

Lago group - Ptarmigan Peak

July 23-25, 2010

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Peaks:

Mt Rolo	(8096')	976'prom
Osceola Peak	(8587')	1147'prom
Mt Carru	(8595')	955'prom
Mt Lago	(8745')	1145'prom (3268' per peakbagger.com)
Peak 8165	(8165')	326'prom
Dot Mt	(8220')	420'prom
Ptarmigan Peak	(8614')	894'prom
Slate Peak	(7440')	480'prom

The **Lago-Ptarmigan Group** are nestled in the Central Pasayten mountains of the North Cascades, NW and accessed easily from Mazama, WA. A sometimes sketchy cut into the side of the hard rock mountain road takes you into the high alpine above tree line. Many trails traverse around 6500-7000' from Harts Pass to Slate Pass. Many very easy trails that are very family friendly.

The area having had many mining settlements starting in the 1800's that didn't pay off and are now abandoned. The Cold War had a RADAR station and road installed on Slate mountain after about 40 feet of the mountain top was blasted and removed. From the many trailheads you are instantly in drop dead gorgeous high alpine terrain. South aspects heather and spruce/pine, while the north aspects have Larch added for spring color. One of the few areas where you will hike downward toward your destination and on the way out could see a car parked high on a ridge above you while still being fully in the quiet noises and beautiful scenery of the east side of the North Cascade Mountains.

This area is in a subrange of the Central Pasayten Area. Class is: Pacific Ranges/Cascade Range/ North Cascades/Okanogan Range/Central Pasayten. The rock is very broken providing poor holds and options for placing climbing protection. Most mountains are seemingly piles of talus and scree with some more solid rock on some faces and ridges. In some steeper areas ample ledges assist in navigating the peaks. Ample wildlife some seen some not –squirrels, ground squirrels, ptarmigan, whitetail deer (very large), black and grizzly bear, coyote. On our trip we saw, or saw signs of all but grizzly (only read of the grizzly encounter in a register posting on Carru).

Pre-ramble:

For the year trips have included all sorts of heavy penalty weight –crampons, snowshoes, skis, pickets, ropes, pro, thick sleeping bags, helmets, gators... -well, maybe gators aren't heavy. We'd talked several times of doing a trip without all that. This was it. Hmmm, just to not be too light I took 2 ½ days extra food by accident (~5lbs).

Day 1:

It's a long drive to Mazama and then the dirt/rock road carved in the side of the mountains up past Hart Pass. Saved from driving at night by a big climbing party at VW, we started off from Seattle at 5am. Morning west side clouds, then warming sun dropping the east side. Through Mazama, past Ballard CG, a right toward Hart's Pass. The regraded road still left much to be desired. Just glad they "fixed" it up. We rose higher and higher, soon above treeline and to Hart's pass. Right past the Ranger house on up to the upward left switchback at Slate Pass. Even some snow to drive through this late in the year.

The TH sign was there, but no sign-in box. Where to register? Oh, well... 300' and we were looking at an amazing sight north down the Middle Fork Pasayten River (10:00a). Wide open green meadows with spruce, pine and larch. This would be an awesome fall trip location. We dropped a hundred feet or so to the meadows along the ridge wall and followed the trail. At .9 miles we stayed on the trail heading right

and downhill. A turn left is the traversing Buckskin Ridge trail leading to Silver Lake. Our track going down to more trees and after the last swithback (c5930') heading NNE to more trees than openings. At 3.4 miles opening and a crossing of the small Middle Fork Pasayten River. Flat meadows and some woods with a cattle fence (3.7m, c5214'). Shortly, there are several trails, all unmarked. Main trail is to the right. The others are from outfitting companies that have pack trails criss-crossing all over around their permanent camp in the meadow ahead. Main trail goes up a little to pass a Y (aiming other way (south) of the Robinson Pass trail (4m, c5256). Meadows blend to woods and in five minutes we pass the Ferguson Lake trail (again, no signage, 4.2m, c5252'). The trail is overly well trodden by horses, wetter areas with washboard type path and black mud. Several good creeks crossed for water and many old camp sites. The trail starts to look like a big straight cut in the forest gentle of pitch.

At 8.8 miles (c2000) we finish our decent down the river trail and head up the 39, hot, grueling switchbacks to Freds Lake. After 27 switchbacks in a mile, another trail to the left (c5848', Point Defiance trail). Ten more swithbacks and a long traverse SE. No more creek sounds on the left, new creek sounds on the right, a scenic path at a switchback shows waterfalls, and the final switch right lands us at beautiful Freds Lake (10.3m, 6207'), except the trashed jumbo campsite area equipped with built in shelves, carved seats, fire rings in abundance... Time has flown by, it's 2:00 and time for lunch. We sat at the north side of the lake, entertained by fish swimming feet away –plenty good for the appetite.

