

TREASURED LANDS

Travel and Photography Notes v1

by QT Luong

PACIFIC COAST & MOUNTAINS

COLORADO PLATEAU

DESERTS

ROCKIES & PRAIRIE

EASTERN HARDWOODS

ALASKA

TROPICS

All Parks

Acadia • American Samoa • Arches
Badlands • Big Bend • Biscayne
Black Canyon of the Gunnison • Bryce Canyon
Channel Islands • Canyonlands • Capitol Reef
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Cuyahoga Valley • Denali • Death Valley
Dry Tortugas • Everglades • Gates of the Arctic
Glacier • Glacier Bay • Grand Canyon
Grand Teton • Great Basin • Great Sand Dunes
Great Smoky Mountains • Guadalupe Mountains
Haleakalā • Hawai'i Volcanoes • Hot Springs
Isle Royale • Joshua Tree • Katmai • Kenai Fjords
Kings Canyon • Kobuk Valley • Lake Clark
Lassen Volcanic • Mammoth Cave • Mesa Verde
Mount Rainier • North Cascades • Olympic
Pinnacles • Petrified Forest • Redwood
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All Regions

About this ebook

A feature that sets the *Treasured Lands* book apart is that for each national park, a double-page spread provides travel and photography notes about each photograph, keyed to a map. An innovation in publishing, this ebook duplicates the contents of those notes in a format specially designed for mobile devices. It incorporates many images not included in the book. I hope that it will prove useful to you.

You can readily bring the ebook on a trip, or you can enlarge it on screen for better legibility than the small type that had to be used in the book to fit everything in. The maps, which were simplified in the book, can be zoomed in all the way to show details. The names underlined on the top of pages are hyperlinks that let you navigate the ebook quickly.

For your convenience, I have provided this ebook with no DRM protection so that you can easily use it on multiple devices. Please do not make copies for your friends. To gather the images and information, I have made more than 300 national park visits over a period of more than 20 years, all funded with my own money, without the benefit of any assignments nor sponsorships.

Most likely you already own a “hard copy” of my coffee-table book *Treasured Lands*, which showcases the photography in the best way thanks to the high resolution and design of the printed page. Otherwise, if you find this ebook useful or enjoyable, please consider buying a copy for yourself or maybe as a gift to a friend. For options, go to: TreasuredLandsBook.com

All Parks

All Regions

PACIFIC COAST & MOUNTAINS

North Cascades

Olympic

Mount Rainier

Crater Lake

Redwood

Lassen Volcanic

Pinnacles

Yosemite

Kings Canyon

Sequoia

Channel Islands

Pacific Coast & Mountains

**NORTH CASCADES
NATIONAL PARK
SERVICE COMPLEX**

Washington

ESTABLISHED: 1968* • SQUARE MILES: 789

RANK IN SIZE: 20

ANNUAL NUMBER OF VISITS: 21,937**

RANK IN POPULARITY: 54



Alpine Larch, Easy Pass

Despite preserving some of America's most beautiful mountain landscapes and being only three hours from Seattle, North Cascades National Park is one of the least-visited parks in the lower 48 states, second only to remote and roadless Isle Royale National Park. This is because North Cascades National Park proper is managed as a wilderness without facilities and almost no road access, accessible only to hikers, backpackers, and mountaineers. If you are not ready to climb over steep passes, you can find excellent views from more developed and accessible areas adjacent to the park. Most of them are part of the larger North Cascades National Park Service Complex, which includes the North Cascades National Park North Unit and North Cascades National Park South Unit, separated by the Ross Lake National Recreation Area, and flanked in the south by Lake Chelan National Recreation Area. The most iconic view in the whole North Cascades is found at Picture Lake, located in the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest.

Orientation The North Cascades Highway (SR 20) is considered by some to be the most scenic mountain drive in Washington. It runs through the Ross Lake National Recreation Area, providing access to great roadside views of reservoir lakes surrounded by mountain peaks. There are only two short roads in North Cascades National Park proper. One of them starts from Stehekin, a community so remote that it can be reached only by boat or floatplane. The other, the Cascade River Road branching off SR 20, reaches into North Cascades National Park for only 5 miles but ends at a very beautiful spot. The communities of Marblemount, Chelan, and a few campgrounds along SR 20 provide a base.

