

Cannon Mt (8638')

McClellan Peak (8364')

Enchantment Peak (8520'+)

– skiing

April 22-23, 2011

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Weather – Sun, no clouds 30s, winds 6-8mph. Eve down to 14F

Celestial - Sunrise 6:04a, sunset 20:05, moonrise 1:37a, moonset 10:37a 2 days from full moon

Short of it

As usual this season the weather forecast is ever changing. Long potential weekend trip shortened with a low coming in Sunday. Looked like best weather window being Friday and Saturday. With the new snow it was going to be a ski trip. I'd put off all week heading into the Enchantments waiting for less winds and warmer eves. Last Sunday had seen Susan and Charlie heading up Rat Creek. Then Tom and Sean headed up Snow Creek. I was flipping coins on which way in and out

The plan...

With snow trips taking longer than summer trips I wanted to start early, Head up into the Enchantments, ski some north facing slopes and tag some of the peaks I'd missed. Goals of sitting on top of McClellan, Cannon and Enchantment. I wanted to venture a creative route coming out, but kept it basic for the Two day weather window. Tom mentioned on his way home the night before his Rat Creek "love". Haven't heard good things about Rat Creek, I've done several Hook Creek approaches and wanted to see about skiing it. Hook is a relatively direct route into the upper Enchantments and the express way to the Mole and Edwards Mesa. Once there drop SW to the lakes, up Cannon, camp at Prusik Pass. In the morning up the north side of McClellan and once the snow was softer up Enchantment and a ski back to the car. Should be some rewards of good ski faces and then a mega pitch down Hook Creek (if it looked filled in).

Got the Hook

Woke up at 3am and the long drive to Icicle Creek. One car parked and had a chat with a climber camping at the pull out. I ended up starting much later than wanted at 6:42a (c1700'). Standard Hook Creek approach toward Yellowjacket Tower, putting on boots at c3130' (.6m, 7:46a) and traversing on snow patches into the creek drainage. It was a beautiful crisp clear morning with no breeze... I kept my figures crossed. Once to c3300' I clicked into the skis and started skinning up. And up, and up. I was rewarded with a stunning view going up the creek. A white blanket hiding the logs and boulders, smoothing out and adding a contrast. The head of the drainage capped with the dramatic peaks of The Duolith, The Mole, The Shrew, Monkeys Head, The Blockhouse... far above. A crust on the surface held the skis up and broke at times. The top section was powdery and needed kick stepping. Time flew by as I pulled to a top out on Edwards Mesa next to the Mole at 2:00p (2.4m, c7230', 5234' ascent). Perfect place for lunch and taking in the views. Oh, my and the views, suddenly in the face of the tall peaks and ridges from Musketeer Ridge on the left to Cashmere on the right.

Heading for the big gun

Trekking across the mesa in softening snow, to ski the ridge through Toketia Pass (3.1m, c6745', 3:00p) and up the lakes (Mesa Lake & Lake Earle). Interesting the view skiing straight across Shield Lake (4.3m, c6687', 4:00p). Cannon on the right so I curved up and right to Larele Laketes (5.3m, c7560', 5:23p) on easy slopes with sparser trees. The travel was pretty basic and the views outstanding. White blanket, pines, bare larch, wind sculptures,

blue skies... I stopped often to just look around and take it in. You have to be there to feel it. The only signs of animal life were a few tracks. A set of rabbit tracks and snowshoe tracks obviously from Tom and Sean heading out Rat Creek yesterday.

My Cannon approach took me in a larger southward loop than needed. I wanted to stash some weight and pick it up on my way to camp at Prusik Pass. Leaving Larele Laketes it was another half mile traverse back north under the steep steps of Cannon Mt., then up a steep snow face (5.9m, c8134, 6:20p) to top out on the enormous boulder strewn plain swimming in a sea of wind sculpted snow (Druid Plateau, c8360'). I'd seen summer pictures and wondered how winter would be. I felt I was in a world thousands of miles away. Could this be Washington? The day was getting long, so I headed NW to the bump of the remainder of Cannon Mt. 8638' (6.4m, 7:15p, 7194' ascent). What can I say about the views? Top of the world, tall peaks all around and only a slight breeze.

