

Walking the Idaho Centennial Trail: From the Nevada/Idaho border to Interstate-90

– Dan Styer

When did I become interested in walking long-distance footpaths? I'm not sure. In 1962, when I was seven years old, my family visited Shenandoah National Park and we took a 100-yard-long hike on the Appalachian Trail. By the time I was ten years old, I dreamed of hiking all 2000 miles of the Appalachian Trail. But by the time I was in my 50s the allure of the Appalachian Trail had faded – I wanted something not quite so long (because I wanted to think and to dream and to botanize on trail, not just hurry on to the next campsite in some test of athletic prowess) and at the same time I wanted something considerably wilder. I cast about for challenges and settled on the Idaho Centennial Trail: 880 miles from Nevada to British Columbia. When trail coordinator Leo Hennessy wrote to me that the ICT was “not well-marked and groomed. Expect everything from miles of blow downs to major wash outs.” I thought, “This is exactly the wildness I crave.”

I hiked in May, June, and July of 2013. Here I share only a few of the highlights from that long and fulfilling walk.

Part I: Through the Desert

Day 1, Tuesday, 21 May

How green, how lush, how various and beautiful. Never did I expect the desert to be like this. There is sagebrush and rabbitbrush – yes. And there are no trees: from camp I see about three square miles with one tree – a juniper. But between the sagebrush the dry soil is bright green with grasses and sedges, and spangled with blossoms of many forms and colors and sizes. This reality differs so much from my fears about desert hiking that it's almost comical. To the south, over the dishpan flatness of the desert, hang the snow-covered Jarbidge Mountains of Nevada.

New wildflowers identified: Desert Paintbrush, Spreading Phlox, Sulphur Lupine.
Daily travel: 0.8 mile.

Day 2, Wednesday, 22 May

Last night was cold, with the Big Dipper and Arcturus brilliant.

In this segment, the official (“designated”) Idaho Centennial Trail follows dirt roads through the flat sage desert, but I'm walking off-trail along the east rim of Jarbidge Canyon. The wind blows. The sun shines, but it's chilly – I wear long pants, wool shirt, and a cap. Seven hundred feet below, the two forks of the Jarbidge River merge – I see the white foam over green water and, despite the wind, I hear the water's roar. Occasionally, in the vast gulf of air that is the canyon, a bird of prey flies by.



New wildflowers identified: Fiddle Neck, Silvery Lupine, Western Blue Flax.
Daily travel: 12.3 miles.

Day 3, Thursday, 23 May

For the first time in decades, I see middle-handle star of the Big Dipper as a binary (Mizar and Alcor). The canyon grows deeper and more rugged and more fanciful. Up here on the rim, pronghorn watch me. I am now within the “Jarbidge-Bruneau Rivers Wilderness”, designated by Congress and President Obama in 2009.

Daily travel: 12.2 miles.

Day 4, Friday, 24 May

For three days I’ve touched no water but the six liters I started with on my back. For three nights I’ve had cold dinners because I didn’t dare build a fire on the windy, combustible uplands. For most of these three days I walked the desert east rim of the Jarbidge Canyon, so I could see beautiful green flowing water, but it was seven-hundred or a thousand feet down where I couldn’t get to it!

So when, late in the afternoon, I find a primitive, ill-maintained dirt road leading down a side canyon to the river, I take it. My nose, grown accustomed to the sharpness of desert sagebrush, is overwhelmed by the scents of water and of blooming wild roses. My sensibilities, grown accustomed to solitude, are surprised by two men and three women setting out for a kayak journey downriver. One of them is Evan, the wilderness ranger for this district. I camp in a cottonwood grove by the Bruneau River. (The Jarbidge flows into the Bruneau just a mile upstream.) I pluck a rose blossom, press it into a letter, and will mail it back to my wife Linda, with the message “I enclose a rose, from your beau on the Bruneau.”

New wildflower identified: Scarlet Mallow (Cowboy's Delight).

Daily travel: 10.3 miles.

Day 5, Saturday, 25 May

Morning rest stop on the east rim of the Bruneau Canyon, just south of the north boundary of township 15: The wind blows gently through the sagebrush. A bird sings behind me. In front of me comes the roar of river-over-rock from a thousand feet below. And beyond the canyon, beyond miles of high desert plains, the snow-capped Jarbidge Mountains look precisely as majestic and enormous as they did four days ago.

Afternoon rest stop on north rim of unnamed side canyon north of Stiff Tree Draw: This side canyon is full of cliffs and rock pillars, and also of White-throated Swifts – they startle me as they swoosh by only two yards away.

New wildflower: a cactus.

Daily travel: 13.9 miles.

Day 6, Sunday, 26 May

Cross Clover Creek, at a small grassy Eden in this magnificent but parched land. Since I am hiking in the desert, I crave things cold and wet. While I prepare dinner on the rim of Clover Creek side canyon, a brief hailstorm blows through. My spoon is already out, so I scoop up hailstones and eat them. After dinner come thunder, rain, and wild wind.

Daily travel: 11.0 miles.

Day 7, Monday, 27 May – Memorial Day

Walk up to the official “Bruneau Overlook” about noon, which is also when my 3-liter water bag runs dry. I still have a full 2 liter bag, but it is 15 hot dry miles to the next reliable water source. I am contemplating my options when a Volvo SUV drives up. A woman pops out: “Are you hiking the Idaho Centennial Trail? We listened to a presentation about that at REI. My friend here wants to hike the Pacific Crest Trail. She’s reading blogs about it. Is there anything you need? I can give you granola bars, goldfish crackers, socks, ice cold water, ...” I allow as water of any temperature would

be great. We chat, view the scenery. A ten-year-old boy, Shawn, wakes up in the back seat and joins us. They notice the emergency contact tag on my shoe and ask after Linda.

My benefactors leave with many waves, then several more cars and trucks pull up. It grows too crowded for me, so I walk half a mile north. This will be my last view of the Bruneau for years, if not forever, so I soak up the scenery. Down south much of the canyon wall is a fantasy of vertical pillars, but here there are stately horizontal cliffs, grey-green with a rare horizontal red streak. The river far below is green and inviting, with white waves where it strikes rocks, which is often. As always, the canyon is full of birds: black-and-white swifts, two hawks, but – and this is something I’ve seen only here – there are also flocks of ten or twenty doves flying as a unit. So graceful!



Daily travel: 14.7 miles.

Day 8, Tuesday, 28 May

The land is no longer flat – there are gracefully rounded brown hills dotted with black cattle. I hear a cry from the sky – a brown and white bird with long bill drifts down, lands on a rock, then folds its wings. This is my first sighting of this species. Aldo Leopold writes (in “Back from the Argentine”) of the upland plover: “Whoever invented the word ‘grace’ must have seen the wing-folding of the plover.” The species is now called Upland Sandpiper, and that’s what I’ve just seen.

Daily travel: 13.1 miles.

Day 9, Wednesday, 29 May

At night I see Scorpio and Antares, seven satellites and two meteors. In the morning I walk on roads and cross the Snake River, where I see a string of a dozen white pelicans, skimming just above the water. In the tiny community of Hammett, I purchase an ice cream sandwich and pick up my food packet from the post office.

Then north on a road away from town! I walk out of the Snake River gorge wearing running shorts and tee-shirt. A cold wind stirs, sleet flies, and I put on long pants, wool shirt, and windbreaker. Within half an hour I reach camp within a windmill farm, and stretch out to nap in the hot air. I am doing camp chores in the warm sun when it starts to sprinkle in the sunshine.

The windmills are mesmerizing: enormous, white, slowly but constantly rotating.

Daily travel: 13.7 miles.

Day 10, Thursday, 30 May

From a letter to Linda:

I'm sitting here on a rock rise. The wind is incessant. To the north are hills broken by brown cliffs in the form of giant pillars. The ground is scattered with slabs of the same brown rock, and brown grass tosses in the wind between the rocks. The map indicates a hot spring in the valley to the east, and sure enough occasional steam clouds issue from that valley. To the south is a steep dropoff to the Snake River valley, and the view brings to mind only one word: "vast". I see sagebrush steppe, irrigated field, windmill farm, the gorge of the Snake River, then more steppe until, off on the horizon, hang the same Jarbidge Mountains of Nevada that I saw on my very first day. This scene is so different from our humane, well-watered, green Wolf Run Nature Preserve that it might be on a different planet.

