Great Escapes

Naturally Appealing

A scenic getaway in Washington's North Cascades | By Scott Driscoll

As our hiking group arrives at the top of Heather Pass in Washington state's North Cascades, we hear several low, guttural grunts. "That's the sound of my heart after seeing a bear," comments a female hiker. She chuckles a trifle nervously, and we all look around. Those grunts sound like they're coming from more than one large animal.

Whatever's causing the sound remains well hidden behind huckleberries, subalpine firs and boulders, but Libby Mills, our naturalist guide, sets our minds at ease. "Those are male dusky grouse," she assures us. "They're competing for female attention."

CHRISTIAN MARTIN

She explains that they make the grunting sound by inhaling air into pink sacs—one at each side of the neck—and then releasing the air.

Mills has led 15 of us on a 2.25-mile, switchbacking but easily doable trail from an elevation of 4,855 feet to 6,200 feet as part of the North Cascades Institute's Northwest Naturalists Weekend. It's a getaway designed to enhance our appreciation of nature—in particular, the natural beauty of 505,000-acre North Cascades National Park, about 110 miles northeast of Seattle.

The Park Service is celebrating the park's 40th birthday this year, and also the 20th anniversary of the Washington Park Wilderness Act, which designated 94 percent of the park as wilderness.

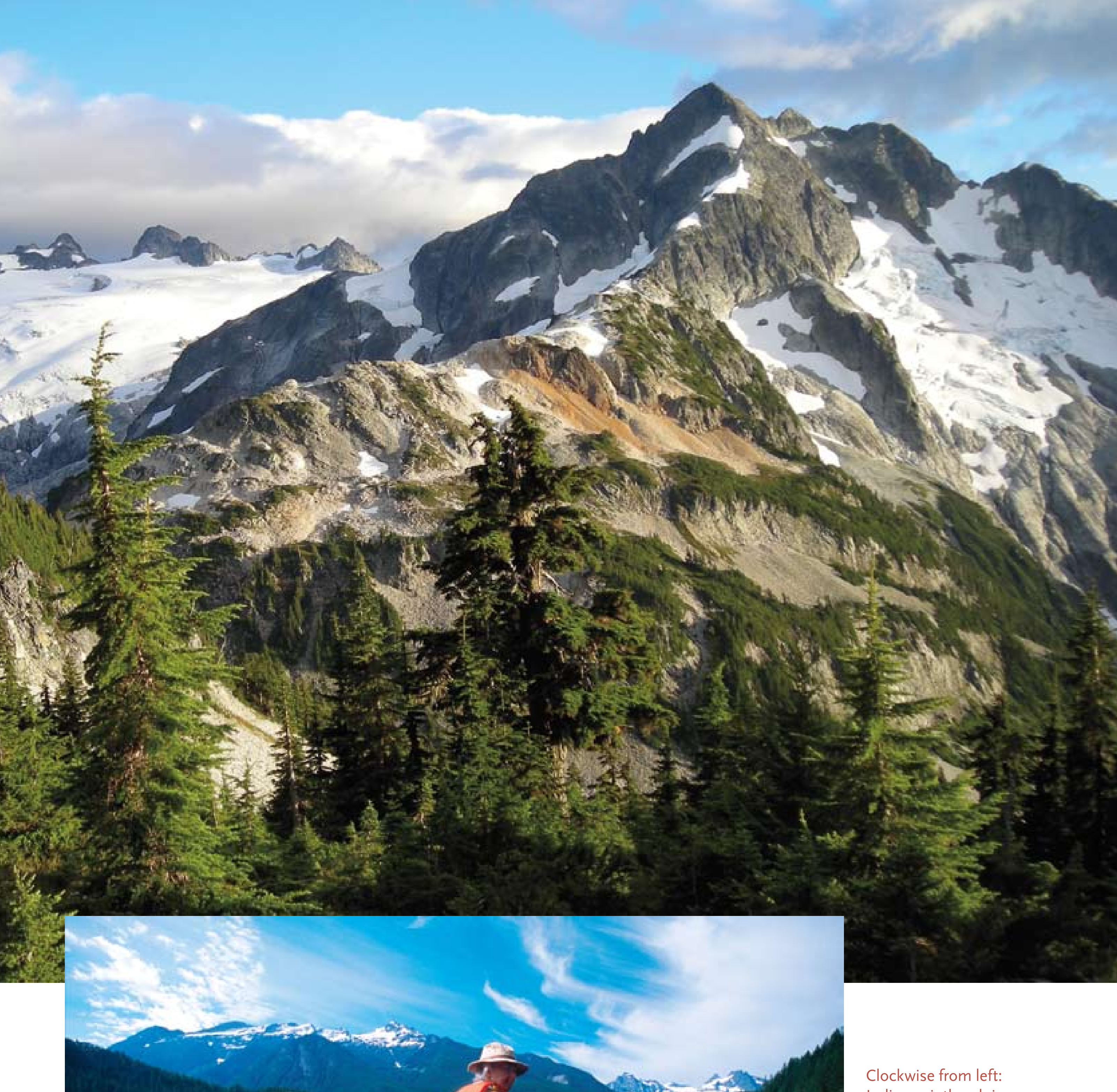
This area's "majestic mountain scenery, snowfields, glaciers, alpine meadows, lakes and other unique glaciated features" were cited as some of the reasons Congress chose to protect the land in 1968 "for the benefit, use and inspiration of present and future generations."

