

The Big Horn Crag

The Big Horn Crag (BHC) is an area of Idaho, as the crow flies, more or less due east of Salmon, Idaho. This ends up being somewhat of a conundrum, since although Salmon is approximately 60 miles north of Challis, ID, and the turnoff from US93 to begin heading towards the trailhead, is only a short ways north of Challis, by the time you actually get deep into the Crag, at Ship Island Lake, as I said before, you are just about due east of Salmon.

The Big Horn Crag's core uniqueness, however, lies in its extreme ruggedness, breathtaking beauty and the many different hoodoos that litter the central and north section of this area.

For the hiker, the BHC is pretty much divided up into the north section, with Ship Island Lake being the focal point, and with others like Birdbill, Gentian, Airplane, Big Clear, Shoban & Glacier Lakes, plus Harbor & Wilson lakes on the bottom edge of this section.

The southern section begins with Welcome Lake (definitely an auspicious name to be sure, considering the presence and numbers of winged-creatures waiting there to warmly welcome you and then proceed to reduce your total blood capacity substantially), and includes the Terrace Lakes (a real grunt to get to, but worth every minute), Barking Fox Lake, Skyhigh, Echo, Turquoise, Reflection, Buck, Doe & Fawn Lakes. There are some more, Tip Top, Ramshorn, Paragon & Alpine that eluded the grasp of this hiker... this time. I thought I was up to 'rugged', but it seems that this particular area is 'rugged squared'!

Although I had visited this area a number of times, I had previously never visited the southern section, always devoting my efforts to the north. This trip was to be an exploration of the many lakes that dot the bottom section of this beautiful area.

Plans being what they are, generally located somewhere in the ether, the plan said: 'Leave Monday morning!' The actual 'leaving' occurred somewhere around 4 in the afternoon. Considering the distance involved to the trailhead, that meant that arrival was going to be well into the evening hours.

And so it was. 11 pm to be exact. And after a 'delightful' RON in the cab of the truck (I have had a lot of 'RONs' in the cab of a vehicle, and am still waiting for a 'good' one!), goats were loaded and the trip was begun.

Sometime around 2ish, I arrived at Harbor/Wilson lakes, took pictures, ate lunch, and continued down the trail for Welcome(?) lake... for about 3 milliseconds. This trail is a lot of granite, and not much of a trail, and so I immediately lost track of the formal 'trail'. Well, no worries! (*the fool said*), I've done a lot of off-trail!



To some degree that's true, I mean the 'no worries' part, I *have* done a lot of off-trail hiking. But it is worthwhile to remember at this point, that this 'trail' goes down around 500' in a very short distance, giving a new meaning to the term, 'challenging'.

So after a lot of what seemed like 'mountaineering', followed at the bottom, by having to slog seemingly forever through what was essentially a swamp (so who said there's no water in southern Idaho?), we arrive at Welcome Lake. I had planned on making this a RON, so off come the packs, and I grab my chair to sit down and rest my weary back from the day's labors. Actually, I grab the chair's bag only to discover that it is empty. **EMPTY???** **What?** Yes, it had apparently determined that things were better



somewhere else, and departed for a life on the run. Now this has to be the biggest 'bummer' of the trip. My back is always a problem, and I desperately need back support when I get to camp. But it apparently was not to be. It was the end of the day, the energy levels were bouncing off the bottom of the reserve canister, and a few minutes after the chair discovery, there were sufficient distractions to divert my attention from the chair for quite some time. Distractions in the form of a variety of different winged blood-suckers. Yes, Welcome Lake seems to be the rendezvous point for every blood-consuming creature for miles around.

The animals were going nuts, I was going nuts, so there was precious little sanity to be had, it having departed everyone with the arrival of the unwelcome guests.