And yet.

At the base of the rock on which I sit is a wildflower. I've never seen its species before, but it's in the same family as the Appendaged Waterleaf that must be blooming right now across from our mailbox at home. My heart stretches, on wings of waterleaf, from here to you at home!

End of extract from letter.

Daily travel: 15.5 miles.

Day 11, Friday, 31 May

Walk up a gravel road following the Little Canyon Creek. Find forests of quaking aspen. For ten days I have seen no forests, and these seem so inviting and friendly. I wonder how our forefathers, crossing on the Oregon Trail, felt?

New wildflower identified: Rocky Mountain Iris.
Daily travel: 13.8 miles.

Day 12, 1 June 2013

Hot day, all of it along roads.

New wildflower identified: Common Camas.
Daily travel: 12.0 miles.

Part II: Sawtooth Mountains

Day 13, Sunday, 2 June

Very early this morning – perhaps 3:00 am – I wake up and poke my head out of the tent. The Milky Way sweeps across the sky dramatically: I see clearly where splits into two forks to the right of Cygnus. Directly overhead is Vega. I see a satellite, and a meteor. I check all the hills around: nowhere can I find a man-made light.

Walk and encounter Camas marshes. Camas is a deep blue wild lily with a bulb that sustained Lewis and Clark when their provisions ran out. (Sacajawea showed them how to eat it.) Find Wild Hyacinth, Redwing Blackbirds, yellow warblers. Then ... Sandhill Crane! Two of them, in brown-grey coloring, trying to divert me from their nest with trumpet calls and clattering.

In camp on the North Fork of Lime Creek: I know I've been overusing the adjective "vast", but I need it just one more time. I cooked myself a vast pot of pasta, covered it with mountains of freshly grated parmesan, and ate it with a tomato paste sauce. Superb!

New wildflowers identified: Wild Hyacinth, Water Crowfoot.
Daily travel: 8.7 miles.

Day 14, Monday, 3 June

I take the day to relax and recuperate in this well-watered campsite. Saw motorized trail bikers both yesterday and today, but so far I've seen no other hikers at all this trip.

New wildflower identified: Sand Spurry.
Daily travel: 0.0 miles.

Day 15, Tuesday, 4 June

John Muir wrote: “We are now in the mountains and they are in us, kindling enthusiasm, making every nerve quiver, filling every pore and cell of us.” I feel the same way today. I loved the desert, especially the four days when I bushwhacked on the canyon rim, but never in the desert did I feel every nerve quiver.

Today I walk up the North Fork of Lime Creek on real, single-track trail – not even the most primitive road. Up, and up, and up. From sagebrush dotted with occasional pine, to solid pine, to spruce dotted with aspen, to alpine meadows. A long haul! The trail fords the North Fork dozens of times – I’m glad I took yesterday as a rest day. I camp near expansive views.

New wildflowers identified: Blue-eyed Mary, Plains Larkspur, Few-flowered Solomonplume, Sugar Bowls, Sierra Corydalis, Ballhead Waterleaf, Nuttall's Violet, Arrowleaf Balsamroot, Yellowbells.

Daily travel: 8.4 miles.

Day 16, Wednesday, 5 June

Midday I leave my pack and try soaking in a hot spring. Not entirely successful: the water is either too hot or too cold. When I go back to my pack, I find a one-year-old Golden Eagle wheeling in the air above.

New wildflowers identified: Many-flowered Solomonplume, Dragonhead, Crimson Columbine, Golden Smoke, Golden Cryptantha, False Forget-me-not, White Woodland Star, Red Fairy Trumpet, Bracted Alumroot.

Daily travel: 10.5 miles.

Day 17, Thursday, 6 June

Hike up Willow Creek. Round a curve and see a bear, just 20 yards away! We each stop and watch the other for a few seconds, then he turns and bounds away so quickly that he raises dust. See six trail bikers and have a nice conversation with one.

Keep climbing. At 8500 feet encounter snowbanks! Delicious to eat, but I lose the trail in the snowbanks. Find it again. Find lots of early spring wildflowers. Lose trail again. In absence of visible trail, just walk in the direction “where the trail ought to go”. At 5:00 pm, achieve crest of pass at 9200 feet.

Need to get down to warmer territory to sleep. With no hope of following trail, I just go down the snowbank. Exhilarating, and fun! Get back down under treeline, find a lake (mostly frozen). Have to cross a stream or two, which is delicate. Once, left leg plunges all the way down into a snowbank – right ankle left behind is sprained. Fortunately, I cross just one more stream before finding bare ground between snowbanks, and the trail.

Make camp, pull on socks and long johns and jacket and cap, and spend the night in relative comfort – not once do my teeth chatter.

New wildflowers identified: Meadow Rue, Phlox, Tall Chiming Bells, Tansy Mustard, Longhorn Steershead, Nuttall Gilia, Goosefoot Violet, Pink Woodland Star, Shooting Star, Western Spring Beauty, Globeflower, Marsh Marigold, Snow Buttercup.

Daily travel: 8.2 miles.

Day 18, Friday, 7 June

Morning: Put my extra knee brace on my right ankle. Go to meadow for mountain view, see two weasel-like animals with black masks. Walk down trail – slow and painful. See two elk.

Afternoon: Warm and sunny, ankle pain less acute. While fording South Fork of Ross Fork, I fall in and am swept downstream 20 or 30 yards. Emerge with nothing worse than bruised toes. I and my equipment dry out quickly in the bright sun. Still, it was stupid of me. I must be more cautious.

Evening: Warm, pleasant campsite at 6700 feet.

These Sawtooth Mountains are the most impressively sublime of any I've ever seen. They have sharp peaks, serrated ridges, snow fields, wildflower meadows, wildlife, waterfalls, rushing streams, deep forests – all the things scenic mountains are *supposed* to have!

New wildflowers identified: Waterplantain Buttercup, Snowbed Draba, Sandlily.
Daily travel: 4.8 miles.

Day 19, Saturday, 8 June

Climb up North Fork of Ross Fork. Scenery, deer, wildflowers, and, near 8500 feet, snow. This pass tops out at 8581 feet, but still the trail is lost under snowbanks. Despite their splendor, I decline to take the ICT through the Sawtooths (where the maximum elevation would be 8895 feet) and will instead take a much lower route east of the mountains, using mostly back roads but some trails and some main roads.

New wildflowers identified: Mountain Parsley, Snowline Spring Parsley.
Daily travel: 5.1 miles.

Day 20, Sunday, 9 June

My way down from the pass to the low eastern route takes me past two women day-hiking with their dog ... the first hikers I've met in my 20 days on trail! I also meet a

mountain biker (another first) and two riders on a single trail bike, who call me “really hard core”.

I camp on Vat Creek in the Stanley Basin – it’s quite flat. Directly in front of me is a meadow blooming in yellow, white, and pink. Behind me Vat Creek bubbles happy through its fringe of willow bushes. Further out are sagebrush prairies – earlier today I had seen three pronghorn, but now there are none. Birds fill the air: black ones, yellow ones. And a few miles off, in all directions, are the mountains: fringed in conifers, topped with snow, as dramatic as any mountains I’ve ever seen in person or in pictures.

New wildflowers identified: American Bistort, White Mules Ear, Pigmy Bitterroot, Senecio, Wild Candytuft, Burnt-orange Dandelion, Pussytoes, Pink Plumes.
Daily travel: 10.5 miles.

Day 21, Monday, 10 June

Morning: I feel hot and dirty. I’m due into town (Stanley) tomorrow, and I like to be reasonably clean for towns. I find an irrigation ditch, take off my clothes, bathe, wash some clothes, then come out. Two pronghorn had come by to watch me bathe naked!