CAROLYN WATERS

Those natural features are also among the reasons the Park Service posted this quote—from 19th century Scottish botanist David Douglas, one of the early explorers of the Pacific Northwest and the person for whom the Douglas fir was named—on the North Cascades National Park Website: "The wilderness is a place of rest—not in the sense of being motionless, for the lure, after all, is to move, to round the next bend. The rest comes in the isolation from distractions, in the slowing of the daily centrifugal forces that keep us off balance."

Thirty-three of us are seeking the restfulness of wilderness this weekend. We're divided into three groups, with each group experiencing a different adventure with a different naturalist guide each day, Friday through Sunday.

The hike to Heather Pass is our group's Saturday adventure, and we admire the pink-flowering mountain heather for which the pass is named,



BENJAMIN DRUMMOND

Clockwise from left: Indian paintbrush is one of the wildflowers that bloom in the North Cascades. The area's glaciers, snowfields, alpine meadows and rugged peaks create breathtaking panoramas. Participants in a North Cascades Institute program canoe on Diablo Lake.

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and the view of surrounding pinnacles, including cone-shaped, 8,970-foot-elevation Black Peak, a favorite destination for climbers.

On our way up the trail, we passed crystal-clear, teardrop-shaped Lake Ann; saw two brown hoary marmots cavorting in a snowbank; and exclaimed over a slope still awash, in early July, with wildflowers such as biscuit root, rock penstemon, Indian paintbrush, wandering daisy and blue-flowering lupine.

MEGAN MCGINTY

We also passed several avalanche slides: long runs of broken rock carried down slopes by previous snow avalanches. The rock slides tend to cut a swath through the woods, leaving areas exposed to the light where mountain ash grow large and stout enough for black bears to climb them for their berries. That's why we thought the grunts might be bears, but our conversation makes plenty of noise to warn the animals if they happen to be nearby. They are just as eager to avoid us as we are to avoid them, Mills says.

Now, having convinced us that the grunts we hear are from grouse, she directs our attention to a few saplings that have sprouted in a nearby snowbank. "What do you call those?" she asks.

Rather than have us tramp off-trail, she collects a needle cluster and asks us to observe and touch it. She earlier taught us to identify—by examining the needle patterns—several species of fir and spruce that are common at this altitude. Subalpine fir trees, for example, have needles that grow in a bottlebrush pattern, with notched ends. Pacific silver fir needles have a flattened underside.

The needles we're rubbing gently between our fingers are soft, like those of the mountain hemlock, which is another species of conifer common at this altitude, but they are also downy, and they don't grow in the starburst pattern typical of hemlock.

"Those are larch," Mills finally tells us. "The only deciduous conifer in this part of the world. In fall they'll turn gold, then drop their needles."

As we head back down the trail, our group is abuzz with conversation about needle patterns, wildflowers and mysterious grouse.

LARA SWIMMER

Top: A hiker follows a scenic North Cascades trail. Bottom: The North Cascades Institute's Environmental Learning Center.

"I like to say our campus is really 7 million acres," Saul Weisberg tells me that night as we linger in the dining hall of the North Cascades Institute's Environmental Learning Center. We've just finished a delicious blueberry cobbler that followed halibut steaks with rice, along with fresh green beans from the nearby Skagit Valley.

The 7 million acres includes not only the North Cascades National Park Service Complex—which consists of the Ross Lake and Lake Chelan national recreation areas, as well as North Cascades National Park—but also protected national, state and British

Continued on page 100

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Columbia lands throughout the North Cascades region, he says.