Seasons This far north, summer is very short. At higher elevations, trails are free of snow only from July to September. Wildflowers peak in the valleys in May, but in alpine areas, not until late July. Most fall colors start one month later, lasting into October. The first winter snows (usually early November) close SR 20 between Ross Dam and Mazama until April.



zoomable map

North Cascades: 1. Visitor Center Area



Skagit River Trail

Just before Newhalem, a side road leads to the park visitor center, crossing a one-way bridge with good views over the Skagit River. In the autumn, fall foliage brightens the shore and salmon swim upriver. A short stroll right behind the visitor center leads to a distant view of the extremely rugged Picket Range. Pacific rains fall on the west side of the Cascades, creating a moss-covered rain forest that I explored along the Skagit River Trail, an almost flat 1.8-mile loop.

North Cascades: 2. Gorge Creek Area



Gorge Creek Falls

Gorge Creek Falls cascades 242 feet down a narrow, lush gorge. I prefer to photograph it in open shade rather than direct sunlight, which means early morning or late afternoon since the gorge is south-facing. The view is from a vertiginous grated bridge along SR 20. I waited for a break in traffic so that the bridge would not vibrate, ensuring a sharp exposure. Along the highway, watch for reflections in the striking green-turquoise waters of Gorge Lake. Less than 1 mile east, after a small tunnel, an unmarked multitiered waterfall cascades into a gully that is bordered with trees that turn yellow in autumn. I parked at a pullout slightly east, on the lakeside, and walked back a short distance.

North Cascades: 3. Diablo Lake and Ross Lake



Diablo Lake Overlook, afternoon

Near a bridge 0.25 miles past the Colonial Creek Campground, you will find a lake-level view. From there, you can photograph either toward the north, looking at Diablo Lake, or toward the south, looking at Thunder Creek, a scene that works well with fog and low clouds. From the Diablo Lake Overlook along SR 20, you stand high above the lake, surrounded by steep forested peaks. My favorite view is toward the west. At sunrise, a thin layer of fog floated above the lake, and eventually midday light brought out the milky-blue color of the lake, which is created by glacial runoff. In the late afternoon, that view is backlit, but pointing the camera southward works well. A few miles further east, the Ross Lake Overlook provides a distant view of the long lake. The unusual and remote Ross Lake Resort consists of cabins and bunkhouses built on log floats, which you can get to by either hiking in or taking the ferry and getting picked up by the resort's truck.

North Cascades: 4. Cascade River Road



Looking southwest from Cascade Pass trailhead

The first third of Cascade River Road is paved, but beyond that, a well-graded section that is passable by any car leads past two campgrounds to the Cascade Pass trailhead, 23 miles from Marblemount. While the road closes after the first winter snows in October, it typically opens by the end of June, except in heavy snow years. Along the way, you will have several opportunities to photograph the North Fork of the Cascade River flowing through lush old-growth forest. Bigleaf maple adds color accents in the fall. At the road terminus, the view opens up. From the beautiful trailhead to Cascade Pass, look for a hanging glacier and tall waterfalls descending like ribbons from ridges below jagged peaks. For this photograph, I preferred a day when mist obscured the mountaintops, adding atmosphere, mystery, and a sense of lushness to the scene.

North Cascades: 5. Cascade Pass Trail and Sahale Arm



Looking southwest from Sahale Arm, afternoon

The Cascade Pass Trail (7.4 miles round trip; 1,700-foot elevation gain) provides the shortest and easiest access to the alpine environment in the park. Once you've finished the steady switchbacks climbing to the pass, you can extend the hike to alpine meadows and spectacular views of peaks and glaciers by following the steep ridge on the Sahale Arm Trail. Reaching the end of the trail, a backcountry camp at the base of Sahale Glacier, adds 4.4 miles (round trip) and another 2,200 feet of elevation gain from the pass. While this outing can be a day hike, you may find it preferable to camp in the backcountry to capture the best light on the landscape.

On the first day, we hiked in rain gear, and a thick fog reduced visibility to a few dozen yards. The next day we found ourselves above that layer of clouds and were treated to the view of the peaks that we missed the first day. The summit of Sahale Peak is 1,600 feet above the base of Sahale Glacier and requires a bit of mountaineering, with some glacier travel and class-3 to class-4 climbing. It offers one of the best panoramic views in the North Cascades.