New wildflower identified: Rosey Pussytoes.
Daily travel: 14.5 miles.

Day 22, Tuesday, 11 June

Resupply in the town of Stanley, Idaho. It is a trying four miles walking to Stanley along the paved Idaho route 75. But on the other hand I walk also beside the rushing Salmon River, and behind me are the magnificent Sawtooths. An osprey flies over.

Once in Stanley I go to a river outfitter for a pair of gloves and two pairs of socks, then to a convenience store for postcards for my boys, then to the post office to pick up food and supplies mailed by Linda. Finally to “Highway 21 Diner” for a Ruben with a side Caesar salad, and for dessert, apple chimichanga with ice cream.

The most direct route would be to walk north on Idaho route 21 until it intersects the ICT, but I have enough time that I will take the “Alpine Way Trail” looping into the northern Sawtooth Wilderness. So I’ll see at least a bit of the interior of these famous mountains.

I walk with my now-massive pack – ugh! – up to the Iron Creek Trail, where I camp in a grassy, open pine forest. Lupine, not yet in bloom, is scattered through the grass. Close by is a bed of pink shooting-star, one of the most beautiful of all wildflowers. I love the scientific name: “Dodecatheon” – twelve gods.

Daily travel: 10.5 miles.

Day 23, Wednesday, 12 June

The Sawtooths are famous for their high mountain tarns, all of which I have missed due to the snow. So I walk 1.5 miles out of my way (3.0 miles round trip) to view Alpine Lake. It is a magnificent walk to a magnificent view of a magnificent lake. There is no possible way for me to describe it.

It's a popular trip, too. Recall that, as of this morning, on my whole trip I had seen two hikers – a pair of women on the trail above Alturas Lake on day 20. Today, while hiking up to the lake, I see a wilderness runner (male), then three high-school age women, then a pair of women in their forties. I begin to wonder where all the men in Idaho are. But on my way back down I meet a couple in early retirement age and half-an-hour later another such couple. Still no other backpackers.

I carry a lot of food and walking is hard. So I wear two pairs of socks, and I eat as much as I can – which is easy!

New wildflowers identified: Eriogonum, Valerian (dense-clustered flowers).
Daily travel: 3.5 miles.

Day 24, Thursday, 13 June

A perfectly flat meadow blooms dense with Slender Blue Penstemon. Beyond the meadow stands a tall wall of conifers. And beyond the conifers, McGown Peak – steep, craggy, shiny-granite, patched with snow – thrusts up three thousand feet. It is the most beautiful mountain scene I've ever witnessed, a sight worth walking 200 miles to see, and, in fact, that's how far I've walked to see it. But the meadow is in truth only half a mile of easy walking from Inlet Campground on the Stanley Lake Road. To whoever reads this: regardless of how frail or aged you are, you should see it too.



People seen today: An older couple mountain biking (the last mountain bikers I will see on my entire trek), a still older couple walking, a pair of trail bikers, and a USFS trail crew of one young man and two young women. Outside of trail-bikers, women are still way ahead in the Idaho outdoors!

I camp at the edge of Elk Meadow – more than a dozen acres of flat, grassy ground. While cooking dinner, I hear strange sounds from the meadow: elk? deer? other? After dinner I look out and find two cranes making all those various sounds.

New wildflowers identified: Slender Blue Penstemon, Wild Strawberry,
Northern Green Bog-orchid, Broomrape.

Daily travel: 7.1 miles.

Day 25, Friday, 14 June

Waken to snow on the ground! I am on a gravel road about noon when I arrive at a meadow and spread my wet tarps to dry. I hear a crane, but also see a bird flying erratically. If I were in Ohio I would call it a woodcock. I walk on and a woman in an SUV stops to chat. She has the *Sibley Field Guide to Western Birds* on her dash, so I borrow it and look up my bird: Wilson's Snipe. When we part, the driver tells me to (1) stay safe and (2) keep in mind the spiritual as well as the safety aspects of my hike.

The meadow extends for miles, and the birder tells me that the Camas are at their peak. Indeed, I find three to four acre fields of intensely blue Camas. They stretch out to green meadow, then conifers, then snow-capped peaks. I take several photos, but none will convey the true beauty and majesty and, yes, spirituality of these meadows.



Today is the first day since my ankle sprain on day 17 that I have felt *really* confident and happy about stretching my legs out and walking with gusto.

New wildflowers identified: Salsify, Yellow Stemless Evening Primrose,
Valerian (open-panicled flowers).

Daily travel: 13.1 miles.

Part III: Watery Wilderness

Growing up in Pennsylvania, I always associated wilderness with mountains, and hence with dryness. If you're on the top of a Pennsylvania ridge, you're lucky to find a stream two feet wide. So I am astonished to find, in Idaho, big wildernesses laced with big rivers.

Day 26, Saturday, 15 June

Yesterday's Camas meadow held the headwaters of Marsh Creek. Today, that creek has grown into the Middle Fork of the Salmon River: a hundred feet wide, deep, clear green, twisting between cliff and mountain.

Meet my first backpackers! Walk to boundary of Frank Church Wilderness, then into the Wilderness a bit where I breakfast. Meet first a couple day hiking, then a couple backpacking, then a string of seven boy scouts and six leaders, backpacking.

New wildflowers identified: Leafy Cinquefoil, Gold Buttons, Cryptantha, Collomia, Western Wallflower, Rockcress, Northern Golden Columbine, Purple Fritillaria, Common Alumroot.

Daily travel: 14.0 miles.

Day 27, Sunday, 16 June

A kayaker paddles to river's edge on Middle Fork and gets out. I ask him whether it was hard to learn kayaking. He says it's like learning to bicycle: At first you fall a lot, but then it clicks and becomes second nature. I notice that he has one artificial foot.

New wildflowers identified: False Salsify, Mouse-ear Chickweed, Mariposa Lily, Yellow Penstemon, Western Jacobs Ladder, One-leaved Orchid (white), White Bog-orchid, Brook Saxifrage, Bishops Cap, Yellow Monkeyflower.

Daily travel: 8.7 miles.

Day 28, Monday, 17 June

In any long backpacking trip, a time comes when you find yourself becoming part of nature, rather than "above" or "outside of" nature. You grow quiet and calm. You start to smell like the woods and not like soap. You can tell this is happening when, while you're resting, birds come *toward* you. This began happening to me a week or so ago. Today it reaches a new level: a butterfly lands on my nose and tries to extract nectar.

Ford of Elkhorn Creek: The water is fast, two feet deep, ten yards wide. I use a stout stick as "third leg" – without it I would have been knocked over. Moments after fording, a voice calls from the far side: a woman on a horse with a dog. After a prod her horse walks across (considerably more easily than I had). The dog wades for a while, then swims the rest. Idaho women are still ahead of men in the outdoors department.

Evening: I sit with my back to a big granite block. To my left is the Middle Fork of the Salmon River, clear and green as always, dotted with white foam at rocks as always. It's about 50 yards wide, and on the far side the ground rises steeply in either cliff or talus slope. To my right there's a little flat land growing grass and pine and spruce. Also about 50 yards wide, and then the right side rises steeply in cliff or talus slope. My tent is just a little in front and to my right. The sun is just setting at the ridge in front of me, and it fills the pines and spruce with golden light. Dancing in the sunlight are winged insects, each about one centimeter long, sparkling in the golden light as they circle over and over again. The whole thing is mesmerizingly beautiful.

New wildflowers identified: Cow Parsnip, Indian Balsam, Spreading Hemp,
Dusty Maiden, Golden Aster, Yellow Stonecrop, Sheep Sorrel,
Whitestem Fräsera, Mountain Hollyhock, Broad-leaved Fireweed, Coralroot.
Daily travel: 12.1 miles.

Day 29, Tuesday, 18 June

Last night I poked my head out of the tent and saw the International Space Station pass overhead.

The Middle Fork here is perhaps 80 yards wide and 10 feet deep, yet clear enough that individual stones on its bed are readily visible.