Weisberg, a former national park wilderness ranger, is the executive director of the nonprofit institute, which he founded in 1986 to promote conservation and restoration of Northwest environments through education. The learning center, which is inside the national park complex and overlooks the north shore of 910-acre Diablo Lake, opened in 2005, and serves as a field school for the institute, which is based in Sedro-Woolley. The center is operated in partnership with Seattle City Light and the National Park Service, whose North Cascades National Park headquarters is in Sedro-Woolley.

A septuagenarian couple has been participating in these guided outings since the institute was founded.

The center's 16 lodge-style buildings house a science lab, classrooms, a library, a conference room, the dining hall and sleeping quarters. There's also an outdoor pavilion where guests can hear the *shoosh* of the evening breeze and the tumbling of Deer Creek, and perhaps spot one of the black-tailed deer for which the creek is named.

When I look around my sleeping quarters, I think, "Wow! This is some dormitory."

The exposed beams, bunk beds, cabinets and support posts are all made from Forest Stewardship Council–certified wood that was sustainably harvested. The bed is made up with fresh linens, and the view is of 7,182-foot Pyramid Peak to the south, and beside that the snowy ridge of 7,771-foot Colonial Peak. Yes, the bathroom is down the hall, but it is gender-specific, with private showers.

Meals—including mondo sandwiches for sack lunches—are included in all of the center's overnight programs, an amenity I quickly come to appreciate. Although no one's exhausting themselves—you don't have to be a fit hiker to enjoy the weekend—the programs keep us on our feet much of the day, and we work up a hearty appetite.

Some of the members of my group are avid hikers. Some are birders. Some admit

to having spent too much time in the office chair. A septuagenarian couple has been participating in these guided outings since the institute was founded.

The organization's environmental education programs take place year-round, and focus on everything from volcanic geology to eagle-watching, from wildlife tracking to identifying wild mushrooms. There are programs for schoolchildren and families, and programs for older teens and adults, such as our Northwest Naturalists Weekend.

The name of our program connotes both the education we're receiving as burgeoning naturalists and the fact that we're learning from three experienced naturalists. Mills is a former national park ranger and former Nature Conservancy biologist. Ralph Haugerud is a geologist who has been working in the Northwest with the U.S. Geological Survey since 1986. Adam Russell is a biologist and mountaineer who has done field work in the Amazon, the Galapagos Islands and the Andes.

Russell leads our Friday morning adventure, a canoe paddle to the eastern end of Diablo Lake. There are 10 of us interested in this excursion, and we fit comfortably into a 28-foot fiberglass canoe. Our guide is at the rear, calling out strokes and steering the canoe. It's sunny, and we have a light breeze behind us, so paddling is easy. We listen to the shrill cries of pikas on the rocky shores and look up at the granite faces of Pyramid and Colonial peaks.

Haugerud previously explained that the metamorphic rock that makes up these peaks—and most others in the park—was originally part of rock assemblages that formed in the Pacific Ocean and drifted north. They collided with the North American continent about 100 million years ago. The collision thrust some rocks up into mountains that subsequently eroded and disappeared. The collision buried other rocks beneath the earth's surface, where the ambient heat caused recrystallization of the rocks at various depths, and these new formations were then brought to the surface by continued plate tectonic activity.

Many mountains in the park, such as 8,894-foot Boston Peak, are also known for their glaciers. In fact, the North Cascades National Park Service Complex boasts more glaciers—300-plus—than any other place in the lower 48 states. Two-and-a-half-mile Boston Glacier is one of the glaciers whose glacial "flour"—fine-grained sediment—is carried by creeks to Diablo Lake.

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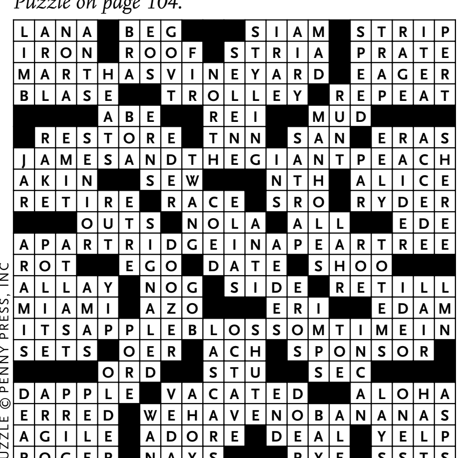
Puzzle on page 104.



Puzzle on page 102.

