

Pemi West 2005—Rain Shadow to Rain Forest

Greetings from Washington's Olympic Peninsula! We have just capped off a successful 8th season of Pemi West, and our first ever season in Olympic National Park. We decided to explore Olympic National Park this year, among other reasons for its unparalleled wilderness experience (over 1,000,000 contiguous acres of wilderness) and its sheer variety of natural landscapes and natural history. It is hard to comprehend the size of the park until you have hiked across it (it encompasses a roadless land area half the size of Connecticut), but hopefully I can adequately depict some of the variety of landscapes and life found in the park through writing (you will have to stay tuned for photographs on our website). In short, this is a dramatic and rugged area of the country, with misty valleys, glacier capped peaks, huge trees, and a wilderness coastline with jagged sea stacks and pounding surf. It is region of supreme wilderness, but gravely also a region of hotly contested land use battles, pitting conservationists against loggers, humans versus endangered salmon, spotted owls, and marbled murrelets (an ocean going bird that nests in oldgrowth trees). Outside the Park we can see starkly the effects of modern man on his environment, but within the Park we can immerse ourselves and test our mettle for weeks on end in an environment that has remained virtually unchanged since Europeans first set eyes on it.

In this first season, we had a healthy co-ed crew consisting of two groups of 6 teenagers with 2 instructors heading up each group. They hailed from all corners of the country, as well as from Italy, and Denmark. All did a fantastic job of working together throughout the course, and this cooperative spirit was spectacularly rewarded as both groups were able to put all 3 of their rope teams on the summit of Mt. Olympus last week. Jen Westenberg and Erik Wilson, former Olympic backcountry ranger and southeast Alaska guide respectively, headed up one group, while veteran Pemi West instructors Tim Billo and Christina Demetro headed up the other. All four instructors call the Olympic Mountains their home away from home having met each other here some 5 years ago as instructors at the Olympic Park Institute.

Our participants arrived at Mora Campground on the Olympic Coast on June 27th, 2005. In their first few days, they all went through a Wilderness First Aid course which certified them in the techniques of wilderness medicine. All passed the course and we began to eagerly prepare for our time in the backcountry. The third day saw us packing food for the next three weeks of trekking through the park. Each cookgroup carefully measured out the quantities of food they would need for each week, from bulk containers we had set up in the campground (We cook in small groups of 3 to allow for more efficient meal preparation and more practice cooking). Our final night before taking off for the trails was highlighted by a blazing bonfire on the ocean beach accompanied by s'mores and songs, as the sunset lingered well past 10 PM!

On July 1st Jen and Erik's group headed for a 2 night backpacking trip on the coast where they completed a service project for the park. Among their accomplishments, they hauled a huge truck tire that had washed up in a winter storm, off the beach, 2 miles to the trailhead—an awesome team effort. Meanwhile, Tim and Christina's group set off for the high country on the East side of the park. This would begin the mountain portion

of the course for their group. Jen and Erik's group would start in on the same trail 2 days later, after their beach trip. The East side of the Olympic mountains, being in the "rain shadow" of the West side of the range, has a reputation for being rockier and drier than the West side. A cold wind whipped across the alpine tundra ridge as Tim and Christina's group made their way into the Grand valley for the night. The cold wind didn't stop their group from going for polar bear dips in the lake before dinner, however! The next 4 days saw the groups crossing 4 passes, testing ice ax skills on snow fields, summiting peaks, walking through flower filled meadows, watching golden eagles hunt for marmots, and generally making their way westward into the heart of the park, to a point 25 miles from trailheads in any direction. Tim and Christina's group celebrated July 4th camped under the stars on a high ridge, melting snow for water, discussing the virtues of wilderness, and the uniqueness of the wilderness system of our country. It was on these high ridges that we were afforded our first views of the glacier-clad massif of Mt. Olympus on the west side of the park, our goal for the last week of the course.

On our 5th day we began a long descent into the gorge-like valley of the Elwha River, the river which originates on a chain of ridges connected to Olympus and which splits the park in half on a North/South axis. The Elwha has gained recent publicity for 2 large dams which are built close to its ocean delta, which are soon to be removed, and in the process are certain to restore the large salmon runs which once came up this river and which grace all of the other large rivers in the park.

In the Elwha, we met Kit, an inspiring lady of 67 years, who hiked 18 miles up the river with her train of llamas to resupply us with food for our next week of hiking. Kit regaled us with tales of cougars and stories of hiking in the early days of the park. After a day of rest by the river, and a class on roped climbing techniques to continue our preparation for Olympus, we began hiking up river to the pass known as Low Divide. We spent a splendid day walking through some of the most impressive stands of Douglas fir in the world—trees 300 feet tall, 15 feet in diameter. It was here that our weather began to change too, however. Heavy rain began to fall in the night, hitting Jen and Erik's group in the mountains and Tim and Christina's group on a day when the Elwha River needed to be forded twice. Two adventurous river crossings, one on a downed log across the river and one in a line with linked arms as the water crested our knees, preceded the long climb to the pass. At this divide, we crossed into the Quinault River valley. The Quinault is a large and dynamic river draining directly into the Pacific Ocean, catching the worst of the winter storms and, as a consequence, the moisture nourishing old growth Sitka spruce trees and big leaf maple trees adorned with a curtain-like moss known as Selaginella, (both of which need over 100 inches of rain a year to survive). It was at this point in the trip that both groups headed off on "group solos," two days of travel without the help of instructors. We also held individual solos in this valley, with Tim and Christina's group running theirs among the big trees and mist of "Wolf Bar," (a huge rock and gravel bar taking its name from the pack of wolves that once roamed the valley before extirpation in the early 20th Century), on the lower Quinault, and Jen and Erik's group doing theirs in the subalpine forest of Low Divide. All of the students had fantastic experiences on their solos, including time for reflection, journaling, and chances to view wildlife.