New wildflowers identified: Indian Hemp, Fireweed.
Daily travel: 11.8 miles.

Day 30, Wednesday, 19 June

The trail leaves the Middle Fork and starts ascending Marble Creek.

New wildflowers identified: Lewis's Mock-orange, Rock Clematis.
Daily travel: 8.9 miles.

Day 31, Thursday, 20 June

I'm now deep in the heart of the Frank Church Wilderness Area – the largest in the 48 states – almost twice the size of Delaware. Since entering at Boundary Creek four days ago, I've seen one horsewoman and many floaters, but I'm the only hiker. And since leaving the Middle Fork yesterday afternoon, I've seen no one.

Forded Marble Creek seven times today. My stick broke on the second ford and I toppled into the water. No harm done, but I was certainly upset with myself. Immediately after the third ford I stop to dry my socks and shoes and feet and nature guides and everything else that got wet in that spill. While drying I watch the rushing water. There, on a rock in the middle of the creek, is an American Dipper. It does numerous bobs (or “curtsies” or “deep knee bends”) – a characteristic of the species and the origin of its name. Once it flies from its rock into the water, but then rushes back out. I searched for American Dipper throughout my Colorado Trail hike last summer, without success.

New wildflowers identified: Mountain Forget-me-not, Catchfly, Brittons Skullcap,
Twisted-stalk, Bog Pyrola.
Daily travel: 7.6 miles.

Day 32, Friday, 21 June

A hard day today. Forded Marble Creek dozens of times. Found a good fording stick and carried it with me, rather than search for a new stout stick at each crossing. The single mile from Trail Creek to Grays Creek is so poorly maintained that it requires half the day. I keep telling myself “You can’t get lost as long as you follow the creek.” True, but walking through alder thickets is slow and difficult and demoralizing.

Despite the difficulty, Marble Creek is one of the most beautiful places I’ve ever been. Two Spotted Sandpipers execute (in Sibley’s words) “an exaggerated bobbing motion”.

New wildflowers identified: Lanceleaf Chiming Bells, Mountain Harebell, Milkvetch,
Lavender Scorpion Weed, Red Monkeyflower.
Daily travel: 5.7 miles.

Day 33, Saturday, 22 June

Eight days ago I passed the headwaters of Marsh Creek. I followed Marsh Creek downstream until it merged with Bear Valley Creek to become the Middle Fork of the Salmon River. I followed the Middle Fork downstream until it joined Marble Creek. I followed Marble Creek upstream until, today, it shrank almost to nothing, then I climbed up Lookout Mountain Ridge. I’ve listened to the roar of water for so long that the silence of the woods here seems intensely pure.

Last night there was a cold rain, my tent got dirty and I was feeling low. This morning started with grey skies and more cold fords of Marble Creek, which didn’t improve my spirits. But then the clouds started to part. I saw my first (and, it would turn out, only) Pika of the trip – he had a mouthful of Yarrow. I found “Small-flowered Miterwort”, a plant I’ve looked for throughout my Colorado and Idaho hikes. Each petal has 3 lobes, and I like to think that it was saving itself for day 33 of my hike. It got to be so easy to ford Marble Creek that I left my trusty fording stick for some other hiker to use.

New wildflowers identified: Small-flowered Miterwort, Beargrass.
Daily travel: 8.5 miles.

Day 34, Sunday, 23 June

I am walking the trail along Lookout Mountain Ridge when I hear a voice behind me: “You must be Dan.” It was Stephan, a 43-year-old long-distance backpacker who, like me, is thru-hiking the Idaho Centennial Trail this summer. He knew my name through reading my trail register entries. We walk together and have a wonderful time talking about hiking and life. He lives in Jackson, Wyoming, and has long experience hiking in the Teton and Wind River Ranges.



As we approach our campsite on Monumental Creek, we hear wolves howl.

For Stephan’s view of his hike, visit

http://postholer.com/journal/viewJournal.php?event_id=1687

Daily travel: 9.0 miles.

Day 35, Monday, 24 June

Stephan is faster than me, but he's slowing down and I'm speeding up so that we can spend the day together. We enjoy each other's company, but I notice few new wildflowers, do no yoga or stretching, and am *bushed* at the end of the day.

We meet a trail crew of three, and Stephan and I thank them personally.

Many ticks. It's good to travel with Stephan, as we check each other's backs.

New wildflower identified: Monument Plant.

Daily travel: 16.4 miles.

Day 36, Tuesday, 25 June

We camped last night on a flat area beside Big Creek. (Such areas are called "flats" in Ohio but "bars" in Idaho, and this particular one is "Hard Boil Bar".) Big Creek itself is extraordinary! Not a creek, but a big, clear, rushing wilderness river, close in between rocky cliffs. Our campsite is particularly dramatic. At night, I wake up and peer out of my tent. The cliff across Big Creek is immense. A cloud illuminated by the moon takes up most of the rest of the sky. The whole thing looks like an Ansel Adams print.

This morning, after a little more conversation, Stephan walks out of camp first. A mile after I leave camp, my right leg hurts sharply. I take tylenol, rest, and worry. After half an hour's rest I walk on, paying special attention to yoga and stretching, and the leg never bothers me again.

Rain on-and-off after 5:00 pm.

New wildflowers identified: Many-flowered Puccoon, Starwort,
Northern Pink Wild Geranium.

Daily travel: 7.0 miles.

Day 37, Wednesday, 26 June

A long haul this morning up Sliver Creek, with many crossings and wet feet. But it was raining anyway. I top out into the legendary Chamberlain Basin, of relatively modest rolling hills, where the walking is far easier.

New wildflowers identified: American Monkshood, White Hawkweed,
Small Death Camas, Bog-orchid.

Daily travel: 12.7 miles.

Day 38, Thursday, 27 June

Stop by at the historic Chamberlain Basin Ranger Station, where the ranger gives me ginger ale and food from his backpacking cache. I look around the work shed (which holds the food cache), ask a few questions, and depart. My step into the work shed marks the first time I have been within a building since Stanley, 16 days ago. It feels funny.

New wildflowers identified: Curled Lousewort, Golden Banner, White Wild Geranium.
Daily travel: 12.4 miles.

Day 39, Friday, 28 June

From a letter to Linda:

I've been walking, my love, through a dense, wet, high elevation spruce forest. The flora is extraordinarily rich: trillium, violets, shooting-stars, windflower, marsh marigold. Through all my walking in Colorado and Idaho, I've been looking for Avalanche Lily. Today I found it – in abundance. But my most exciting find is this one:

I was walking along the trail when I came to one of many trees blown down across it. It was small, and I just stepped over it. Then I thought to myself “You shouldn't just step over it. It's small enough that you can throw it off the trail, and then future hikers won't have to step over it.” When I did so, I noticed a small snowbank in that direction.

Now, since my hike through the desert, I've craved icy treats. I walked off the trail, scooped up a handful of old, cold snow, and ate it down.

That's when I noticed a new wildflower: A stem two or three inches tall, three flowers each half an inch across, five to seven slender petals, then a starburst of stamens at the center. No discernible leaves (or leaves basil only and not obviously connected to flowers). Not grand or spectacular, but lovely and intimate. I never would have found them had I not tossed off that blow down, or had I not craved icy treats.

When John Muir was 28 years old, he described a similar find “far in the depths of the very wildest of Canadian dark woods, near those high, cold, moss-covered swamps.” He found the orchid “Calypso” and wrote that “I felt as if I were in the presence of superior beings who loved me and beckoned me to come. I sat down beside them and wept for joy.” I am neither of an era nor a personality quite so emotional, so I didn't cry, but I think I felt as Muir did.

End of extract from letter.

The wildflower is Idaho Goldthread (*Coptis occidentalis*). The photo below is not mine, because I downloaded a photo far superior to the one I took.



Another nature story from that high, cold spruce forest: I hear a single note, slurred, then the same note repeated with a slightly mechanical, metallic tone. At first I think it a bird call, but then that metallic tone make me think it might come from an insect, but then it could have come from a mammal, also. During my trek I would hear this sound several times, always in high, deep forests, and I began thinking of it as the “bird, beast, or bee buzz”. The mystery was resolved on day 54.