North Cascades: 6. Hidden Lake



Ridges from Hidden Peak, dusk

After hiking up the Hidden Lake Trail (9 miles round trip; 3,000-foot elevation gain), I left my camping gear at the saddle between the two Hidden Lake Peaks. Carrying just my camera gear, I hiked up the higher of the two peaks in dense and chilly fog. Right after sunset, the fog lifted, revealing spectacular views of the jumble of mountain ridges. A telephoto lens compressed the perspective, making the ridges look close to each other. Back at the saddle, I found my camping gear coated with a layer of frost. Aided by the full moon, I scrambled to the Hidden Lake Peak lookout cabin, situated on the other peak, and was grateful I didn't have to bivy outside. The lookout cabin turned out to be one of the nicest places I've stayed in the mountains, with stunning 360-degree views and a cozy interior well maintained by volunteers.

In the clear morning, views toward North Cascades National Park were backlit. Every rock was coated with a layer of hoarfrost, causing me to delay my departure until midmorning. By that time, clouds had already built up, and one hour before sunset, it was clear that the summits would stay engulfed in clouds. I began to descend so that I could get under them. As the sun emerged for a few minutes, I paused to make a few photographs and then quickly resumed hiking to make sure to catch the trail before it was completely dark.



Hidden Lake from near Hidden Peak, moonlight

North Cascades: 7. Picture Lake



Mount Shuksan from Picture Lake, sunset

Near the end of Mount Baker Highway (SR 542), on the west side of the park, a one-way loop circles a pond aptly known as Picture Lake. Because of the nearby ski area, the road is open year-round. The mountain reflected in the pond is Mount Shuksan, sometimes said to be the most photographed mountain in North America. The boundary of North Cascades National Park was specifically drawn to include Mount Shuksan, which lies 4 miles away. This most iconic scene can be successfully photographed at any time of the day and in a range of conditions; however, midafternoon offers the most naturally balanced light. At that time of the day, the angle of the sun in winter provides more cross-lighting than in summer. At sunset, the foreground is quite dark, but I used a flash in manual mode to illuminate the fireweed flowers, making sure to keep it dim enough that it would not look unnatural. I positioned the camera carefully so that the central rock in the lake would not overlap the flowers or the mountain.

For less common views of Mount Shuksan, continue a few miles to Artist Point at the end of SR 542 and hike a short trail to the east toward Huntoon Point along the Kulshan Ridge. Sunset brings particularly nice light there.

