



# A Sense of Wonder

The joys and challenges of hiking Mount Rainier's Wonderland Trail with kids

## Mom, look!

"Mom, look! Look at that double tree!" "Mom, look! Look at this salamander!" "Mom, look! Look at the cool shape of those rocks!" These are the words that ring in my ears as I think about my hike on the Wonderland Trail with my husband and three children—ages ten, fourteen, and seventeen. Whether it was the white mushroom with the red polka dots that looked like it could be part of Alice in Wonderland, the wiggly tadpoles in the alpine pond, or the rocks that were shaped like string cheese, my children called out the wonders of the Wonderland Trail all along the way. Even though I had hiked for many years, I felt like I was hiking for the first time, seeing the forests of the Pacific Northwest anew.

## Our Plan

When our youngest child was born in 1997, my husband and I set a goal of hiking the Wonderland Trail around Mount Rainier when he was ten. Our thinking was that when our oldest son was seventeen, he would be big enough and strong enough to help carry some

of the gear that the five of us would need on the 93-mile hike. In 2007, our daughter would be fourteen and we knew that she and our youngest son would only be able to carry a light load—just their personal gear.

## Preparation

In the summer of 2006, we began to prepare for our big hike, which would take place the following summer. Our oldest son had grown into a strong young man and was now nearly 6 feet tall and weighed 180 pounds. As we had hoped, he could indeed help us carry the load so that his younger sister and brother could manage their lighter loads.

Having just finished my doctoral studies at Seattle University, I could now direct my research interests to the Wonderland Trail. I read every word of Bette Filley's book on the Wonderland Trail and the June 2006 article on the Wonderland Trail in *Washington Trails*. My husband and I spent hours studying maps of the trail, calculating distances and elevation gains and losses, and pondering the best trip plan for our family. We finally decided to circumnavigate the mountain clockwise, start-

**A family adventure: In 2007, the author and her family decided to trek the 93-mile Wonderland Trail around Mount Rainier.**

## Colleen Ponto

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## Lessons Learned

- Children enjoy hiking when they don't have to hike all day long. A 5-mile day (with an occasional longer day) is plenty for them.
- Pay attention to all the data, especially the weather. Don't ignore data just because you have a goal to accomplish.
- Good tents are key. They must have a good rain fly, and they must be big enough so that your sleeping bags do *not* touch the sides of your tent.
- Bring plenty of trail snacks. We'll bring a lot more chocolate next time!
- Lighten your loads. Our packs weight in at 51, 46, 46, 26, and 24 pounds. We plan to leave at home everything we didn't use last time.

ing at Mowich Lake and completing the hike in fourteen days.

I became a frequent face at the Seattle REI store—learning about gear from their salespeople and shopping every sale. In the seventeen years since we had backpacked, the technology of the gear had changed significantly. I had a lot to learn! Once we had acquired all the necessary equipment, we went on two short backpacking trips that summer—our first with our children—to test our equipment and to determine if we could carry the weight and volume needed for our trip. Both hikes were successful, and completing the Wonderland Trail hike seemed possible.

## Mother Nature Alters Our Plans

In November 2006, a devastating rainstorm washed away many sections of the Wonderland Trail, and our goal of hiking the entire trail the next summer seemed unlikely. We made our campsite reservations and would start our hike at Longmire, head north along the west side and travel clockwise around the mountain for eleven days, finishing at Box Canyon. The southern section of the trail was closed. Even though it wasn't what we had originally planned, we were glad to be able to hike 80 miles of the Wonderland Trail.

## Joys and Challenges On the Trail

### Day One

On August 17, with a mixed weather forecast, we left for Mount Rainier, driving two cars so we could leave one at the start of our hike, and one at the end, at Box Canyon. We stopped along the way to drop off two food caches: one at the Carbon River Ranger Station and the oth-

er at the White River Ranger Station. We spent the night at the National Park Inn and rose the next morning under sunny skies to begin our journey. After a rough start complete with grumpy kids not wanting to go on the hike and a husband nervous about the weather, we started to climb, and soon the complaining lessened and we settled into a peaceful hiking rhythm. As we continued, our focus began to shift from our strenuous work to the beauty of our surroundings. Our ten-year-old began searching for a good hiking stick. Our fourteen-year-old began to notice the big Douglas-fir trees. And our seventeen-year-old took the lead, setting our pace and hiking with ease. My husband stayed near the front of our line while I pulled up the rear, making sure that our youngest two were as happy as could be. After 5.9 miles, five and a half hours, and 2,200 feet in elevation gain, our first camp was a welcome sight. We set up our tent in the forest at Devil's Dream Camp. As we cleaned up after dinner, it started to rain.