From this cold, snowy woods at elevation 7000 feet, I switchback down to a hot, dry prairie at 2600 feet along the Salmon River. Near the end of this long descent, after I had drunk all my water and was feeling under the weather due to heat, the trail led from the hot, dry, sunny prairie down a slope right to Little Trout Creek. I drank and I drank. Only then did I notice my surroundings: Trees and shrubs and wildflowers instead of parched grass. Butterflies filled the air! Two birds swept by too fast for me to identify. And I was sitting opposite a giant western Lady Fern. Enchanted place! – Enchanted by water. (“If there is magic on this planet, it is contained in water.” – Loren Eiseley)

Finally, I camp in a grassy, open Ponderosas Pine forest. I set up my tent, but sleep on the pine duff outside, without benefit even of a ground sheet (because the ground sheet is under the tent). How splendid a day!

New wildflowers identified: Avalanche Lily, Western Trillium, Roundleaf Violet, Twinflower, Windflower, Western Wood Anemone, Idaho Goldthread, Small-flowered Miterwort (pink), Whiskbroom Parsley, Ballhead Sandwort, a native Clover, Leafy Jacobs Ladder, Clarkia, Grand Collomia.

Daily travel: 16.9 miles.

Day 40, Saturday, 29 June

A highly social day along the Salmon River.

My campsite last night was less than 100 yards from the historic Campbell's Ferry Ranch. I walk through the ranch and three men from the guest cabin call to me: "Stephan said you'd be coming." They offer breakfast, and how can any hiker refuse food? I eat three pancakes, three sausages, two eggs, and two slices of day-old cake. Ranch owners Doug and Phyllis Tims come down and, through a grand conversation, I learn much about the history of these individuals, of this ranch, and of this wilderness.

I cross the suspension bridge to the north side of the Salmon River, then walk upstream. In three miles I meet the owner of Whitewater Ranch, Kathy Shotwell, who offers me Stephan's left-over food. (There is far too much of it for me to carry it all.) And she gives me two cookies and two glasses of lemonade *with ice*.

Walk up the Salmon – a beautiful wide wilderness river. There are many river float parties, some with dogs. (Each dog wears a life vest!) It grows hotter and hotter, so I drink more and more water. At one spot I step from the trail down to the river, strip off all my clothes, and take my first full-immersion bath in 40 days. There are no words to describe how good this feels. In the parched air and warm sun, I dry off quickly.

Finally I arrive at Rattlesnake Bar. The ICT leaves the Salmon River here and heads steep uphill. I want to climb this slope in the cool of the morning, so I camp here. At the riverside I wash pot and self. The majestic river flows between craggy walls. A hummingbird flies over the river. A waterfall enters on the opposite side. Tranquil beauty.

New wildflower identified: Rayless Coneflower.

Daily travel: 14.4 miles.

Day 41, Sunday, 30 June

Steep climb (5000 feet in 3.5 miles) on the way to Sheep Hill Lookout, with snowbanks and alpine flowers. Lookout views down to two lakes and south as far as the Chamberlain Basin. The afternoon holds *lovely* fields of wildflowers: avalanche lily, buttercups, shooting-star, wind flower, etc., etc. I am admiring them when Stephan comes up behind me! I passed him without knowing it when he spent a night at Yellow Pine Ranch on the Salmon River. We camp together tonight, and will split tomorrow

morning. Hordes of mosquitoes at camp, so both of us are “trapped” inside our mosquito-netting tents.

As of this evening I’ve been 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness.

New wildflowers identified: Purple Fringe, Pink Mountain Heath.
Daily travel: 11.2 miles.

Day 42, Monday, 1 July

Walk out of the Frank Church Wilderness and along the gravel Magruder Corridor road.

Daily travel: 5.9 miles.

Day 43, Tuesday, 2 July

My brother Bill (who lives in Idaho) arrives on the Magruder Corridor with food and socks for resupply, letters, his friend Rick, pizza, salad greens, peas from his garden, and (my requested item) a watermelon. I eat heartily but there is too much good stuff – I have to throw up.

The three of us walk north a few miles and camp. Rick has multiple sclerosis, but does a good job walking. He talks about his favorite bird songs and wildflowers. Stunning sunset.

Daily travel: 3.9 miles.

Day 44, Wednesday, 3 July

Bill and Rick go back to Bill’s truck; I continue north. The trail is poorly maintained and I lose it in a burnt area. That sends me to a stream with many ferns and wildflowers, then to the grassy summit of a knob, then down the deep conifer forest on the knob’s west slope. I am looking for the trail, feeling very small and very far from anything at all, when I see three mushroom pickers, Hispanic men perhaps 18 to 20 years old. Apparently only one speaks English, but he says they were going “back to the road, just follow us.” I find one morel while following, but he finds dozens. When we cross the trail, I stop following them and start following the trail. It goes through extensive wildflower meadows, then crosses a creek and makes its way into a woods.

New wildflowers identified: Queenscup, Cornhusk Lily, American Monkshood (white),
Little Red Elephant, Willowherb, Ladies-tresses.
Daily travel: 8.1 miles.

Day 45, Thursday, 4 July Day – Independence Day

An old-growth forest, with Ponderosa Pine eight feet around and straight as an arrow.

A single ripe wild strawberry.

A cool vale with two-yard-wide prancing stream bordered by fir and wildflowers and ferns and mosses. I eat my Independence Day meal there on a mossy boulder.

New wildflowers identified: Hemlock Parsley, Pearly Everlasting, Pipsissewa,
British Columbia Wild Ginger, American Trail-plant.

Daily travel: 12.6 miles.

Day 46, Friday, 5 July

Toward evening I walk through a recently burnt area. In regular forest you can hardly see a dozen yards, but in burnt forest you can see for miles. I look up to check my location – and find four antlered elk walking in a line. A moist sandbank nearby holds Stephan's footprints, and also wolf footprints. I'm now within the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness – the second largest in the 48 states – larger than the state of Delaware.

New wildflower identified: Meadowsweet.

Daily travel: 10.8 miles.

Day 47, Saturday, 6 July

Hard day. Due to poor mapping I walk down the wrong trail for about a mile before retracing my footsteps. Then due to poor trail maintenance I lose the trail in a meadow, and when I find it again I think at first that I've found the wrong trail.

Yet at one point I look across a wildflower meadow, then down cliffs to an alpine tarn (with the unfortunate name of “Bitch Lake”) and then off 20 or 30 miles to the Bitterroot Mountains on the horizon. Bliss.



New wildflower identified: Porter Lovage.
Daily travel: 8.2 miles.

Day 48, Sunday, 7 July

The Selway River holds near-mythic status with me. It was one of only eight rivers protected under the original Wild and Scenic Rivers Act on 2 October 1968. (Today more than 200 rivers are so protected.) Two times, Bill and I backpacked in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness hoping to get as far as the Selway, but we never did.

Today, at last, I reach the Selway. It's a big, deep, clear green river, wonderful in voice and scent, with lots of white water. It's bordered sometimes by cliffs, sometimes by hills of green conifers.



New wildflowers identified: Sweet Cicely, Tall False Dandelion, Heart-leaved Arnica, Brookcress, Miner's Lettuce, Mountain Boykinia, False Bugbane, Western Rattlesnake-orchid, Pinedrops, Venus Looking-glass.
Daily travel: 12.1 miles.

Day 49, Monday, 8 July

Walk north away from the Selway on Sixtytwo Ridge. Stunning views west to the Selway Crags. Trail was recently and superbly cleared, so I have great going until I reach the end of the trail crew's work, where it becomes a nightmare of blowdowns, washouts, and brush. I get lost and follow a bootleg trail off the ridge, because the bootleg trail is a lot clearer than the USFS trail. It is actually a nice walk, with a marmot, wildflower meadows, and, at the end, a delicious spring of cold water surrounded by giant ferns. But it takes a lot of time and effort to regain the ridge. I feel foolish.