Camping in a magic land

My excitement to ski built as I ripped the skins and skied my route back with much less shutter delay. The deep powder had been blown away, but I had good turns anyway. It felt like spring... then a firm traverse SE to Prusik Pass. The snow was very firm in most places. Seems the high winds yesterday had blown the powder elsewhere. A crust firm enough for skis to stay well on top, yet fragile enough for boots to break through and sink in 8-12". Earlier as I crossed Shield Lake, I'd seen a ski track crossing from Cannon to Prusik Pass. Once there, I couldn't see it -magic. At the Pass (8.1m, c7460', 8:30p) there where snowshoe and ski tracks all heading up the bump towards Prusik Peak. I followed and set a camp near Balanced Rock at the base of Prusik Peak. While melting water, I felt a building wind and took in the views of the changing colors of sunset. A note... I was testing out some fuel I found in the camping section at Fred Meyer. I gave it a try. I do mean a try. The gas would barely burn in the cold weather. Switching to the normal stuff I use there were no problems. If it's going to be cold DO NOT use the fuel in the black cans from Fred Meyer. The tech data says it's a winter mix, well, maybe a Hawaiian winter mix. Relaxing with dinner, I stayed up checking out the change to night and the abundance of stars filling the sky.

Morning was cold. So glad I'd brought down booties and an extra layer. Rising winds woke me at 2am with a shaking tent. Checking the thermometer, it read 14F -Brrrr! Good thing I waited til it was warmer to do this trip -Ha!.

McClellan or bust

It took a while to break camp and clicked into the skis at 6:45a. Breaking the silence of the morning skiing down to Sprite Lake on the noisy night hardened snow. Calm and sunny as I skinned up the north face of McClellan working SE to the right side of the Gendarme that I figured was The Prong on the north ridge (Beckey describes as a north leaning spire on the NE ridge). Right side of The Prong (1.6m, c8000', 8:45) is a good steep snowfield I kicked up to the top of the NE ridge. I'd read a brief Beckey description and hoped I'd picked the right route. From the ridge south of The Prong I could see that the rest of the ridge was easy going. I took a deep breath of relief.

At the E-W running ridge, I dropped to the south side, traversed under a rib, then direct to the west side of the summit block. A bit of looking, dang, darn risky looking rock. I pulled up a flake in a chimney, still on the west side I didn't like what I saw to get to the top. Too much for winter and ski boots solo. Would this peak need a redo? Time to scout, I went down and up a east flowing snow finger to the east side of the block then elation finding an easy snowfinger heading back up and west to the summit. Whew! I made it :) (1.8m, 8364', 9:43a, 1320' ascent).

Bare rock on McClellan's summit. In a flake crack an Alpine Roamers register gave a good break. Again, outstanding morning Enchantment views from another angle. What can I say? And looking south into the

Teaway, a very different view. Stuart far west, I wondered how Jason and Kyle were doing on Stuart? They picked a prime day.

Opening the register, the first name I saw was Tom and Sean's from July 2005. I gave a chuckle. Reading the 40 pages, I was amazed at how many people I knew who'd been to this same place that I'd shared other trips with. Now to share a summit through time.

Time to get Enchanted...or not

Much to do, so after food, drink, name that peak and reading the register I worked my way back to The Prong and skied back to Sprite Lake. Sweet :) I'd been thinking for a long time about painting turns in McClellan's bowl. It's good to get a chance to put a dream into reality. It was warm and breezless skiing up Rune Lake and up to now breezy Prusik Pass (3.7m, 11:32a). A typical high alpine day, peaks cold and breezy, whereas the lakes very warm and calm.

I waited on ascending Enchantment Peak in hopes the snow would soften for better skin traction (and skiing). After replenishing water and a bite I headed due west up the ridge. Mellow then steeper, too mellowing out with the summit block in view. Unlike unspoiled snow of the other peaks, there were two sets of footprints coming off Enchantment. Looking south I could see tracks coming down Little Annapurna as well. In a short hour I was at the summit block. A pile of boulders on the north edge of a smooth blanket of white. Working up the rocks it is obvious where to end up. But wait... Crap! Rock scrambling with exposure. Oh, boy... and in ski boots? It was very easy looking, just the consequences of a slip would suck. Should I do it? Digging in the pack I pulled out a cordelette. Cleaning off the holds they were perfect instilling confidence and shaped for easy protection if needed. I was deliberate heading up. A mantle to a small flat and another to the flat boulder topping the Enchantment rock pile (4.4m, 1:00p, 8520+, 2785ascent).

Weird sitting there on a flat plate on top of the world again. Strong winds making for a shorter summit stay. Descent went easy and a good break back at the skis warm and sheltered from the wind.

