Phantom Peak, West Ridge

Washington, Cascade Mountains, Picket Range

On July 30, Rolf Larson and I completed a new route on Phantom Peak, climbing its west ridge.
Phantom Peak (8,000+') is in the northern section of the rugged Picket Range of North Cascades
National Park, and requires an involved two-day approach. After ten miles on trail up and over
Hannegan Pass, we waded the Chilliwack River, navigated up and down the five-mile-long and scenic
Easy Ridge, soloed exposed fourth-class to cross a chasm (the Imperfect Impasse), climbed through
Perfect Pass and over the Challenger Glacier, then finally descended and traversed steep snow, talus,
and more glacier to arrive at a bivy under Ghost Peak, Phantom Peak's neighbor to the north. From
our scrabbly camp, the profile of Phantom's west ridge was finally in full view.

In the morning, we ascended to a 6,100' saddle in the ridge's lower reaches. A few hundred feet of
hiking and scrambling up the ridge led to a notch with a convenient ledge for roping up. Friends and
acquaintances had in previous years set out for the unclimbed ridge above us, but were either
skunked by the area's notoriously fickle weather or, upon arriving at the base, reassessed their
willingness to continue.

I led the first pitch, which began with a short and steep crack system, then gave way to rambling
along the crest. The next four pitches were more of the same, and included some large corners,
towers that we either bypassed or climbed directly, and exposed ridge running. The climbing was
engaging but surprisingly moderate, mostly 5.7+.

Midway up pitch six, Rolf encountered a tough move over an airy four-foot cleft in the ridge. At the
same moment, we spotted a plume of wildfire smoke erupting near the Chilliwack River, apparently
threatening our return route home. Out of view, Rolf shouted, "We have a problem!" After a bit of back-
and-forth banter echoing around the cirque, we concluded that bailing halfway up the ridge would not
help us to deal with the soon-to-be-named Bear Creek Fire, so we continued upward.

The cleft on pitch six required a long 5.10-ish stemming move over the 100'-deep gap. Rolf created a
handhold with a nut and a sling to tension across the gap. After removing the gear, and with the
benefit of long legs and a top-rope, I was able to free the moves.

Two pitches later, we topped out on a tower and rappelled about 100' into a notch. Pitches eight
through ten served up aesthetic face and crack climbing on solid rock, with outstanding views of the
aptly name Picket Range immediately to our east and the sheer northwest-facing wall of Spectre Peak
across the way to the south. As the difficulties eased off, we coiled the rope and soloed about 400' of
fourth-class to the sharp summit ridge, followed by an exhilarating traverse to the final pinnacle. The
descent by the southeast face route required methodical downclimbing and a sprint across a
snowfield exposed to rockfall. (This would be more straightforward on snow earlier in the season.)
We eventually circled back to our camp under Ghost Peak. The next day, bad weather scuttled our
other plans in the Pickets, but also dampened the Bear Creek Fire's threat to our route home.

The west ridge of Phantom Peak is ten pitches plus approximately 400' of easy soloing, and involves
much 5.7+ climbing with a single sequence of 5.10.

— Eric Wehrly

Images

Rolf Larson soloing the final part of the west ridge of Phantom Peak.
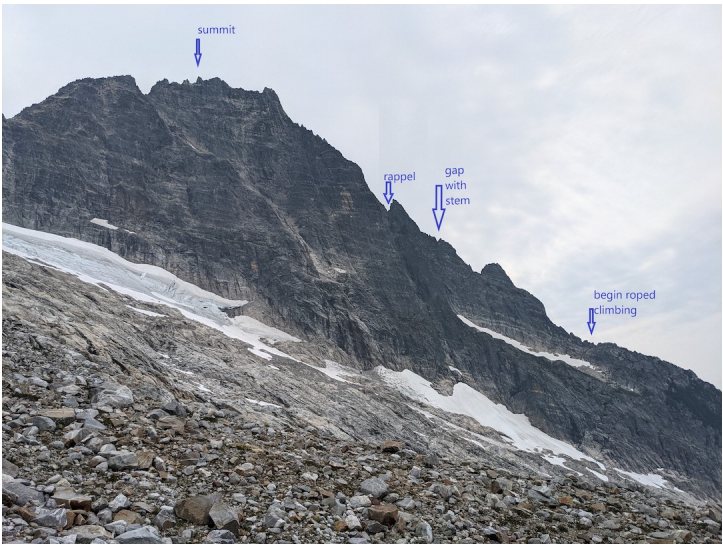

Looking up at the west ridge of Phantom Peak from near the base of the ridge.

Rolf Larson coming up the west ridge of Phantom Peak, nearing the end of the fifth pitch.

Viewed from the summit of Phantom Peak: Crooked Thumb and its subpeak Ghost Peak in the close foreground, with Mt. Challenger in the near background and wildfire smoke beyond.

Phantom Peak from camp, with the west ridge along the right skyline.

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