The only way to get some respite from the bugs was to keep moving. So we got up and explored the area's camping, a very large area as this is used as a horse camp. The hope here is that there is some part of this area that is not quite so populated with these miserable creatures. Turned out there wasn't, they were everywhere, so what to do? The second enthusiastic bit of nonsense I came up with was that maybe up in the top end of the cirque there would be fewer pestilences as they probably want to stay close to where they can get a drink! (Well, they do, but it is a drink of blood, *NOT* a drink of water!)

Suffice to say that neither I, nor the goats, wanted to begin slogging uphill again, but it seemed there was no choice. So off we went. Arriving at the top of the cirque, and no real viable options left except to attempt a climb (up the sides of a very steep cirque) to the top of the ridge, where I knew that there would definitely be fewer of these pests (*pay close attention to why in retrospect that would have been a very BAD move*), there was no choice but to set up camp.



Which we did. Right in the middle of the cloud of bugs that had apparently followed us up there. Therefore, following the wisdom of the saying, "When you are up to your a— in alligators, it is very difficult to remember that the original objective was to drain the swamp", our attention to detail in setting up the tent, etc., was not sufficiently focused due to our primary focus being on preventing the winged predators from draining your personal (blood) swamp. This lack of focus was to manifest itself as a very critical item as time wore on.

Weather break — another relevant item as time progressed as well. Late afternoon we had had a lot of buildups and wind, and over in the north section there was actually some thunderstorms, but as the evening progressed, the clouds dissipated, the sky cleared, and all was well in Xanadu.

Tent up, some measure of nutrition needs handled, and so entering the one refuge, the tent, seemed to be the most logical choice. Well, it was either that or be bled to exhaustion. Eventually, the drowsies took over, and sleep became the order of the day.

That is until somewhere between 11pm-2am. When all of a sudden the **CRASH!** of thunder communicated very clearly that the post-dinner blue sky had taken a very decided 'hike'. Since I had made no provision whatsoever for this eventuality, it was time to blast out of bed, fix the tent's vestibule (rain protection), and tarp the goats. Of course, by now it was dark, and this was being accomplished by headlamp, and made even more delightful by the return of the blood-mobile boys. Fortunately, at some point in this procedure, it began to rain lightly, which sent the mosquitoes scurrying for cover, so at least that distraction was dispensed with.

So, what provisions that could be made, were made, and so it is back in the tent, close up the vestibule, and wait for more reasonable weather. Meanwhile, the rain got going in earnest, and the lightning became virtually constant, and a good time was had by all. Right? With no more protection than a little fabric, *who worries about a little lightning?* (Note at this point, that had we actually slogged on to the top of the ridge, that would have been a **VERY BAD** place to be all things considered)

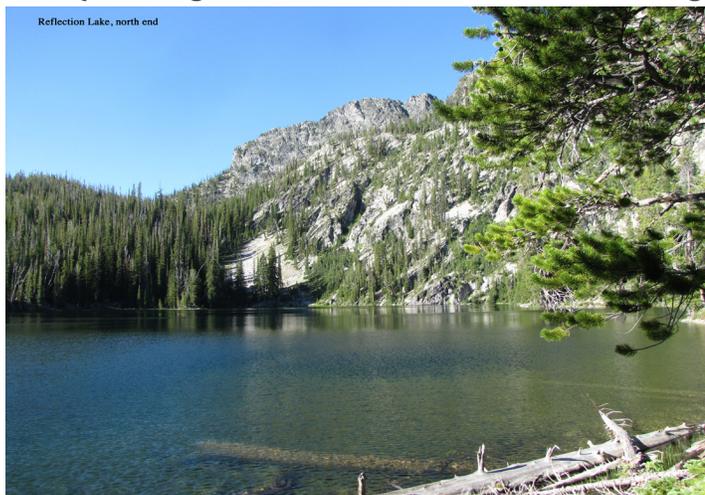
Probably after about 30 minutes the lightning backed off, but the rain was having none of it. It continued in earnest long after I was finally lulled back to sleep.