Yeehaw... let the skiing begin

Oh, so sweet. Top of the world, gentle slope and the best spring corn snow so far. Turn after turn, slope steepening, views, the feel of the glide. Not a bad turn all the way back to the Pass (5.2m, 1:29p). I stood at the Pass taking in the views as I did at each small stop. Thinking of the different seasons I've stood at this same spot. Each a unique and rewarding experience. As I write this I realize it was even more peaceful in winter. No voices, and best no goats.

A last look around breathing in the sights. A push of the poles as I dropped the edge heading north in smooth snow to Shield Lake. Low on the lake it was warm. I could feel the sun beating down and reflection from the snow. The scenery, quiet, calming and so peaceful. For a tour this was a great pick and the avy conditions so far were low up high on the slopes I'd picked. I cracked another of many smiles.

Only thing that felt like work was the idea of rising up over 500' to the Mesa again. I walked down the lakes and up Toketia Pass again (7.3, c6747, 2:56p). The part I'd not looked forward to was no big deal. The ~550' up and I was traversing Edwards Mesa, a forgotten gem in its own right. My choice in a route out had played in my mind all week. Option A, an icy trail down Snow Creek then the switch back walk out and road back to the car—not inviting. Option B, no up, just battle down the much loved Rat Creek? Hmmmm, not good reviews and Thursday Tom said he didn't like at all. Options of Cannon Col. Great skiing, way up then a log crawl back to the road and long road walk—naw. Aasgard... too long. Favorite option ended up being direct route, 550' up to Edwards Mesa and down Hook Creek. The chance to ski a broad steep gully to 3300' kept me in fueled.

Sitting at the top of Hook Creek (8.1m, c7250', 4:00-4:35p, 3338' ascent) for a long last enchanted break My mind wandered. It seemed a bummer to leave with blue skies and plenty of time to explore. Maybe stay another day? Could hang and catch some laps? It'd been a gratifying two days and the afternoon snow should be prime for skiing.

4000' of turns

Life is good. Real good. Sun bright and now to ski 4000' feet in one pitch. The top was very steep at 50 deg plus in 8" powder. Nice, but the heavy backpack kept me conservative and stopping to relax the legs on occasion. Then it all changed. At c5700' a nasty breaking crust. Tried turns and breaking through was nasty. Checked middle then sides. Crap! Would I have to walk out from way up here? Not to give up I traversed searching for a safe place to turn. Kick turn try again, kick turn try again. This was going nowhere, Aargghhh. Booted down a section and seeing sun still on the east side where it widened I ski traversed into the sun on the east side (c5300'). YES! Sweet corn and great turns. Ha, ha, ha... life is good! Wait, don't get over confident. Would this sun washed snow last down low enough for the warmer temps that wouldn't allow for a re-freeze hard surface? Smooth corn, rolling and changing pitches. Turn after turn, weaving wide open bumps the snow stayed soft sweet corn, the best you can hope for all the rest of the way. Dead burned tree dodging to add to the fun getting lower. Time to make a choice, I moved to skiers right of the creek. At c3400, I had to pick the route better as the snow began patchy. Making it another 200' working right on the snow. Then stowed the skis to walk off across more snow patches and a traverse back to the Yellowjacket trail (10.1m, c3235, 5:36p).

Yellow jacket descent or The long trail down

Walking down in ski boots, the trail seemed much easier coming up. Maybe part of the mentality of returning on trails seeming 2-3 times longer than the way in. Just tedious down, past Rat Rock, across the bridge and plop at the car (10.8m, c1680, 6:32p).

It was very warm at Icicle Creek. Climbers across the road top roping at Alphabet Rock. It seemed odd, me there with my skis, people stopping and walking around in tee shirts and shorts... All having a fun day. The interesting part of how different our experience and memories would be. Driving out I saw Doug driving in my rear view mirror –small world. Hungry I polished off some delicious fresh fruit to wet the appetite. Nice how after a hike everything tastes so good.

A truly breathtaking ski tour, a wide variety of skiing, perfect weather window ('cept the cold eve), gorgeous scenery and peace in the high mountain Enchantment basin. I'd been in before in the winter, but this time special at my own pace to enjoy. Do yourself a favor and visit some of these places in the winter. A great cure for the Seattle gray.

Happy Trails!
fwb

Stats:

In to camp: 8m, 6h12m, 2857'ascent

Camp to turn around: 1.7m, 5h30min

Out: 11.5m, 12h40min, 3300'ascent

TT: 19.5m, 18h52min, 6157' ascent