

TIMING IS EVERYTHING ON WASHINGTON PASS

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“IT’S MOSTLY CRUSTY ON TOP WITH POCKETS OF SOFT.”

W e all know timing makes the trip. When you add the Washington Department of Transportation to a list of variables that include snow, weather and schedules, circling dates on a calendar is a gamble at best.

But the odds looked good on our current weekend wager. The ‘06 snow season brought a deep pack to the North Cascades that surround Washington Pass, and the thick winter sky suddenly turned bluebird. This clearing trend accelerated spring plowing progress on the North Cascades Highway and our band of five tracked D.O.T. predictions daily. We were ready with five cases of cheap beer in reserve and a standby plan to meet at the Pass for the annual roadside celebration. Even with weeks of anticipation and speculation, when the road officially opened on May 1, we weren’t quite ready to hit.

Colin was the first to arrive. After receiving the word, the fiercely Canadian skier was welcomed to America after answering the marijuana question correctly and convincing the border patrol there was still skiing in the right spots. He joined photographer Grant Gunderson and me in consolidating three rations of gear and supplies into one lumbering vehicle. We wasted more precious daylight, but by afternoon, the roof boxes were loaded to capacity and Washington Pass was in our sights. The blacktop baked from steamy lowland temperatures, but as we wound past the terraced dams to the Blue Lake Trailhead, we realized our timing was right to hit the sunset refreeze.

THE HIGHWAY

Most zones hold a few specialties in the seasonal reserve, but the North Cascades is a range stacked with 8,000-foot peaks, loaded with a lingering base and legendary for harvestable corn. Objectives such as Cascade Pass, the snowfields on Ruth Mountain or Goat Peak and the massive massif of Mt. Baker—which skis well from the north or south—provide a wealth of terrain when rising temps, fair weather and higher snow levels start to ease the approach. But not until the gates are raised on the North Cascades Highway, which links east with west at 5,477-foot Washington Pass, is open

season declared on the heart of the range.

The highway runs 70 miles through North Cascades National Park, dissecting the craggy range christened “The American Alps,” and linking the I-5 corridor with the idyllic Methow Valley. When snow sticks to ground, the road shuts down.

A northern link through the Cascades was first ordered in 1896, but not until 1940—after repeated failures and false starts—was the corridor through Rainy and Washington Passes officially designated as the chosen route. Ground broke on phase one in 1959. By 1966, a push to

declare the area a National Park accelerated the project. The North Cascade National Park Bill was signed in 1968 and a rough route was passable the next summer. Three years later the road officially opened.



PASS THE CORN. DEAN COLLINS GETS A SECOND HELPING.

HAPPY HOUR TOUR

Grant’s Chevy Blazer squeezed into the last space of plowed shoulder at the Blue Lake Trailhead and we suited up to skin. We picked our way up the popular approach, angling toward the iconic spires of Liberty Bell and Early Winters. Above tree line, a wide-angle view of these symbols of North Cascadia was revealed and climbers on rappel from the Beckey route slid into view.

Just back from the four-day Assinaboine traverse, Colin kicked into gear while Grant and I struggled to keep pace. Gaining the ridge, we scanned the jagged horizon and snapshot the sunset as the temperature plummeted and clouds rolled in with maritime speed. We ripped skins quickly and dropped in fast through the cirque, past a trio of shirtless snowshoers headed to a ridgetop bivvy. We linked turns under an explosive sky, savoring the fleeting rhythm of refreezing corn on a 2,000-foot return and held out hope the weather would blow through by morning.

Back in the truck, we crested Washington Pass and rocketed toward the designated Early Winters campground, which sits 14 miles downslope to the dry side and is the first to open each spring. Colin, new to the range, was treated to a fading-light glimpse of the Early Winters spires, Cutthroat Ridge, Silver Star, Vasiliki Ridge, and the Kangaroo lines. His Canadian-proud skepticism quickly turned to stoke and he was left trying to rally support for an early assault on an exposed razor-thin chute. We set up camp at Early Winters, surrounded by parties on the same program.