9	5	8	7	1	3	2	4	6
4	6	1	8	9	2	3	7	5
7	3	2	5	4	6	9	1	8
5	4	7	2	6	9	8	3	1
6	1	3	4	8	5	7	2	9
2	8	9	1	3	7	6	5	4
8	9	5	3	7	4	1	6	2
3	2	6	9	5	1	4	8	7
1	7	4	6	2	8	5	9	3

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Sudoku

Complete the Sudoku grid by placing a number in each box so that each row, column and small nine-box square contains the numbers one to nine exactly once. *Solution on page 101.*

							4	6
4		1	8			3		
7		2	5				1	8
	4	7		6	9			
	1						2	
			1	3		6	5	
8	9				4	1		2
		6			1	4		7
1	7							

Puzzle © 2008 Penny Press, Inc.
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"It's the runoff from the glaciers that gives the lake its pale-jade color," Russell says.

He also reminds us that Diablo Lake was created by the damming of the Skagit River. Completed in 1930, the dam filled Diablo Gorge, a trench that is nearly 400 feet at its deepest and that stretches roughly five miles from west to east.

Paddling back to the center, we hit a stiff headwind that requires vigorous paddling. As a result, we are more than ready for a lunch of build-your-own sandwiches when we return to the center, and more than happy with the promise of a leisurely afternoon hike along the 3.8-mile Diablo Lake Trail.

The trail starts at the center and winds along the northern perimeter of the gorge to the southern tip of Ross Lake, which was also created by a dam on the Skagit River.

Russell wants us to know more about the role birds play as the messengers in the forest, so before we start down the trail he tells us how earlier in the summer he saw a black bear sow chase down a fawn, separated from its mother, on this very trail.

"It was the birds' cheeping—all species alarming crazily—that alerted me to the presence of trouble, well before I heard the bear," he says.

We listen to cheeping from what he identifies as a northern flicker, a varied thrush and a hermit thrush, and Russell explains that birds have five essential calls, which range from waking up to say, "Hi, I survived the night—I'm here," to mating calls.

Then we divide into three "bird" groups, each of which is assigned one call to demonstrate. My group is to do the "full-alarm call." I volunteer to be the predator. Going down on all fours in the underbrush—a mountain lion—I chase the madly cheeping members of my group, who are pretending to be thrushes, high into the branches ... figuratively. They actually just jump behind trees. It is great fun. We are all laughing. The important thing is, we are now one step closer to "reading" the forest.

Along the trail, we stop frequently to examine small plants in the understory. Russell points out small, brown coral root, which obtains nutrients from dead and decaying plants.

After identifying tiger lilies and rattlesnake plantain, we stop to examine pathfinders, which are part of the aster family. If crushed underfoot, these small plants with shovel-shaped leaves take a long time

to spring back and can be used to mark a trail through the woods, hence the name.

About a mile and a half into our hike, we are moving at such a leisurely pace it is already past midafternoon. Russell calls an end to the hike so we'll have time to do a "Sit Spot." This exercise, he says, is used by naturalists to observe and record the world around them. Amid nurse logs under a high canopy of Douglas firs and western red cedars, we each find a private spot to sit for 40 minutes. Our job is to "map" what is around us and jot it down.

Sun pours through the canopy. Shadows from vine maple leaves in the understory flutter across my legs. "A swallowtail butterfly flew over," I write in my notebook. "I first saw it as a shadow dancing across this page. ..."

I notice a flowering salal shrub nearby. "The little white flowers hang down, seven white lanterns upside down on a twig. ..."

It is, perhaps, not the same level of detail a naturalist might provide, but I know that as I look back on my words in years to come, they will instantly evoke the beauty I'm observing and the peace of place that I'm feeling.

As we hike down from Heather Pass the next afternoon, I can still recall the piccolo notes of the hermit thrush's summer song that I heard the day before. There was nothing urgent in it, no hunger, no alarm. It was merely one bird seemingly saying, "I'm alive, and this is still my territory."

Prior to my North Cascades getaway, this song would have faded meaninglessly into the background. And my memory of which bird sang that particular set of notes will, possibly, fade with time. But I'll still know why that bird was singing. I'll still know what it was trying to communicate. That knowledge will enrich every future hike on which I hear that song and, like all of my experiences during this weekend, will add immensely to my appreciation of the natural world and my desire to conserve it. ■

Writer Scott Driscoll lives in Seattle.

Horizon Air (800-547-9308, www.horizonair.com) flies daily to Seattle and Bellingham, gateways to North Cascades National Park. For more information on the North Cascades Institute and its programs, including group rentals of the learning center for meetings and conferences, call 360-856-5700, ext. 209; www.ncascades.org. The national park Website is www.nps.gov/noca.

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