New wildflowers identified: Yampa, Giant Angelica, Triangle-leaved Senecio, Goldenrod, Climbing Vetch.
Daily travel: 11.7 miles.

Day 50, Tuesday, 9 July

Continue north on difficult trail. On one of the many blowdowns there is a paper note attached! It is, of course, from Stephan. He says he had reached that point, gone a quarter mile farther and lost the trail – again. He was going back to the Selway River, with its well-maintained trail. He sounded discouraged: “Moose Ridge kicked my butt.”

I am sure that I can do better. I walk a quarter mile. The trail disappears in brush. The trees are all dead, so brush grows everywhere. Blowdowns are every 50 feet, the treadway is washed out. There seems no prospect for improvement farther down along the trail. If I get lost – one tiny hiker within this immense wilderness – it will require major effort to rescue me ... *if* I am rescued. I have promised Linda not to be stupid. I turn back for the Selway myself.

My mind runs through schemes for salvaging my hike despite the disruption: Can I take trail 693 as an alternative? I try it and that trail vanishes too. Perhaps use the trail that passes near Chimney Peak and Old Man Lake? No, I’d run out of food. Can I walk on roads from Selway Falls to Wilderness Gateway? No, that route would be even longer. Through Elk Summit? Doesn’t connect to ICT northbound. I could get someone (Bill?) to drive me on roads from Selway Falls to Wilderness Gateway, but that would break the continuity I prize. I think more. I’m tired of the biting flies, of the blowdowns, of the heat. I decide to quit my hike.

And once I make that decision, I feel great! As I walk south back to the Selway, without the pressure of trying to make it to Canada, I notice wildflowers and scenic views that I had missed going north. A hummingbird sips nectar from a columbine, then a second hummingbird arrives and the two have an aerial dispute. The air is alive with bees.

I’m glad I attempted the ICT, but I’m glad to be stopping, too. I will never regret walking that last quarter mile, even though it took me no closer to Canada, because on that last quarter mile I saw and smelled wild azalea in bloom.

Daily travel: 8.7 miles.

Day 51, Wednesday, 10 July

I walk down the Selway River. With each tributary the river grows, not only in volume and grandeur, but also in beauty.

Five years ago, before a trip to the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, Bill was talking with a friend who is an entomologist. The friend said “If you see any white-assed bees, capture a specimen for me.” We saw none. But last night I *did* see one! And this morning, as I wash socks and pot in the Selway, I see a horsefly coming for me. I slap it before it can bite me, but then it stings me in retribution. No horsefly, it’s a white-assed bee! (Mostly black, but white marks on face, and the last three segments pure white.) Later in the day,

I was walking when a horsefly began buzzing me. Then a white-assed bee as well! Suddenly, the bee attacked the horsefly, and carried it off on the wing! (The species would turn out to be bald-faced hornet, *Dolichovespula maculata*.)

Met a couple in their 50s, Alan and Birgitt, backpacking in to spend a few days camped at one sandy bar on the Selway. Alan had been the first graduate student mentored by Carlo Rubbia, a physicist went on to win the Nobel Prize, but he abandoned physics in favor of first psychology and then computer programming.

Daily travel: 12.0 miles.

Day 52, Thursday, 11 July

Camped in a small grove of Western Red Cedar, and dreamed of the scent of cedar.

Walk to the end of the Selway River Trail and then down the gravel Selway River Road. Arrive at Selway Falls, a rapid that I had chosen as the symbolic end of my hike, and start hitchhiking. Walk several miles more (to west of Twentyfive Mile Bar) before I catch a ride. During those miles I decide to remain on the trail. My reasoning: If I quit now I'll never have the opportunity to hike the ICT again, but if I keep on hiking I'll have plenty of opportunities to quit again. My brother Bill is scheduled to come tomorrow with food resupply, and I'll just have him pick me up at the Three Rivers Campground in Lowell and drive me around the impenetrable section of trail.

The first vehicle driving down the Selway River Road picks me up and takes me to Three Rivers. I spend the afternoon eating at the café, showering, swimming, hot-tubbing, washing clothes, trimming mustache, and eating ice cream sandwiches.

New wildflower identified: Blanket Flower.

Daily travel: 6.0 miles.

Day 53, Friday, 12 July

Bill and his friend Donald pick me up. We drive to Wilderness Gateway campground and trailhead, then walk toward Stanley Hot Springs, one of Bill's favorite places. We ford Boulder Creek and enter a rich old-growth forest of fir with a ground cover of twinflower, bunchberry, and foamflower. At the hot springs we soak, eat, and camp.

New wildflowers identified: Bouncing Bet, Filaree, Phantom Orchid, Bunchberry,
One-leaf Foamflower.

Daily travel: 4.7 miles.

Day 54, Saturday, 13 July

One more soak, then we're off. I mention the nature problem of the "bird, beast, or bee buzz" (see day 39). Then we hear that sound ourselves! No one knows the solution, but Donald has a bird identification app on his iPhone. Bill suggests that he play thrush songs, and sure enough the Varied Thrush matches. You can hear the sound yourself at

http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Varied_Thrush/id

Daily travel: 10.7 miles.

Day 55, Sunday, 14 July

Today I cross the path of Lewis and Clark, and I do so at a particularly fitting point: The Corps of Discovery crossed the Bitterroot Mountains westbound in September. It was cold and snowy and food was low. Then on 19 September 1805 conditions improved. (Meriwether Lewis: "this plain appeared to be about 60 Miles distant, but our guide assured us that we should reach it's borders tomorrow the appearance of this country, our only hope for subsistence greatly revived the sperits of the party already reduced and much weakened for the want of food.") This site is called today "Spirit Revival Ridge". I cross the path of Lewis and Clark very near Spirit Revival Ridge, and this is appropriate because the day at Three Rivers Campground, plus the day with Bill and Donald, plus a card from Linda, have revived my spirits.

New wildflowers identified: Subalpine Larkspur, One-sided Pyrola, White-veined Pyrola,
Bunny-in-the-grass.

Daily travel: 9.6 miles.

Day 56, Monday, 15 July

Walk up to ridgeline along Windy Creek – make nine fords. All are easy, but my shoes and socks are soaked! On ridgeline walk through gorgeous old-growth woods and wildflower meadows. Hear the Varied Thrush. See snowbanks for the first time in about two weeks.

Daily travel: 9.8 miles.

Day 57, Tuesday, 16 July

New wildflowers identified: Meadow Hawkbeard, Largeflower Hawkbeard,
Alpine Wintergreen.

Daily travel: 9.8 miles.

Day 58, Wednesday, 17 July

Hike up Kelly Creek, a world-renowned trout stream. About six miles upstream from the bridge, the creek is turbulent with huge boulders. I say to myself “This looks like where an American Dipper would live.” Within ten seconds I spy one flying from rock to rock while singing.

New wildflowers identified: Klamath Weed, Wild Mint, Tofieldia.
Daily travel: 17.0 miles.

Day 59, Thursday, 18 July

Garnish my breakfast granola with two fresh wild huckleberries and two fresh wild strawberries. Walk upstream. Meet three backpacking fishermen. Then meet a couple with a dog, who are doing invasive weed control for the “Great Burn Study Group” – an organization working to establish a legal Wilderness Area encompassing Kelly Creek and surroundings. Continue upstream – Kelly Creek grows slimmer and slimmer. This well-maintained trail is a pleasure to walk. I meet two trail maintainers, Kurt and Jessie, who also work for Great Burn Study Group. These two are the reason the trail is in such good shape!

Expansive, flower-filled meadows adorn the upper reaches of Kelly Creek basin. I walk on up to the magnificent Kid Lake, the very headwater of Kelly Creek, situated just below the Bitterroot Crest. Kurt and Jessie had set up camp on the northeast side. I go there and take a delightful swim. Kurt and Jessie return, invite me to camp there, and Jessie invites me to dinner. (They alternate cooking, and Jessie was on that night.) She makes a burrito filling of Vigo black beans and rice, plus fresh carrots. She supplements that with cubed cheddar cheese and cubed chicken from a foil pack. She has a stack of flour tortillas. We each eat two burritos, and they are *wonderful!*

New wildflower identified: Parry Harebell.
Daily travel: 16.0 miles.