An inconspicuous black van—one that had an earlier life in either surveillance or abduction—arrived after dark from the ski town of Glacier, which sits just over the range but 150 miles around by road. Scott Rowley—a longtime splitboarder,

transplanted Kiwi and renowned Northwest surfboard shaper—and local Adam Ü emerged from the interior.

A feast, fire and drinking session ensued, while boots and shells circled the flames to dry. Adam cooked sausage on a stick—the only food he brought for the weekend. Ü unsheathed a travel guitar that had accompanied him during ski trips to Turkey, Kashmir, Argentina, the Pyrenees, and the Alps. He skillfully picked through a repertoire that ranged from ‘80s cheese to classic rock anthems. The logs burned low and we crawled into down, hoping to sober up by morning.

FORMIDABLE EXPOSURE

From the beginning, the North Cascades Highway remained open only as a seasonal link. A year before the official ribbon-cutting, Ed LaChapelle, a highly respected avalanche guru, longtime University of Washington professor and author of *The ABCs of Avalanche Safety*, presented a study on the requirements for keeping the road open in winter.

His report stated: “The North Cascades Highway has an extensive and persistent avalanche-hazard problem. No other highway which normally is open to traffic all winter has avalanche hazard of a similar magnitude.”

Citing extreme hazard and extensive expected slide activity, the study predicted that staggering manpower, cost and scenic disruption would be required to keep traffic flowing year round. LaChapelle’s final recommendations—which estimated the cost of winter operation at approximately \$10,000 per car—convinced highway officials to settle on seasonal status instead of a Herculean effort with staggering expenditure.



DANK IN THE MANK. RIDER DAN K.

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EXTRA TIME ON TOUR

Saturday we awoke to the famously fickle weather that limits access in the North Cascades. A thick grey sky and low freezing level confronted us, but after caffeine, we were off to the trailhead. The previous day's corn had frozen into a death crust, and hopes of sun-break softening seemed remote. The group unanimously passed on Silver Star or Whistler Peak—survival-turn epics—while also shying away from the packed shoulder at Blue Lake. So we retreated to Spire Gulch, skinned up slowly and gained vertical with low expectations.

Grant and Colin peeled off prematurely to fix a delaming tail and broken binding, while the three remaining members pushed on to Kangaroo Pass. We encountered a bearded free-heeler on narrow-gauge skis completing the final leg of the Birthday Tour—the most popular half-day circuit off the highway, which climbs through the Blue Peak Col, hits Madison Avenue, and ends at the Big Spire Gulch switchback.



PUKE-ULELE

“It's mostly crusty on top with pockets of soft and occasional large debris,” he reported without a trace of humor. We were not encouraged, yet still undeterred.

Alternating between skins and soles, we eventually hit the saddle, and were barely scratching the surface. The snow at this elevation was rock-solid and Kangaroo Pass seemed a satisfying midpoint. We heard voices echoing from above as Scott and I reconnected our splits and Adam scoped a stance-width line through the rocks. We spied two specks inching up boilerplate to the peak, almost 1,000 feet above us. We identified a two-person team on the summit that would later join us for cold beers on the shoulder.

We respected their effort, but opted to drop in. Our edges screeched at high velocity, and Adam scraped his line in perfect balance. We let gravity pull us back to the lawn chairs, afro wigs and stashed Tecates.

THE ANNUAL CLEARING

Each spring, the highway is painstakingly cleared to pavement. Starting in March, Department of Transportation crews make steady progress—as stability permits—from both sides through a condensed pack that can total as much as 16 feet. Fourteen operators, three forecasters and eight pieces of heavy machinery are required to do the job. Working full-time for an average of a month, the crews make headway from both east and west, aiming to meet in the middle by the first day of fishing season.

Plowing progress is dictated primarily by total snow pack, depth of debris and avalanche-cycle activity. Marty Schmoker, the Department of Transportation Avalanche Control regional supervisor, directs the clearing effort and has seen massive slides on Highway 20 during his 32-year tenure.

