



AAC Publications

The North Cascades High Route

United States, Washington, Cascade Range

Jenny Abegg (right) and Kaytlyn Gerbin descending into the White Rock Lakes basin on the Ptarmigan Traverse, during their first complete traverse of the North Cascades High Route. The Dana, Dome, and Chickamin glaciers, along with Dome Peak, lie ahead of them. Photo by Steven Gnam.

In early 2022, Kaytlyn Gerbin called me with a wild idea. An elite ultra-runner with a penchant for long mountain missions, she proposed traversing the entirety of North Cascades National Park in a continuous effort, from close to the Canadian border to the tiny town of Stehekin near the park's southern terminus. Her idea was to link several established mountaineering high routes, including the Whatcom-Redoubt High Route, the Northern and Southern Pickets traverses, the Isolation Traverse, and the Ptarmigan Traverse.

This style of travel has grown more popular throughout the last decade or so: Climbers want to go faster and lighter; runners want to go bigger. In Washington's Cascades, long mountaineering routes have become common ground for those looking for that engaging cocktail of endurance and skill. Many of these—like the oft-traveled Ptarmigan Traverse—are attainable in a day. This one would be a whole different beast.

Jenny Abegg (right) and Kaytlyn Gerbin descending the Chickamin Glacier at dusk. "It was moments like these when we laughed about calling this a running objective," said Abegg. Photo by Nick Danielson.

Kaytlyn and I started from the north, taking a boat to Silver Creek Campground near the head of Ross Lake rather than risking an illegal border crossing. With 27-liter packs loaded up for four nights, we entered the forest and bushwhacked west for roughly ten miles before reaching the high country at Silver Lake, less than a mile south of the Canadian border. Over the next three days, we traveled south through the Chilliwack Range, along the Whatcom-Redoubt High Route, across both the Northern and Southern Pickets ranges, and down Stetattle Ridge to a resupply near Highway 20. Each day was long—14 to 19 hours—and full of challenges, chief among them: a 36-hour whiteout, broken crampons, dead smartphones (read: no GPS navigation), steep snow descents, waterfall climbing, fifth-class rock bands, and—worst of all—swarming caterpillars.

After a few hours of rest and a resupply at Diablo Lake, we made our way up the Pyramid Lake Trail to camp below the Colonial Glacier. On this leg, our friend Steven Gnam and our partners, Ely Gerbin and Michael Hutchins, joined us to help document the trip. After traveling the most challenging section of the route alone, the second half felt like a victory lap, with fresh energy and mellower terrain. We journeyed over the Isolation Traverse (a route that's become popular among skiers since Lowell Skoog gave it a name back in 1983) and down to Cascade River Road, where we were met by more friends and fresh food. On the last leg, Nick Danielson joined our clan as we ran and walked the Ptarmigan Traverse, wrapping over the shoulder of Dome Peak and across the Chickamin Glacier, eventually making our way to the Pacific Crest Trail and into the hamlet of Stehekin.

All told, Kaytlyn and I traveled 127 miles and gained (and lost) almost 60,000' of elevation over seven days. We roped up on a few glaciers and pitched out five sections of rock and one section of snow.

Our route was not new in that it was a link-up of established traverses, but the speedy style in which we completed it was novel. We took inspiration from a few other parties, including Don and Natala Goodman, who, in 1990, completed a similar traverse over the course of 28 days, bagging 19 peaks along the way; and Jason Hummel and Kyle Miller, who, over 16 days in 2013, skied from the North

Cascades Highway, through Holden Village, and onto Glacier Peak, a route they called the American Alps Traverse (originally envisioned by Skoog). Other noteworthy North Cascades mega-traverses include a 25-day ski traverse from the Canadian border to Lake Wenatchee, by Peter Dale and Aaron Mainer in April and May 2016, and a 34-day ski traverse from Snoqualmie Pass to the Canadian border, by Trevor Kostanich and Forest McBrian in 2017.

With hopes of enticing others to repeat our objective, we decided to call our link-up the North Cascades High Route (à la the Sierra High Route or the Wind River High Route). Perhaps other mountain athletes inclined toward sufferfests will want to get out there and give 'er a go.

— **Jenny Abegg**

Images



Jenny Abegg (right) and Kaytlyn Gerbin descending into the White Rock Lakes basin on the Ptarmigan Traverse, during their first complete traverse of the North Cascades High Route. The Dana, Dome, and Chickamin glaciers, along with Dome Peak, lie ahead of them.



Jenny Abegg (right) and Kaytlyn Gerbin ascending the Middle Cascade Glacier on the way to the Spider-Formidable Col. This section of the 127-mile North Cascades High Route follows Ptarmigan Traverse, one of the previously established mountaineering high routes the two linked up to create the North Cascades High Route.



Kaytlyn Gerbin (right) donning crampons on the Dana Glacier during her and Jenny Abegg's seven-day

traverse of the North Cascades High Route, Washington.



Kaytlyn Gerbin surveying the scene above the Northern Pickets. This was day three and the first time the skies cleared for Gerbin and Jenny Abegg during their seven-day traverse of the North Cascades High Route, Washington.



Snow traversing on the North Cascades High Route on day six. On this day, Jenny Abegg (left) and Kytlyn Gerbin covered 24.7 miles with 12,800' of elevation in 15 hours 10 minutes.



Jenny Abegg (left) and Kaytlyn Gerbin on the last day of the North Cascades High Route, descending out of the alpine to join up with the Pacific Crest Trail.



Jenny Abegg (right) and Kaytlyn Gerbin descending the Chickamin Glacier at dusk. “It was moments like these when we laughed about calling this a running objective,” said Abegg.



Route-finding, such as here on day six, was the name of the game for Jenny Abegg (left) and Kaytlyn Gerbin on their seven-day, 127-mile North Cascades High Route, Washington.



Jenny Abegg (left) and Kaytlyn Gerbin ascending the Neve Glacier on the morning of day six on the North Cascades High Route, a 127-mile mountain traverse of North Cascades National Park, Washington. Abegg and Gerbin traversed the glacier north to south, but skiers doing the Isolation Traverse often do it south to north. Paul Bunyans Stump is the peak prominent in back.



The route of the North Cascades High Route, starting near the Canadian border in the north and linking the Whatcom-Redoubt High Route, the Northern and Southern Pickets traverses, the Isolation Traverse, and the Ptarmigan Traverse before ending at the village of Stehekin on Lake Chelan in the south.

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