Part IV: Bitterroot Crest

Day 60, Friday, 19 July



Kid Lake – morning light

Bid goodbye to Kurt and Jessie, thanking them for their food, their hospitality, and especially for their trail work. The ICT here follows “Stateline Trail” which stays close to the Bitterroot Crest, which forms the boundary between Idaho and Montana. Occasionally it drops down to a lake, but it’s always highly scenic: wildflower meadows, cliffs, views.

New wildflowers identified: Western Sweetvetch, Broom Huckleberry,
Pink Mountain Heath (same as on day 41, but here in carpets),
Western Pasque Flower, Slender Hawkweed, Shrubby Potentilla,
Mules Ear, Saint Johnswort.

Daily travel: 12.0 miles.

Day 61, Saturday, 20 July

I eat breakfast on an orange-brown rock shelf, high above Straight Lake, where I can see dozens of miles in any direction. Near me is a meadow full of wildflowers of all

descriptions. Suddenly a buzz. I look up from my granola. Two yards in front of me a hummingbird sips nectar from a Yellow Penstemon. Reflective green back, orange-brown sides, tail with some orange-brown in it. I can see him swing his tail around to direct his flight. I am so grateful to be here, to be alive. (Rufous Hummingbird.)

Afternoon: A mountain goat and kid walk up to within ten yards from me.

Logistics problems: (1) Biting flies. (2) Low on breakfast/lunch/snack foods. (3) Need alkaline batteries for GPS. In five miles I reach Hoodoo Pass, and from there I'll hitch to Superior, Montana. I'll probably spend the night, do laundry, call Linda, and then hitch back on Monday. That will give my body a day to heal from fly bites.

New wildflowers identified: Drummond's Rockcress, Many-rayed Goldenrod,
Alpine Buttercup, Parry Gentian.

Daily travel: 11.2 miles.

Day 62, Sunday, 21 July

I hitch into Superior, buy food from Castles Market, enjoy lunch (with grapes!) on the town square, and call Linda and Bill. By the end of lunch I have lost any desire to spend the night at a motel in Superior – it is noisy (by my standards), crowded (by my standards) and 89 degrees Fahrenheit (hot by any standards). I hitch back to the mountains. (Got rides from three vehicles, and each driver went out of his way to get me closer to where I'm going.)

New wildflower identified: Large Death Camas.

Daily travel: 5.1 miles.

Day 63, Monday, 22 July

I get a nice early start and hike well in the cool of the morning. Pass near Graves Peak and find a new wildflower, Snow Potentilla. Look down on St. Joe Lake. Walk a little farther to the rugged Illinois Peak. Just as I notice some new wildflowers an older man day hiking comes up behind me. We chat a little and I check out the wildflowers (Parry's Locoweed, Lyall's Phacelia), then we walk on together. He tells me a lot about the history of the area: gold rush, loggers, foresters. He was born in 1947 and his father had been fire lookout on Illinois Peak – he describes an overnight trip to the lookout tower he had made as a pre-teen, ending with sourdough pancakes. At one point he walks off trail saying “This is the site of the old Forest Service Cedar Creek Crossing Cabin.” Sure enough we find a spring, then the log outhouse, then a few scraps of metal remaining from the roof. I ask his name: Tom Castles. I say I had shopped at Castles Grocery Market yesterday, and he says his sister owns it. He points out old mule trails down Wolverine Gulch, and finally takes one of those trails himself.



Tom Castles in front of Illinois Peak, where his father had served as fire lookout

The trail is poorly maintained after Road 320, and finally disappears altogether. (Although not before I discover yet another new wildflower, Nodding Saxifrage.) Bushwhack west to Trail 616, which is in great shape, and follow it to Bonanza Lake.

I face several “high and dry” days so camp by the lake. I fill up on water, wash my clothes, swim. After swimming I put on my shoes but nothing more, and walk up to the campsite to cook (and to dry off). A mother grouse and three chicks are at the campsite, but they don’t run away, presumably because I’m not clothed. I cook and eat dinner, go back to the lakeshore, rest in the sun, watch fish jump, watch the sun glimmer off lake ripples. Most lakesides in Idaho have mosquitoes and biting flies, but not this one.

New wildflowers identified: Mountain Harebell (pure white), Snow Potentilla, Parry's Locoweed, Lyall's Phacelia, Nodding Saxifrage.

Daily travel: 10.0 miles.

Day 64, Tuesday, 23 July

Today starts in the manner to which I’ve grown accustomed: Wake up at Bonanza Lake, soak in the beauty, walk through woods and through wildflower meadows with great views, find a new wildflower, get lost once but find my way again with no great loss,

peer down from the Bitterroot Crest to beautiful alpine lakes, find a snowbank and eat from it.

Then I reach Dry Creek Saddle. The trail ends and the ICT follows a dirt road. It's a pleasant enough road, with easy grades, occasional views and wildflower meadows, and lots of woods, and it's impossible to get lost, and there are no vehicles (so far), but it's dusty and of course there's no sense of wildness.

New wildflowers identified: Subalpine Arnica, Rose Angelica.
Daily travel: 14.4 miles.

Day 65, Wednesday, 24 July

When I woke up this morning I could already tell it would be another hot day. And I knew that I would walk on dirt road the whole day. I said to myself "Don't let it get you down. John Muir walked dusty roads from Louisville, Kentucky, to Cedar Key, Florida, during his thousand-mile walk to the gulf. He got a lot out of his walk, and you can get a lot out of yours."

So when I walked through a spruce-tamarack woods, I gave special thought to its beauty. When I walked past a meadow, I paid special attention to its wildflowers and views. When I walked past a spring, I gave special notice to its ferns and flowers and cascades.

Just beyond the spring (Bed Spring) I encounter a young woman, Sarah. She is working on a masters in fire ecology at the University of Montana – Missoula. Her research involves Whitebark Pine. I ask her about my tree identifications. I was wrong about the spruce – it was Subalpine Fir. And I was wrong about the tamarack – it was Western Hemlock.

I walk just 50 yards farther to Sarah's camp, where I meet her partner scientist, Signe, and her dog Abby. Signe offers me a grapefruit and grapes, which I devour, and she takes my trash so I don't have to carry it. As I leave, I say "Thank you for the food and for taking the trash. But thank you especially for the research you're doing. I know it can be painstaking ..." Sarah corrected me "You mean tedious." And I continued "... but without it we can't intelligently manage our forests, so hikers and everyone else benefit from your work."

I continue. The trail passes through an extraordinary woods – almost pure Western Hemlock, and stunningly beautiful. I don't need to channel John Muir to appreciate this. And there in the middle are a dozen individuals of Coralroot, a saprophytic orchid.

Daily travel: 20.6 miles.

Day 66, Thursday, 25 July

I rest on the south side of the dirt road. A chipmunk comes out from the north side and half crosses the road. It freezes, seeing a human, then runs back north. After a moment it decides I must be okay and crosses all the way south.

I *finally* get to the end of the dirt road, and walk onto trail. Unfortunately, it is a trail widened and ripped up by ATVs.

Daily travel: 15.3 miles.

Day 67, Friday, 26 July

Today starts with a surprise and goes downhill from there. I woke up but had not yet left my tent when I heard galloping hoofs. A moose rushed by the tent, about seven feet away!

I start walking. Within moments the foot trail becomes a wide dusty ATV track. I follow that track for half a mile, when it becomes clear that the ATV track goes north, while the map shows the ICT going west on USFS Trail 16. I walk back the half mile, then look carefully for signs of Trail 16. I locate post number 135+12 marking the Idaho/Montana border, and this allows me to walk very precisely to the map's location for Trail 16. There is nothing.