“Some of the biggest slides we've induced were world class,” Schmoker says. “They've run a mile, a mile-and-a-half, 12-foot fracture lines, go clear across the canyon and halfway up the other side. Five-plus size. Big monsters that take massive timber—there are slides in there that cover the highway over 100 feet deep.”

With the world-class exposure and seasonal unpredictability, the entire project can take as many as 12 weeks. Opening is often on target—mid-April to mid-May being the norm—yet when slide activity heats up again, temporary highway closures are common.

HAPPY HOUR

When the case was kicked, we picked up our party and hit the Mazama Store for last call at 5 p.m. This resupply stop is the epicenter of the nearest town to Washington Pass and the only option for sustenance or swilling on a budget. We selected chilled Tecate caguamas and returned to our designated campground.

Jake and Shaffer—the more motivated party who shared a couple cans with us on the shoulder—joined us back at the fire. Shaffer, an ambassador for Birdwhere—a local visor brand—summed up their epic with what immediately became the phrase of the day: “It's all training.”

Grant made use of his new mechanical engineering degree, epoxying his wounded tail and set the ski by the fire to cure. Embellished tales were told about foreign destinations, far-off lines and beautiful ladies who just barely got away. The rumor that Swedish skier girls prefer mountain men was independently confirmed three times. We cracked into another case while dinners cooked on food-splattered camp stoves that had served us well in many fine locales. Once again, Adam ate only sausage.

Speculation about next season solidified into concrete plans for future trips. The forecast looked worse for Sunday, so Grant formulated a strategy to return next weekend with a different crew for better photographic luck. The five of us reluctantly admitted the weather had won this round, but we were contented by the beauty of this place in spite of the weather.

Each of us had killed it and been shut down many times before, but without getting out and getting after it, there would be no stories to tell. And, if the chapters we toasted by the fire were any indication, both the highs and lows of this trip will certainly be revisited in the context of other adventures.

The locals stood up and thanked us for the beer. They were eager to track down a rumor of single city girls in the valley for an equestrian seminar and, aware of the mountain male-to-female ratio, we all understood the importance of that mission. We invited them to both Baker and Banff, while they reciprocated with details for securing access after the road closure split east and west, leaving us keen for a visit when traffic was sparse.

As he exited, Shaffer offered a few farewell words. “There are good people everywhere, especially if you ski.”



PIG IN A BLANKET.



WASHINGTON PASS.

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RAIN CHECK

Motivation was low by morning three as thick clouds loomed overhead. Adam powered through the last of his pre-cooked sausages, we packed the vehicles and hit the highway. We called it in record time and split up at Helicopter Meadows. Grant and Colin turned toward Bend, while our remainder adopted a wait-and-see strategy as the glass fogged inside the van. No one wanted to admit defeat, but an hour later we left the pass for another trip and headed to chips and salsa in Sedro.

A day later we scattered in different directions. Grant and Colin embarked on an arduous skin into Oregon's Middle Sister, with Washington Pass tempting Grant to return with local hero Dean Collins when glorious weather reemerged. Adam ferried to the San Juans for a season tailing sea birds, and Scott loaded up his FBI van with freshly shaped Northwest Surfboards to re-supply coastal shops in Tofino.

I packed touring gear again, this time for a work-and-play week in Jackson, where I was assured the snow was still in good form and the forecast looked favorable. With a new destination on my radar and all signs trending positive, I prepared to test my luck again, seeking, as always, that elusive perfect window.

SOURCE

North Cascade Mountain Guides
phone: (509) 996-3194

North Cascade Heli-Skiing
phone: (800) 494-HELI

Road Conditions: The Washington DOT
www.wsdot.wa.gov/traffic/passes/northcascades

The Rendezvous Huts
phone: (509) 996-8100

The Mazama Store
phone: (509) 996-2855

D-Tours Bike and Backcountry Shop
phone: (509) 996-3673

The Winthrop Brewing Company
phone: (509) 996-3183

General Mountaineering Research
alpenglow.org