But hey, the fun was just beginning! At some point I reawaken, and note that my knees were cold. Why? Headlamp revealed that the sleeping pad was sitting in a pool of water, and I was beginning to float off down the Nile. *Hey! I was supposed to remain comfortably anchored here in the reeds!*

Lack of focus, previously mentioned, I had set up the tent in a low area, and the noachian flood I was experiencing was entering the tent through the bottom seam (not previously resealed or tested in the 10 years or so of tent ownership), and by this time, sleeping pad was thoroughly soaked and sitting in a pool of water.

The only good news, and believe me, one has to grasp at straws here, is that the far side of my 3-person tent was higher, and therefore still dry. So I and the sleeping bag, only wet in the one spot, crowded ourselves into that side of the tent, hoping to be able to spend the remainder of the night still dry. The bad news is that now there is no thermal insulation from the ground, and I am immediately cold. Time for the thermal underwear and my knit hat. Dang. Knit hat has also acted as a sponge and it not currently functional. Suffice to say we survived the night. Believe me, there are times when the line between survival and 'not' can get perilously thin out here.

Morning, and time to sort out the various issues. Naturally, I had set up camp on the east side of the cirque, you know, where the sun doesn't 'come up' until three in the afternoon (well, it seemed that way at the time), and so I hauled the sleeping pad and bag across the cirque to where there was sun, hoping to dry them out. Finally decided to just wrap up the tent wet and dry it out that afternoon at Reflection Lake (meaning the tent had at least doubled in weight)(Oh well, *I'm* not carrying it!).



Late afternoon, arrived at Reflection, set up tent to dry, and departed on a day hike to see how far the formal trail went. Not far as it turned out, and so I decided to wait until the following morning to attempt to bushwhack over to Paragon, Ramshorn and Alpine lakes.

Following morning did just that, hit the end of the trail, went into the woods, and to make a long story short, just plain didn't make it. I have never been defeated by an off trail adventure before, but this time I was. By the time I figured out that I needed to regroup, I was too tired to go on as far

as these lakes were, so, back to Reflection and a lazy afternoon.

Next day, we begin the trek out. However this day, until we arrive a Barking Fox lake, all is off trail. So around Reflection we go, climb from 8100' to 8300' and find Echo Lake. From there, it was a definite crap-shoot which way to attempt to get to Turquoise lake. In spite of the fact that this was only another 300' up, all the potential routes looked like mountain goat quality. So I decided to circuit Echo lake, and attempt the climb at the north end of this lake. It turned out to be a real, unadulterated bugger, and especially so since Ezra was having trouble with the sore on his back. Going up more than likely



exacerbated an already bad situation, which was undoubtedly painful, as when I touched it once, Ezra's reaction let me know that it was tender indeed.

Turquoise lake arrived in the windshield, pictures were taken, and we motored on towards Skyhigh lake. This one wasn't much higher than Turquoise, but did involve trekking around the contour lines for quite a ways. Skyhigh turned out to be one of the more attractive lakes we saw, but after Skyhigh, the real work began.

Our route from Skyhigh took us up and over the saddle above it to the north, just shy of 9000'. Aside from the difficulties with Ezra, this one was not particularly technical, other than a whole lot of heavy work. Interestingly, the opposite side of this saddle was a rockslide all the way to the bottom, and the destruction of the trees at the bottom due to 2012-2013's heavy winter snowfall and resultant avalanches was extreme.

Climbed all the way down this basin to Barking Fox lake, plopped down, and enjoyed 'lunch with a view'.

Bearing in mind, that I had not talked to anyone since Monday AM, here I am sitting at the edge of Barking Fox on Friday PM, and what to my wondering eyes should



appear, but another humanoid! Turned out he had come in via a horse packer to Terrace Lakes, then walked on down to Barking Fox for some fishing. His only complaint? These fish, so unused to the human presence, would bite on just about anything you flung at them. Somewhat akin to shooting fish in a barrel, eh?



