

A Hike around Coldwater Lake, Mt. St. Helens National Monument (Washington)

Wes Hayward, May 26, 2007

My brother, Den, is an avid fishing enthusiast and wanted to go up to one of his favorite haunts, Cold Water Lake. This lake came into existence with the 1980 eruption of Mt. St. Helens, an active volcano in southwestern Washington state. He sent me an email asking if I wanted to join him for the drive up. I could then hike for a while as he did his best to fool the wary trout in the lake. I of course jumped at the chance. The lake is nearly a 100 mile drive north of his place in Vancouver, but if the fish are hitting, it is worth it.

After looking at maps and a hiking guide book of the area, I elected to do the hike that completely encircles the lake. Coldwater Lake is 2 or 3 miles long, located 7.2 miles north of the lava dome in the new crater of Mt. St. Helens. My hike would start about a mile from the boat launching place where Den starts his fishing. He dropped me off and we split. The trail immediately climbs the ridge bordering the SE side of the lake.



Looking down at the edge of the lake.



Although difficult to see, the speck in the center of this shot is Den. I could see him losing a strike with my little spotting scope. (Not really.)



Some of the flavor of the trail through the devastated timber along the ridge top.



This is some old logging equipment that got caught by the blast.



Here's more, another half mile along the ridge.



By now I'm well down the lake, but still gaining elevation.



This may have been my high point. A peak across the northeast end of the lake is lost in clouds.



The trail loops around the ridge on the lower of the old logging roads. This area had been logged in the recent past, so was not as laden with timber as some parts of the blast zone.



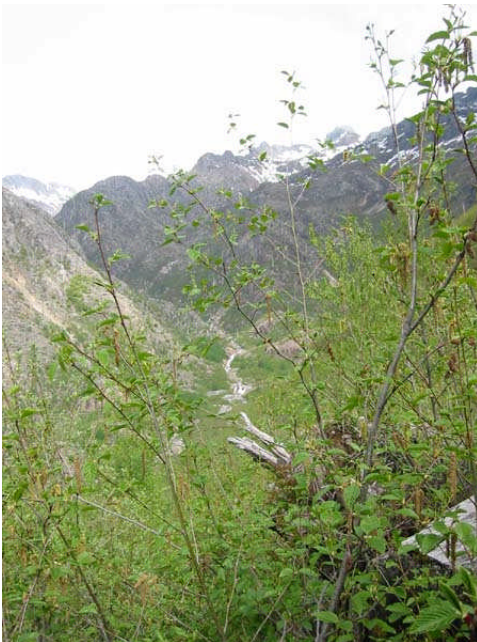
After 3 miles I came to a place where another trail split from the one I was following. Appropriately, this is known as “Tractor Junction.”



As I dropped down the ridge from the junction, I started to encounter slide alder. The trail was hard to follow in this area, for there were other elk trails that exited from my route periodically. Some brightly colored trail makers kept me out of trouble.



Another view through the slide alder toward the head of the valley.



Finally I'm seeing Coldwater Creek in the bottom of the valley.



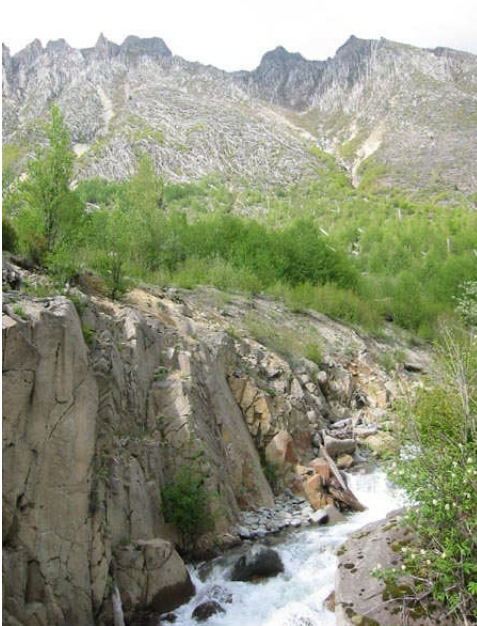
I found a log in a moderately clear spot in the trail, so I sat down for a bit of “lunch.” It was later in the afternoon by now, but as they say about eating in the mountains, “Lunch is a many splendored thing.”



A final view across at the “toothpicks” on the ridge before I drop down to the creek.



Fortunately, the bridge across the creek had survived the extreme storms that we had last fall and I was not forced to make a choice about fording this one! If faced with that decision, I would probably have turned around.



Another view up the creek toward the back country.



Soon after crossing the river, I found this sign. I would love to get back into that high country toward Mt. Whitter. Someday.



There is a final waterfall before the creek levels out to join the lake.



This sign was confusing, for I had been following these rules all along the hike. But careful examination of the map indicated that I had

hiked out of the restricted zone. This sign occurred at the border as I reentered it. Much of the Mt. St. Helens National Monument is set up as a highly restricted zone where even leaving the trail is forbidden. It is a drastic difference from the usual National Forest or Wilderness area policies where one is free to roam at will.



This photo was taken much later, well down the lake and shows the ridge I had traversed. My route was roughly along the upper edge of green.



This is another view across the lake, now showing the ridge that I ascended earlier in the day.



This final shot up the lake shows where I had been. Note the trail along the edge of the lake. It was usually from 20 to 100 feet in elevation above the water. Some recent massive slides must have happened in the wild storms of last winter.

I was finally at the end of my 11 or so mile walk. Just as I got to the boat landing, I found Den about to pull his boat from the water. It was at about 7:30 in the evening.



The fishing had been reasonable, but not as good as previous years. (Hey, it never is.) Den takes two fishing rods with him on his little boat. One has a dry line while the other is loaded with a sinking line for wet flies. The lake is restricted to lures with a single barbless hook. The only means of propulsion allowed on the lake is paddling or electric motors. Actually, kicking is also allowed. Den is wearing fins on his feet in this view. The lake was stocked with rainbow trout just once. Den tells me that many of the fish he catches (and releases) are descendents of the native cutthroat trout from before the blast.

I'm anxious to get back up to the area for more hiking. In fact, I already have my next hike picked! I wonder; could I go camp in the area to the north, the so called Mt. Margaret Backcountry? Time for some research.....