A half mile and twenty two switchbacks later, we are at the pass to Doris Lake (c7080', 10.8m). Trail continues and in a third of a mile we can see the basin for Doris Lake. We donned summit packs, headed back toward the last pass and south toward Rolo. I cut a corner to avoid the elevation of a mound south of the pass. This proved extra work and c13+ scrambling. Would be better to just go over the eastern knob (caught it on the way back). Pass that knob in "Dr Seuss tree land", a beautiful tarn/pond in the saddle north of Rolo. We followed snow up to avoid the talus, then up talus and the more solid north ridge. Knowing ridges are more up and down work we tried working the obvious west side along the ridge through some gullies and up to the summit. Too much work. We soon learned with this loose talus and scree, going up the ridgeline is safer, faster and more fun. 1 ½ hours from dropping our packs we reached the summit (12.1 miles). Found a Fay register from 2004 with 19 names in it. Plenty time for well deserved lounging with the usual name that peak game. Inspiring scenery and clear skies –another stunning area. The breeze helped keep the heat away.

Time to move on we descended the ridgeline, over the east knob, through "Dr Seuss tree land", back to our packs and the path left (west) down to Doris Lake in her pocket basin. Another beautiful lake (c6985') with great camping on the knoll east of the lake. Though again, too many camp spots and fire rings.

We set camp, hung packs and food, donned the summit packs and headed NNE to SW Ridge of Osceola. Some mini cliffs to crawl up the weaknesses and c12-3 scrambling to the flat ridge west of the mountain (14.1m, c7015'). From the Flat plateau we went up the NEE leading ridgeline to the summit trying to avoid the loose ball-bearing to breadbox size rocks that all had a mind to want to be at the bottom of the mountain bouncing against our legs on their way down. Less than an hour from camp we stood on the summit of Osceola peak (14.6m, 7:55p, 8587'). Another chance for a leisure break, sightseeing... On the summit is a small engraved memorial rock for a Ranger. No register, so I left a new one in a 2" PVC tube. All day we'd seen tracks of another party ascent in the past week or so. Still no clue. We headed down and on the ridge plateau, stopped to admire the setting of the sun and the surrounding mountains glowing orange then red. Back at camp before 9:15, for dinner and watching the moon rise over Monument Mt. We planned on a somewhat early start in the morning knowing we had a long day of hiking ahead of us. Oh, the moon was so bright the Milkyway wasn't apparent.

Day 2:

Up at 5am, cool, yet summer cool. (alt reference 6983') -Breakfast down and loaded with 3+ liters of water and food we were off following a depression to intersect with the Shellrock trail. The Shellrock trail does not appear to be maintained and not used much, apparent by much windfall and overgrowth abandonment

taking its toll. At 1.4 miles two cairns and an old sign "primitive trail" for the Eureka Creek trail (c5885', 45min). A third mile more we leave the trail (1.7m, 55min, c5838') angling NE through trees avoiding the open brush to hit the gully just west of the one leading to the Lago-Carru Col. Soon on rock and then use a snow filled gully to gain altitude. The snow thinned c7500' and we moved right for rock and talus scrambling -not nearly as loose as Osceola. Morning temps were perfect and the sun still hidden by some ridges. C7900' we started heading NW under a ridge rock feature. Looking like we needed to head even more west we topped the ridge first and found ourselves on the summit (8595', 2.7m, 3hr15min). A cairn on the summit and a Mountaineers register from Mike Torok (missing the 2" threaded cap -still). It was dry in three chewed upon plastic baggies and the pencil had been munched on by a critter or two. Again we'd seen bootsteps and finally a couple had signed in the register apparently doing the same route ten days earlier.

A half hour break and we moved on for Lago following the easy ridge working down to the cliffs of the Lago-Carru col. Working back south til c7700', then we followed zigzagging ledges down to the gully south of the col, across some snow patches and started up the joyous loose scree and talus of Mt Lago (c7300', 3.9m, 4hr40min). The trick was trying to work up the green area and solid rock avoiding the loose ever descending moving talus. Larger chunks made for good stairs and solid slabs a sounder feeling of not about to surf down the entire mountain. We hit the west end of the ridge at c8350' and followed it easily. Just before noon we topped out on the west end of Lago (8745', 3.9m, 5hr45min). No register, I looked and looked. We left a new register, played name that peak, ate, drank, figured our next steps to go north along the ridge to our next objectives and after a half hour moved on.

Leaving the west summit, I went east to the east false summit to check for wayward register (none). We descended the rocky north slope to the snow covered face for several glissades past Peak 8207, then a nice saddle scrambling, a couple hundred feet over a bump... that was too easy, hmmm, I thought they said there is a crux to go west around? Well, onward... Another saddle heading north on the ridge and summit Peak 8165' (5.2m, 7hr, 35min). A cairn and the north side dropping off. Oh, this is that crux spot. We back track down 50', enter a weakness, across two gullies and back to the ridge. More c12-3 walking, another saddle-ridge and larger talus scramble up the south ridge to the peak of Dot (8220', 5.9m, 8hr20min). We looked with no avail to find Fays register from 04. Even the cairn had been dismantled -obvious where it had been. I had only one reg left so saved the reg in case our next peak needed it.