The Ridge we have to climb over, and the snow cornice we have to skirt



The top of the ridge, presumably, and Skyview lake below



Looking back up towards the top of the ridge



The avalanche damage



Barking Fox Lake

We finished our backwoods chat, and I headed on up to Terrace Lakes to continue my photo documentation. While transiting the Terrace lakes, however, besides taking pictures, I was also looking up at the side of this exceptionally deep cirque and wondering, just how in the world do you get out of here and over to Heart & Welcome? Looking up the sides of this cirque looked like looking up at the Swiss Alps. And they bring horses in here as well. Maybe they do all that with a very large helicopter? ;-)



Terrace Lakes, from top of Cirque

Of course, as it turns out, I just called in the Enterprise, and 'transported' over the top of this pinnacle to Heart Lake. *Right*. In reality, about 487 switchbacks later, lo and behold, I was looking down on Heart lake, which is above the Welcome lake basin. The good news is that this trail is quite well built, other than being paint-scratch thin at points, and the grade was easy and consistent... albeit long.

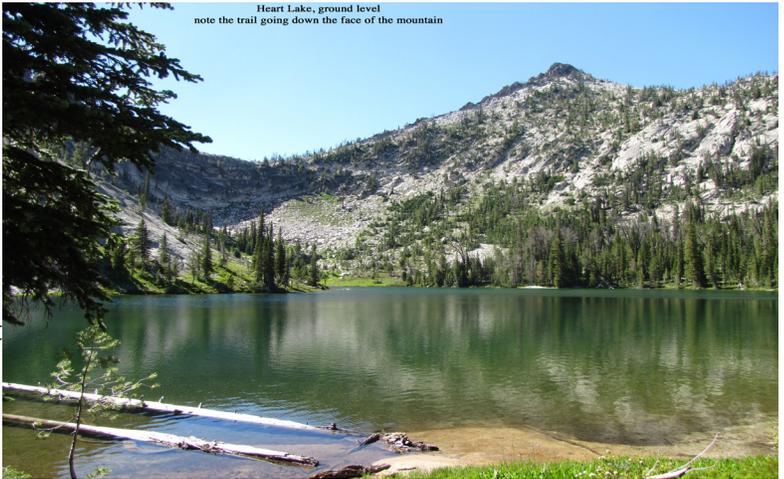
The top of the ridge/cirque above Terrace Laks



Heart Lake



Heart Lake, ground level
note the trail going down the face of the mountain



So here we are at Heart Lake, it is late in the afternoon, this would be a great place to RON! At least that was my initial thinking. Until about 5 minutes after I had taken all the equipment off the goats, sat down, and realized that this was Welcome lakes alter-ego in terms of blood-sucking, winged predators. By now, after 5 days of fending off mosquitoes and others, I had just about had my fill of this nonsense, so I immediately transitioned into the planning mode of how I am going to get Ezra back on the trail with his sore back

and all. As to continue, we have to pass Welcome lake and hopefully get up into the dry territory where there are... are you ready for this fantasy?... waaaay less mosquitoes. Uh huh.



Waterfall on the trail from Welcome to TH

Well, I got part of that right, after seemingly endless miles of trudging, I finally said, we gotta stop here, regardless. And so we did. Not the ideal camping spot to be sure, and an awful lot of the Welcome mosquitoes seemed to have kept up with us to this point, but camp we did. Put up the tent quickly, ate quickly, high-lined the goats quickly, and quickly dived into the refuge for the night. Not without first killing the sneaky buggers that thought they would wait around inside the tent for a midnight snack.

Turned out to be a good night, and next morning motored up the trail as fast as the heart would allow, with the consideration that there was a whole lot of 'up' to be done, and arrived back at the trailhead before the sun got too intense. Good times, good trip (Ummm, that is all things considered... the 'big picture' look).

PS: One interesting postscript...

Since I hike fairly rapidly, I passed a couple of folks on the trail on my way out. But eventually I came up on one gentleman with a young person accompanying him, and he leapt into gear when he saw me, and got back on the trail forthwith. As time went on, it was indelibly clear that he was in a blind panic to insure that the goats didn't get in front of him, as he just kept looking back and speeding up.

So what was *THAT* all about??