### Day Two

The next day, we hiked 6.6 miles from Devil's Dream Camp up to Emerald Ridge and then down to South Puyallup River Camp. We stopped at Uncle Henry's Patrol Cabin to eat our lunch on the porch and out of the rain. Crossing the suspension bridge over the Tahoma River was a scary highlight that the kids enjoyed very much. Our climb up to Emerald Ridge was beautiful, and a marmot greeted us as we reached the top. We couldn't see the mountain as it was shrouded in clouds, but beautiful wildflowers lined the trail. I fell behind as I stopped to take pictures and they were quite annoyed with me when I finally caught up with them. It was nearly 6 p.m. and we still had some distance to travel before dinner and dark.

**Crossing a footbridge. You'll have to be prepared for all sorts of weather and conditions on the Wonderland Trail.**

Photo by Colleen Ponto



## Day Three

On our third day, we climbed 2,000 feet in 4 miles to Klapatchee Park. We hoped for sun, but none came—just rain and more rain. A highlight along the way was a bumper crop of huckleberries along the trail. We stuffed ourselves with the treats, and it took our minds off of the rain. Despite the welcome distraction, I began to worry about keeping my children dry and warm.

## Day Four

We woke up to clearing skies the morning of the fourth day. What a hopeful sight! Our youngest two played with tadpoles while the rest of us packed up our soaking wet gear. We deliberated for 45 minutes about which way to go—continue on to Golden Lakes or head back to Longmire and our car. Both routes were two days away. As we stood there with our packs on, the sun shined brightly, the clouds cleared, and we saw Mount Rainier for the first time. The mountain seemed to call us forward, and we decided to continue our hike, hoping for better weather. An hour after leaving Klapatchee Park, the rain and clouds returned and it was a near whiteout. In no time our spirits sank as we hiked down to the North Puyallup River and then began the ascent up to Golden Lakes. The only highlight of this day was the abundant patches of blueberries along the way. As we set up camp that night and unpacked our sleeping bags, we discovered that one sleeping bag was completely wet and unusable. I shared a sleeping bag with our youngest son. My husband's sleeping bag was wet at the bottom, so he slept curled in a ball to avoid getting his feet wet. Fortunately, the kids' sleeping bags were dry.

## Day Five

I didn't sleep a wink the night before. As I listened to the rain pelt our tent, I recited over and over again, "We're safe, dry, and warm," to keep from panicking. At the first sign of light, I looked over to see my husband studying the map. We rose to a thick fog and rain, quickly ate some granola bars, and broke camp. As we packed up, my husband suggested that we hike back to Longmire. "Absolutely not," I responded. "We must get to Mowich Lake to get our food cache. We can't walk four days back to Longmire without more food." He agreed, and we continued on to Mowich Lake where we could at least replenish our food supply. As we began our descent to the Mowich River, my oldest son suggested that I try to call someone on my cell phone. I didn't tell him that I had been trying my cell phone for the last twelve hours to no avail. I pulled it out and dialed my friend Lisa. Much to my surprise, she answered the phone. I told Lisa that we were struggling, and then I immediately broke into tears and quickly handed the phone to my husband. He explained our situation and made arrangements with Lisa for

her to drive to Mowich Lake and rescue us.

Suddenly, the fears of survival disappeared. We could now enjoy the beautiful 6-mile hike down through the forests to Mowich River and the 4 miles back up to Mowich Lake. What a grind. The only way we made it was because we knew that Lisa would be there for us when we got to the lake. I played the alphabet game and telephone game for hours with the kids to help the miles and time pass away. When we finally arrived at Mowich Lake,

we looked around to see if Lisa was there and didn't see her. So we took pictures and picked up our cache. I decided to check the parking lot again, and there was Lisa sitting in her mud-covered car. "Lisa's here!" I yelled to the others. All three kids came running with big smiles on their faces. Our journey was over.

I had mixed feelings about having to quit our trip halfway, but knew that it was the right decision. We were soaked, and the weather was still socked in. Lisa had brought dry clothes, fresh fruit and cookies for us. After hiking 10.3 miles that day and climbing up 2,300 feet and down 2,420 feet in the rain it felt very good to be sitting in a warm car driving home.

All in all, we hiked 34.5 miles in 5 days, climbing up 10,100 feet and descending 7,470 feet. Even though we were proud of what we had done and learned a lot, I felt as though our mission was not accomplished. As we drove home in Lisa's car, I began to think about the lessons we had learned about hiking with children and what we will do differently the next time. ♦



**In front of Mount Rainier. The adventure took 5 days, climbing 10,100 feet and traversing 34.5 miles.**

Photo by Colleen Ponto

## Take Two

In August 2008, we returned to the Wonderland Trail to continue where we left off last year. When this issue went to press, our plan this year was to hike clockwise from Mowich Lake to Box Canyon, traveling 44 miles in eight days. With new and better equipment, a trip plan more suitable for children, and more chocolate, we look forward to once again experiencing the wonders of the Wonderland Trail. And naturally, we are hoping for good weather. And I am looking forward to hearing, "Mom, look! Look at Mount Rainier!"