

GET OUT GLACIER PEAK WILDERNESS

Into the woods —for the first time

By Dan A. Nelson, *Special to the Seattle Times*

THE QUESTIONS ABOUT BEARS and snakes kept coming, despite my assurances.

"If I see a bear, can I outrun it?" "No, but we probably won't see one." "How about if I run downhill, then stop real fast? It will just tumble past me, right?"

"No, they can run downhill as fast as uphill, and they can turn on a dime." "Oh, well, what if I climb a tree?"

"They can climb, too, and much faster than you. But we won't see a bear. If we do, just remember, don't run, and do what I do."

"OK. (Pause.) What about snakes? Will we see snakes?"

On this trip, the remote country of the North Fork Entiat Valley on the eastern slope of Glacier Peak Wilderness proved a lot more distant from Seattle than mere geographic miles would suggest.

Our team had crossed into a foreign world — half of us had never seen anything like this natural world, and the other half had never seen it through the eyes of such wilderness novices.

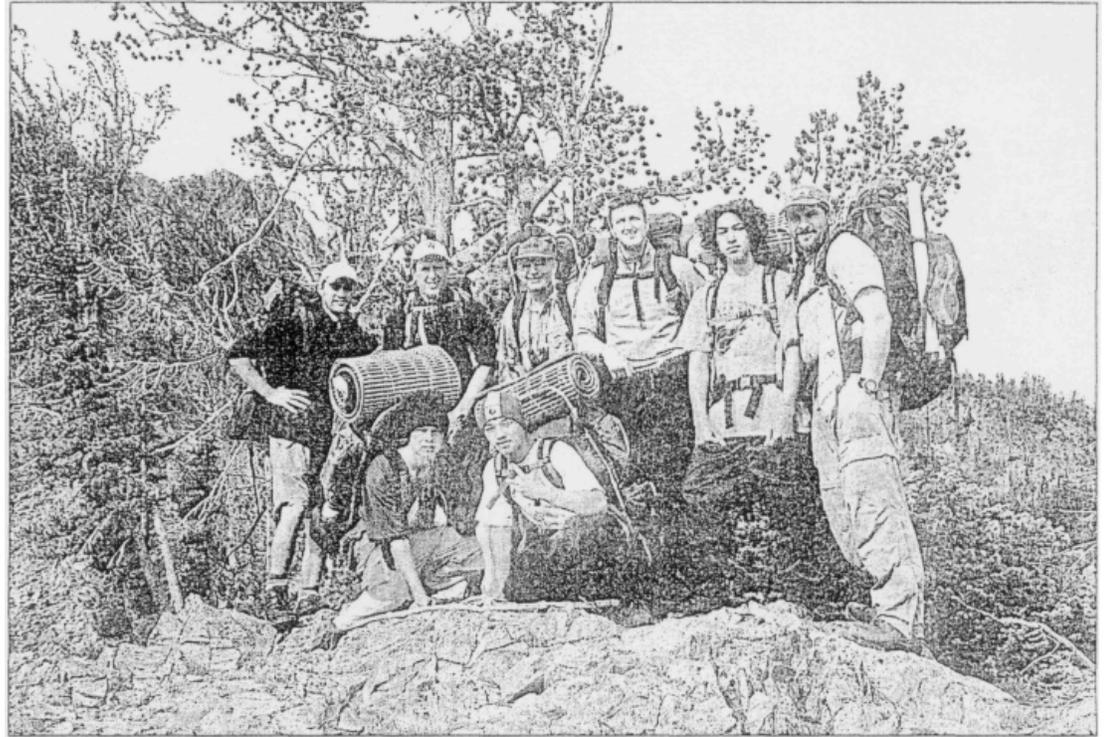
Of the eight team members, three were younger than 16 and had never carried a full backpack or hiked through a wilderness. Before the trip was completed, though, they were masters at setting up their tent, had learned how to safely ford a swift, ice-cold river and had successfully scrambled up a steep ravine to gain an eagle-eye perspective of their camp.

I was one of five adult volunteers leading a group of young men from the Boys



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Stuart Olive, wearing a fully loaded external-frame backpack, prepares to set out for the steep climb to Larch Lakes.



The group, a little older and a lot more wilderness wiser, pauses near the summit of Fifth of July Mountain. Members are (seated in front) Tyler Weinzirl, Quoc Tran; (standing from left) Mark Vahrenwald, Roger Bird, Rob Richardson, Chris Brennan, Stuart Olive and Dan Nelson.

and Girls Clubs of King County in White Center. The outing was organized by Big City Mountaineers, a nonprofit organization based in Colorado, which sets up outings for teenagers.

As we hiked into the woods, we moved slowly and paused often for rest. I was chomping to get going, but forced myself to remember that these novices weren't used to backpacks. By early afternoon on the first day, we had covered just over four miles and stood facing the icy cold waters of the Entiat River.

Our route for day two began on the opposite shore, yet no bridge existed, so we faced a choice: Cross now and be cold while setting up camp, or cross in the morning, and be cold while hiking.

We opted for the afternoon crossing, realizing that we still had some sunshine left to dry wet clothes and warm ourselves.

So, Roger Bird and Chris Brennan, two of the other adults on the trip, and I waded through a deep but slow-moving section of the river. The water climbed over my thighs, so I knew one of the youths would be waist deep at least. The three of us dropped our packs, then returned to the river to lead the boys across. We got everyone transferred safely and spent the next few hours sprawling in the sunshine. The cold water had done nothing to dampen anyone's spirits or enjoyment of the trip.

After breakfast the next day, we climbed from the low river valley to the high alpine basin of Larch Lakes. I knew we needed to crest the small ridge above

us and cross through the saddle to drop into the lake basin.

One of the teens, Stuart Olive, 14, asked, "Dan, what's a ridge?"

That's when it really struck me: This was a totally new world for these teenagers. They were enthusiastic and positive about the outing, but they were also completely out of their element.

Bird and I — as the resident Northwest hikers — passed on what we knew about the flora and fauna. Brennan, a limber and scientist, instructed the teens in geology and rock formations. Another guide, Bob Richardson, offered his experience as a birder.

By midday, we had crossed the ridge and made camp at 5,800 feet. The young men were amazed to realize they were more than a mile higher than their homes. Later in the day, we led them on an HOO-foot scramble to a rocky ridge above the lake basin for a bird's-eye view of the camp.

The next day was a layover, and we let everyone sleep in — it was a damp, cold morning and everyone welcomed the extra time in their sleeping bags — before enjoying a day hike deeper into the Glacier Peak Wilderness. We climbed to 7,200 feet, getting above the clouds briefly, and on our return we encountered a snow squall.

After our fourth day out, we had an evening of fly-fishing lessons. (Quoc Tran, 15, proved to be the master angler, netting several small trout on his first foray.) A brief swim for all of us in the chilly water led to our final dinner, in which

If You Go...

Big City Mountaineers needs adult volunteers to assist with outings around the Northwest and around the country. For more information about the organization, and for details about how to volunteer, visit www.bigcitymountaineers.org or call 1-800-844-2122.

everyone bartered and traded the last of their dinner rations. Breakfast was a blur the next morning as ever/one packed up for the last long hike out.

Our charges had their minds made up: Forget about gorp and granola bars; lunch was going to be a buffet at a Wenatchee restaurant.

The adults didn't argue.

They had learned just as much as the young men had — about enjoying the simple things on the trail, like sharing the places and things we love with someone new.

We learned, or relearned, the power the natural world has on the people who visit it, regardless of whether it is their first time or merely their first time in a week.

Dan A. Nelson, a Seattle-based writer, is publications editor for Washington Trails Association