladder* (named for Jemrod Creek), it is also known to some to have 60 steps for a total of 100 feet. We did not count. The slope continuously erodes. Some of us who have seen it in past years, report the ladder is longer and a bit steeper in places.



The disreputable ladder

Here we donned helmets and carefully descended one to two at a time being careful of potential rock fall. Off the ladder and quarter of a mile later, we were at Glacier Meadows, our camp for the next two nights.

After we selected sites and set up tents, Ellen, Tim, Ping and I headed up to the lateral moraine for a look at the next day's route. Aside from the pain of adding another 900 feet to the day's total, there was pain from seeing the shrinking Blue Glacier. My first Olympus climb was in 2004. At that time, the descent from the lateral moraine to the glacier was short and slightly loose. Over the years the descent has become longer and steeper and looser and is a more significant segment of the climb. Climate change has had a substantial impact on the glacier.



Olympus with shrinking Blue Glacier, snow dome, and distant summit

Summit Day

With a potentially treacherous descent down the moraine, we decided to time the departure time for summit day so we would have a bit a light to navigate the moraine. This was a successful tactic on a previous 2017 climb. Up at 3:00 a.m. and on the trail by 4:00 a.m. we slowly and safely navigated the moraine and landed on the Blue Glacier. For several in our group, this was the first time experiencing the ablation zone of a glacier. It is different. We donned crampons and carefully set off across and up the glacier looking forward to the ramp of snow that would lead to the Snow Dome—allowing us to avoid the loose rock slabs of an alternate route to the Snow Dome.



Kaitlin traverses the ablation zone of the Blue Glacier.
It is different.

Eventually, we encountered large and finally full sections of snow on the glacier, we roped up and broke out our ice axes. Making our way around the gentle bend to where the ramp should be, we encountered the first indications that route conditions were very different from past climbs.

Aw Shit (number 2)

This section that on past climbs, even much later in the season, provided a series of snow ramps as a gateway to the Snow Dome, now required moving between snow slopes and significant sections of scrambly rock slabs. This was accomplished in crampons. Progress was slow. A final, very steep, snow field led us to the Snow Dome. We were behind schedule but on our way.



Steep slabs where there generally
has been continuous snow

Awesome

Our route headed across the snow dome toward Crystal Pass. There were large crevasses to wind through but previous parties had created something of a sidewalk so we didn't place pickets. Even so, we marveled at the depth of the gapers.



Navigating a series of crevasses approaching Crystal Pass

Next, over a melted-out Crystal Pass—the first time I have ever seen “soil” at the pass. We navigated the short, steep “soil” and made our way through a system of growing cracklers. Then, we were out on the upper Blue Glacier. The turnaround time clock was ticking and our slightly later start and delay making our way up to the snow dome didn’t help. Eventually, at above 7300 feet, we had to face the fact that we were still a couple of hours from the summit and in order to cross some challenging areas before dark we needed to head down.

This is not in the Aw Shit category because it was a successful climb just without a summit.

Several hours of descent were ahead of us. We placed our assistant leaders—Kaitlin and Cathy—at the lead for different segments to give them experience out in front. We down-climbed the steep snow fields and slabs. Navigated the ablation zone on the Blue Glacier. Scrambled back up the lateral moraine. Headed to camp for “splashies” (per Bill Saur), food, and sleep.

Awesome

Day 4

I have always “enjoyed” the accomplishment of hiking the 18 miles from Glacier Meadows to the trailhead in one day. It is probably best described as *type 2 fun*. Even on the hike out, which should be downhill, there are numerous annoying ups—made worse by carrying the rope.

We were efficient moving and strategic in our breaks. We waded one of the snag obstacles (a pleasure on sore feet) instead of navigating the stack of trees that formed a bridge. The way was not without hazards. Along the way, Liz was stung by a yellow jacket and Garry abraded a shin stepping off the trail to pee. Rest stop by rest stop we watched our trail snacks diminish and waited for the inevitable encounters with sweet smelling tourists that always signal the trailhead is near. Finally....



Our crew happy at the trailhead

Aw Shit (number 3)

With evening quickly approaching, a shower and wine awaiting at the BnB some of us had reserved, I was driving “progressively” and very glad to see Amanda Park because it meant we were getting close: around an easy curve, a view of “downtown,” and out of town. The rear view mirror showed emergency vehicle lights. I complied to get out of the way.

Aw shit, it is a police car and it is stopping me!

Sixty miles per hour in a 40 miles per hour zone, he tells me. My older, white, maleness gave me a good start with negotiations but then my companions—Liz and Cathy—engaged the officer explaining that we had climbed Mt Olympus just hiked 18 miles and that I was simply looking forward to a shower (I think he could tell that as soon as I rolled down the window). After checking for outstanding warrants, he wished us a good evening without a ticket. We were off again headed for showers and wine, but a bit slower.



A subjective hazard in mountaineering.
Stephenson avoids a ticket for 60 in a 40 mph zone

Eventually arriving at the Airbnb, the evening was spent showered and in clean clothes. A variety of food was served for dinner and a variety of imbibitudes were consumed. The next morning included a massive breakfast followed by walking slowly on a flat beach—in contrast to the previous four days.



Cathy, Kaitlin, Ping, and Liz strolling, sand, surf, no mountaineering boots

Photos are here:

<https://photos.app.goo.gl/tDDjuaJmaubGbYTW6>

The Mt Olympus team:

Garry Stephenson and Ellen Gradison, co-leaders
Kaitlin Summers and Cathy Lazarus, assistant leaders
Ping Lim, Liz Babs, Tim Hale (consultant), liverworts