I am not going to bushwhack in difficult terrain, by myself, without local knowledge. (I had promised Linda I wouldn't do anything stupid.) There is nothing to do but follow the ATV track. I walk that half mile for the third time, then follow the track down, down, down about 1.5 miles. My knees hurt from so much steep downhill walking. It is dusty and, even early in the morning, hot. I come out on a gravel road and walk west toward Mullan, my next food resupply town.

I pull into the Mullan post office at 4:30 pm, but it closes at 4:00 pm and doesn't reopen until Monday. I eat steak, carrots, broccoli, salad, strawberry/banana smoothie, and desert pastry at the "Bitterroot Coffee House". The steak was perfect, but the smoothie not nearly as good as those made by Mitchell's Ice Cream in the Cleveland area. The one place to stay in town – Lookout Motel – has a "No Vacancy" sign up and no management present. So I walk west out of town on a rail-trail, take a splash bath in the stream, and set up a stealth camp in a pine grove between the rail-trail and Interstate-90.

I have lost my pen. Fortunately Signe, the fire ecologist, gave me a spiffy mechanical pencil.

I am discouraged and contemplate leaving the trail. I list pros and cons:

"Here are my reasons for continuing:

(1) So I can say I did it.

Here are my reasons for quitting:

(1) It's hot and dusty. (2) Stephan tells me the 200 miles north of Mullan are mostly "high and dry" dusty ATV track. (3) I can expect more disappearing trail. (4) Stephan says the ridgetop trail goes, sometimes, as far as 45 miles between water sources. (5) I've been eating so much I need to supplement my mail drop, and Mullan has no grocery store. (6) I need to wash clothes with soap, and there's no laundromat in Mullan. (7) I might not be able to get a shower in Mullan, and I need one. (8) I've accomplished all I wanted to in Idaho: desert backpacking, the big wildernesses, the ridgeline with lakes, wildflowers, American Dipper – except that I haven't seen a mountain lion, and lions don't live this far north in Idaho."

I will sleep on the decision.

Daily travel: 8.0 miles.

Saturday, 27 July 2013

From a letter to Linda written in United Flight 3454 en route from Spokane to Chicago:

I've made the decision to quit my hike. It was a hard one to make. I had a bad night last night: legs itching from insect bites, from dirt, from a sleeping bag used 67 times without washing. But once I got up, in the cool of the morning, I felt much better. I walked to the Bitterroot Coffee House and ordered a three-egg and meat omelet with hash browns on the side, and when that didn't fill me up I ordered and ate three pancakes. I felt full for the second time this trip.

But I needed to get my mail shipment. I had peered into the post office window and seen the package for me. The Mullan post office service window is closed on Saturday, but a worker inside was sorting the mail for P.O. boxes. There was a sign: "No package pickup on Saturdays" but I called out over the P.O. boxes. "Could I pick up the general delivery package for hiker Dan Styer?" And she popped out and gave it to me!

Even better, you had slipped in extra food, so I wouldn't need a supplemental trip to the grocery store six miles away. That argued for continuing my hike. But the package contained a beautiful card from you, and a surprising but most welcome note from the Quaker Meeting, and those made me want to go home.

One more story: At the end of my big breakfast three well-dressed men (shirt & tie, most customers wore tee-shirts) walked into the coffee house and ordered coffee. We chatted about my trip as I paid for breakfast. They found my web page on "Wilderness Travel" on their smart phones. Then I walked to the P.O. and got my package. I was unloading the box when one of them came inside and handed me my "civilization" plastic bag – the one with my phone and cash and driver's license and credit cards. Then he

gave me a copy of *Awake!* and *Watchtower* magazines, said they were heading to Montana looking for converts, and offered me a ride.

I sat outside the coffee house reading the card from you, packing my pack, and deciding. I went back and forth. Finally I said to myself “Here in Mullan, there’s little dust, few flies, and I’m sitting in the shade, yet already I’m uncomfortably hot. How would I feel climbing one of those steep sunny slopes?” I called you and said I was coming home. I called Bill, too, and I could hear the disappointment in his voice. (Or perhaps I was reading my own disappointment into his voice.)

I asked the good folks at Bitterroot Coffee House for a magic marker, I tore one side out of the box from the post office and wrote on it SPOKANE. I walked out of town past the City Hall/Fire Station. They were having a pancake breakfast so I made a donation and ate one more pancake. There was a statue outside showing “Capt. John Mullan – Trail”. I asked the folks at the fire station if someone would take a finishing photo of me next to the statue, and the major of Mullan volunteered.

I walked two blocks from the fire station to the Interstate-90 entrance ramp, and held out my sign. The third car passing was a red, sporty, rebuilt car, and it stopped for me. The driver was Josh, a 24-year-old Nez Perce native American recently discharged after five years in the Marines. (He served three tours in Afghanistan.) He had rebuilt the car himself. He told me long and fascinating stories about tribal life, his family, his military service, his car-rebuilding, his running (on a dare, he had run a marathon on each of three successive days in Okinawa), his girlfriend, and his future. [He was determined to live his life in twenty-first century America, while still keeping in contact with his native roots and culture. He said “Don’t forget where you came from.”] Josh was driving all the way to Spokane, and he even went out of his way to drop me off at the United Airlines counter at the airport.

I walked in cold, asking if they could change my reservation from 19 August to today. Fortunately, I got a very competent ticket agent. She could! It cost only \$200. Furthermore, the flight was leaving in less than an hour. Fortunately, getting through security in Spokane airport is easy and quick.

So, here I am in the air! I have my regrets, but I think I’ve made the right decision. I wonder how Lewis and Clark and the Corps of Discovery did it, facing biting flies and ticks and heat, without the benefit of food resupply and VaporWick clothing and DEET and mosquito tents and maps, much less GPS. Well, for one thing they travelled slower than I did (they didn’t have to be back by fall semester) and for another, they were younger than 58 years. When I voiced my disappointment in myself to Josh, he assured me “You’re doing great in my book, Professor.” Sometimes I think that providence intended for Josh and me to meet, and that’s why I stopped at I-90 instead of Canada.

End of extract from letter.

Linda meets me at the airport in Cleveland, and never have I beheld a more beautiful sight. In her hair she has a flower. In her car she has a fresh berry smoothie from Mitchell's Ice Cream. She drives me home to Wolf Run Nature Preserve, where I am enchanted by the first fireflies I've seen in 67 days.

Statistics:

67 days
699.7 miles
202 plant species identified

Reasons:

Backpacking hardens the body, sharpens the senses, strengthens the mind, and enriches the spirit.

Summary:

For weeks, I was dirty, my feet were wet, and I was immersed in splendid wilderness. I was dirty for so long that I forgot about ever being clean. My feet were wet for so long that they forgot about ever being dry. But never did I – never could I – forget that I was immersed in splendid wilderness.

Thanks to many people. First, to those who gave me direct support. Some but not all of you are named in this essay, but I want to add the names of Jacob Styer and Mary Franzel, who generously offered me support on the ICT north of Interstate-90. Special thanks to my wife Linda who did more than send me food and letters: When I grew tired or discouraged or hungry, too hot or too cold, too wet or too thirsty, Linda's spirit walked beside me, calm and collected, sustaining and encouraging me, reminding me of how much I wanted this hike, of how long I had trained for it, and of the many years I spent planning for it.

Second, to those who taught us that wilderness is not to be feared and despised but to be loved and revered: Thinkers and actors such as John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Bob Marshall, Margaret Murie, Senator Frank Church, the Owyhee Initiative, the Great Burn Study Group, the Friends of Scotchman Peaks.

Third, to those who pioneered long-distance trails for recreation and inspiration and contemplation: Thinkers and dreamers and actors such as Will Monroe, Benton MacKaye, Myron Avery, "Grandma" Emma Gatewood, and ICT founders Roger Williams and Syd Tate.

Fourth, to those who designed, built, and now maintain these trails.

Finally, to those who nurtured my love of nature and of wild adventure, and who took me on that 1962 family trip to Shenandoah National Park, my parents, "Pete" and Tom Styer.