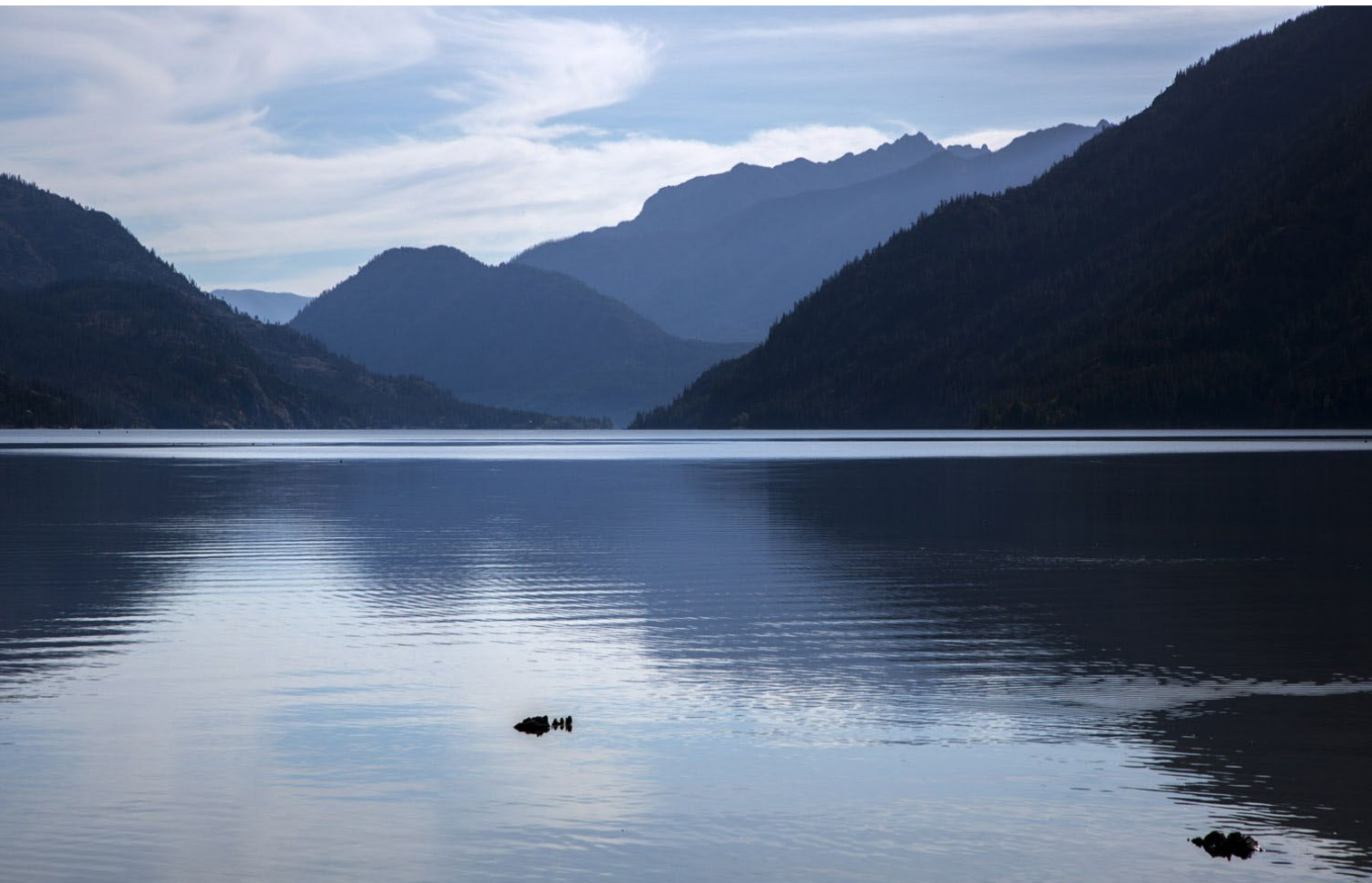
North Cascades: 8. Eastern Passes



Easy Pass, late afternoon

The dark, coniferous forests and imposing mountains of the Cascade Range do not seem like an obvious place to look for fall color, but within the park, there are places with impressive displays. The most unique is the subalpine larch, a rare Pacific Northwest deciduous conifer whose needles turn bright gold before falling in mid-October. The subalpine larch requires a dry climate and high elevation. To the west, the climate is too wet, whereas to the east, the elevation is too low. Places to see them in the North Cascades are all reached through trailheads along SR 20 on its portion east of the main range. The easiest is maybe Blue Lake (4.5 miles round trip; 1,050-foot elevation gain), while the most popular is Maple Pass (part of the great 7.2-mile Heather-Maple Pass Loop, with a 2,000-foot elevation gain and beautiful views of Lake Ann). I chose instead to hike to Easy Pass (a misnomer: 7 miles round trip; 2,800-foot elevation gain), which offered great views in all directions. After starting in the late morning, I arrived at the pass in the late afternoon when the larches were beautifully lit, stayed after dark for night photography, and returned at night, aided by the full moon.