A half hour break and we headed down the loose NE gentle side of Dot. The scenery looking toward Ptarmigan reminded me of Ireland (just like Stefan mentioned). Green, round features, open gentle slopes and even a tarn with snow. Just that the peak looked so far away. In 15 minutes we were near the tarn and heading up the gentle south slope. Resting near a snow field was a large Whitetail deer. On the summit (8585', 7m, 9hr25min) were two hikers we'd passed on the trail in yesterday. They'd come in from the north via Tatoosh. Also a small cairn and a Fay 04 register which they cared not about. Peakbaggers seemed a bad taste in their mouths. They left to head to beautiful Dot Lake while we lounged, ate, drank, marveled at how far away we were from camp... Yikes! Oh, and there was a little heart shaped rock left on the small cairn. I wonder the story of it.

We left for our return to camp at 4pm. It was a long way north and we hoped the way back would go easy. Soon past the hikers going opposite directions -one to the Dot tarn, one to Dot lakes. Traverse the dicey east flank of Dot (c8080), along the ridge, dropped the same gulleys of peak 8165', this time down and to ridge (c7870') about a hundred feet above the saddle low point (c7735'). Here we dropped SW aiming direct and contouring to the Lago-Carru Col. First down right to avoid slabs, then traverse left to a bump, through a hidden chimney under a buttress (c7430'), across snowfields and heather, streams for fresh water, kept at 7400-7500' to an upper moraine terminal ledge. Rounding to the col, I kept us too high at above 7500' traversing a steepish snow sidehill. Would have been better c7400 to round into the col then up. From back at the north ridge saddle it looked like a good plan, but up close things were clearly a little different. We gained the col an hour and a half after leaving the north ridge with a sigh of relief (c7627', 10.1m, 12hr50m).

We didn't fool ourselves. The last bit is always the most grueling, being later in the day, miles under the feet and the magic of trails being stretched by those magic gnomes to longer distances. Heading down south to the trail seemed easy following the snow and stream. Soon a very debris chocked deep and a narrowing gulley had us crawling to the woods on the right. The woods were surprisingly easier walking. Little underbrush and ample evidence of bear activity. We angled slightly west and hit the trail in a meadow at c6000' (45min from col, 11m). Simple now –follow the trail and don't miss the un-marked turn off. Day getting longer, tired, and ready to sit at camp we kept a steady pace. Past a one tent camp deep in the woods, past the cairn where we went up, past Eureka Creek trail and steadily up. Found the un-marked gulley to head to camp and in 53 minutes we covered the 1.9 miles via trail back to camp (8:35p, 12.9m, 14hr30min, 7620' ascent and descent).

Cheered by our round trip, the scenery, taking off the boots and another beautiful moonrise over Monument. I slept as well as usual, while Carla had a too friendly deer in the night stomping around.

Day 3:

Morning was a sleep in til the warm sun booted me from my sleeping bag. Left camp at 8:20a. Ten minutes out and uphill I dropped my pack to return for my snow-refrigerated food. Was a hunt, the snowfield I buried it in had melted and the bag blended in with the dirt. Again leaving at 8:30, up to the pass and 22 switchbacks to a scenic morning break at Freds lake. Another 39 switchbacks down and a left on the Middle Fork Pasayten Trail (2.5m). A long gentle rising walk. Passing the outfitters camp we saw horses tethered. Up into a meadow and a right (left goes to Robinson Pass) we were confronted with five ground squirrels were standing erect eyeing us. It looked like pop-a-mole as they stood up and dropped down. At the spot where the trail is confused from the many trails leading to the outfitter camp, we met two hikers trying to figure out which way to go. We chatted and exchanged info –they were planning a similar route. One had passed over Osceola last week on a 48 mile loop. I thought –“and crazy enough to return to do again a week later...” At the river crossing we gladly removed our boots to enjoy an icy crossing and lunch on the other side. The sun was hot and it was refreshing to have mostly tree cover on the 1.8 miles to the first switchback. Then up ever opening to meadows, past Buckskin Ridge trail -saw a family with baby carrier and a 3-4 year old heading north. This open meadow area is stunning with green meadows, flowers, sparse trees, and wait... cars on the ridge way above us –huh? Go figure? The last of the jelly beans got us up the final rise cut in the side of the ridge to Slate Pass. A last pause to admire views and the 300' to the (hot) car (11.4m, 5hr35min, 2716 ascent).

For a consolation we drove up to the parking lot overlook and gate. So close and early in the day, we walked the 320'+ vert up the road in sandals to the flat top (Slate Mt) lookout. At one time the summit was 7488, but in the 50s the military blasted and flattened the summit to 7440 to place a RADAR installation during the cold war. Several informative plaques and a great vista. I ascended the stairs to get to the height of the original peak (day total 12 miles, over 3000ascent)

The drive out was like an outback rush hour on the narrow single lane road -Dusty, hot. A stop at the Mazama store for cold refreshments and the largest ice cream. Another stop for dinner at the Marblemount Diner and back in Seattle while still daylight.

It was nice being in such a beautiful place I'd missed and have heard very little about. Couldn't ask for a better hiking partner, great weather and we had the place nearly to ourselves. All in all a great weekend.

Stats:

Gear: bug juice and sunscreen. Took ice ax (didn't need)
40.3 miles, 15,036ascent, 2.5 days (32 hours on the trail).

Thanks and happy trails!

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