North Cascades: 9. Stehekin

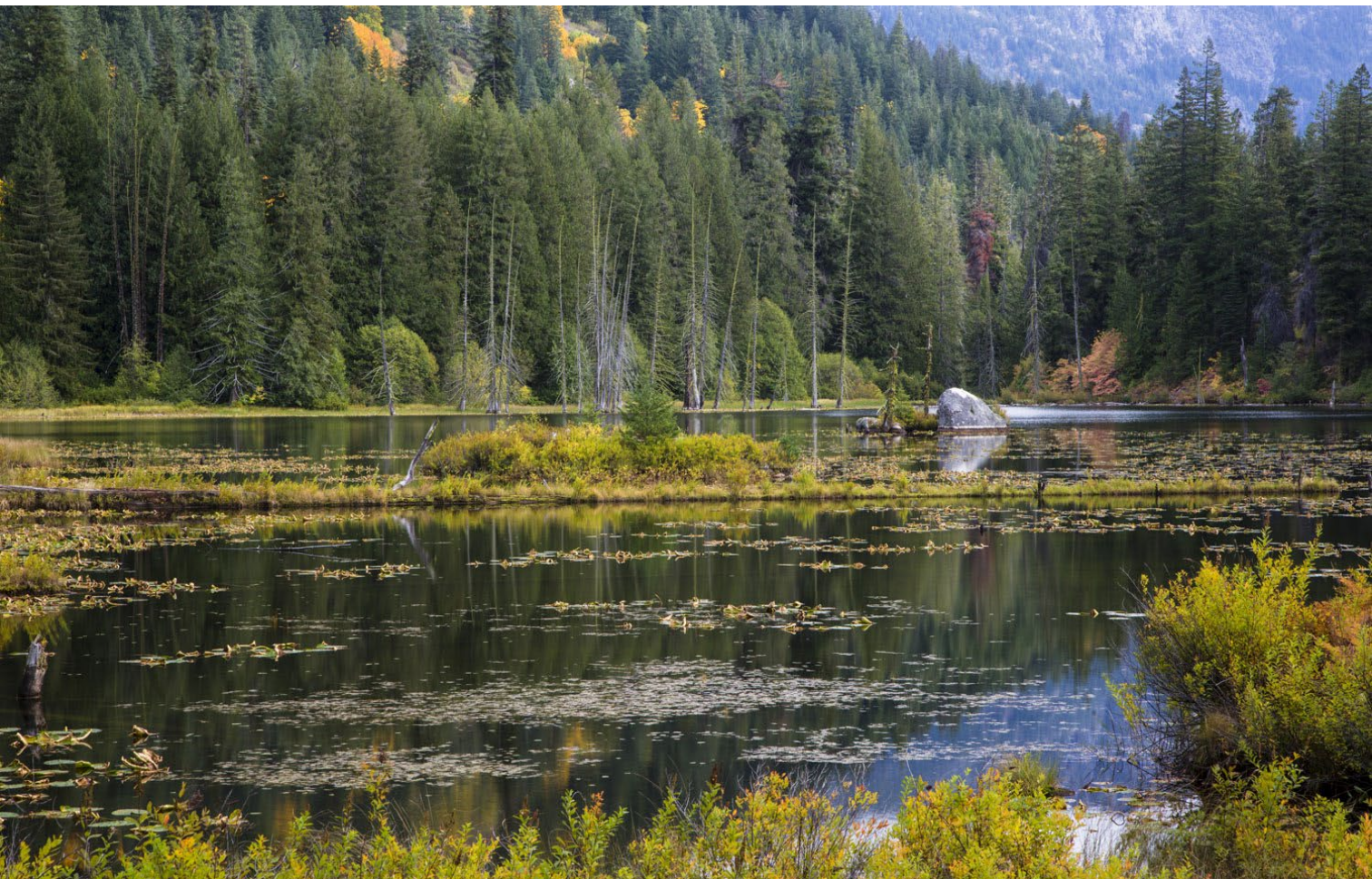


Lake Chelan from Stehekin, early afternoon

In a park that is essentially wilderness, the historic resort community of Stehekin, situated in Lake Chelan National Recreation Area, offers nice amenities in an uncrowded, scenic valley. Arguably the most remote community in the lower 48 states, Stehekin can be reached only by floatplane or ferry starting from Chelan—getting there is part of the adventure. The 50-mile ride on Lake Chelan is quite scenic.

Although it is preferable to stay for at least two nights, by combining an incoming trip with the Lady of the Lake Express (2.5 hours) and a return with the Lady of the Lake II (4 hours), it is possible to visit in a day with a layover of 3 hours in the summer. That would allow you to take the bus to Rainbow Falls and walk back 3 miles to the landing, taking in glimpses of the Stehekin River and views of Lake Chelan along the way. Rainbow Falls is quite impressive, with a total drop of 470 feet, the first 310 of which are continuous. The midday light isn't ideal, as the waterfall is in the shade until midafternoon while the surrounding cliffs receive sunlight. In the absence of clouds, late afternoon light is better.

North Cascades: 10. High Bridge Area



Coon Lake, midday

Several hikes start at the terminus of the shuttle bus at High Bridge, 11 miles from the landing. I stayed at the High Bridge Campground, a great base near trailheads. Since the weather was rainy, I was grateful for the shelter there, which was built in the 1930s by the Civilian Conservation Corps. The Agnes Gorge Trail (5 miles round trip; 300-foot elevation gain) traverses various forest terrains (including some aspens that change color in autumn) and provides glimpses of the mountains and an impressively narrow gorge at the end. Coon Lake (2.6 miles round trip; 600-foot elevation gain) is particularly beautiful in autumn. From there, a 6.4-mile one-way trail with a 5,800-foot elevation gain leads to the top of McGregor Mountain, the most prominent peak in the Stehekin Valley. Hiking just a few miles up is enough to get nice views.

While Stehekin is an all-year destination, the shuttle runs only from late May to mid-October, with a reduced schedule at the beginning and the end of the season, making the logistics more complicated if you try to visit at the peak of fall foliage, which occurs slightly after mid-October.

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