At the end of week 2, we were met at the Quinault trailhead by Matt Thompson, our logistics coordinator, and antical Andrew, one of our climbing guides, for the short shuttle over to the Hoh River trailhead. A pizza dinner and business-like bed time foreshadowed the teamwork that would be required to pull off our summit bid for Olympus. The following morning we divided up all of the climbing gear and pre-packed food rations, packing some of it on our backs and some on Kit's llamas who would be accompanying us part of the way up our 18 mile trek to the base of the mountain. The Hoh River trailhead is at 500 ft. of elevation, and the summit of Mt. Olympus is at 7,995 ft. You can do the math. A lot of miles and a lot of climbing lay ahead of us. Two full days of hiking took us to our base camp on Olympus, 18 miles from the trailhead. The way up included a relatively flat day along the river, among huge spruce trees, sometimes crossing side channels of the river, on the downed trees themselves. The valley is known for its elk herds and here some of us were lucky enough to see a huge buck wade effortlessly across the gray and icy glacial torrent of the mighty Hoh River. Our packs became exceedingly heavy as Kit reached her turn around point—the point at which the trail became too washed out and thin to be safe for llamas. Tim and Christina's group had the task of ferrying climbing gear (ropes, crampons, snow pickets, carabiners, pulleys etc.) and food for the next 5 days the final 3 miles to our base camp, over the steep and narrow boot track up to our base camp below the glaciers (Jen and Erik's group would carry the climbing gear 18 miles downhill the other way!).

Both groups spent a day brushing up on glacier climbing skills before attempting the climb. For Tim and Christina's group, this day was spent on the Blue Glacier—literally a river of blue ice several miles long and perhaps 500 feet thick, flowing off the mountain at a snail's pace. Giant cracks in the ice, or crevasses, are testament to the movement as the ice flexes around the bends in the valley or over rock features lying beneath it. Mist and drizzle moved across the glacier all day, giving the mountain a foreboding look and certainly not boding well for our climb the next day. Occasionally, the summit would poke out in sunshine above the giant icefall of the Blue Glacier. A brief tour of the lower glacier afforded us views into deep blue crevasses, close up encounters with ice worms wiggling their way out of the ice, and the sounds of streams running inside the glacier with the occasional hollow sounds of rocks moving around below. Perhaps more importantly, it afforded us practice walking in crampons and as part of a rope team. This was a landscape new and unusual to us all, and characteristic of what would have been commonplace throughout most of northern North America during the last ice age. As we finished our training, we spotted a mother goat and her calf trudging carefully across the glacier and up into the rocky crags of the lateral moraine.

Bedtime was early, and wakeup for Tim and Christina's group was at 3 AM. Sunrise on the Blue Glacier afforded us views through the mist, to the occasional peek through the clouds at a silvery white summit, punctuated with black rock spires. If we could just get through the clouds! By 10 AM, we were above the clouds, making our way across the broad glacier-covered plateau known as Snow Dome. Here 200 feet of snow can fall in the winter, compacting into ice which feeds the lower glaciers. The rocky summit pinnacles were in sight (and below them a deer came bounding across the glacier, jumping a 10 ft. wide crevasse in one bound—a mirage? It headed straight for the ice fall to our horror, until we lost sight of it). Continuing our trek higher through a notch

between two of the pinnacles, we made our way around back, onto the upper Blue Glacier above all of the 1000 ft. ice falls we had earlier viewed from below. Wind whipped through the upper pinnacles and whisped strands of cloud with it. We crossed onto rock and made our bid for one of the pinnacles known as “5 fingers Peak,” perhaps one of the most spectacular perches in the whole park. As we sat above the clouds on this peak, we occasionally caught glimpses of our route and the ice of the Blue Glacier thousands of feet below, as it curved gracefully down its valley. After snapping quick photos, some 8 hours after leaving camp, it was time to turn around. The rope teams headed out one by one steadily but cautiously, knowing that most climbing accidents happen on the way down. Retracing our steps, we descended into the clouds. But even as we descended into them, they began to lift, and dappled the mountain in afternoon light. To our surprise and relief, the deer we had seen earlier on Snow Dome, had veered off its course for the icefall, and managed to pick a safe way down to the Blue Glacier. Picking our way among the crevasses, jumping across them occasionally, and jumping over an icy blue rivers flowing down the center of the glacier, we ascended the moraine and arrived back in base camp 14 hours after leaving.

Jen and Erik’s group would summit 2 days later in clear blue skies. Leaving camp at 1 AM, they arrived on Snow Dome by headlamp and watched the sun rise across the eastern ridges they had spent the past weeks traversing. Literally following in the foot steps cut by Tim and Christina’s group, they were able to make good time to the foot of the pinnacles. They then veered off the main route to take a more direct route to the summit pinnacles where they opted to climb an aesthetically pleasing drifted snow ridge between “5 fingers Peak” and “West Peak”.

Both groups descended the Hoh River trail over 2 days. Fresh cougar tracks on the trail between two factions of Tim and Christina’s group reminded us of the wildness of this place we were now leaving. Though we didn’t see the cat, and though people rarely see them in general, they are an integral part of this ecosystem and remind us that here is still a place where humans are not on top.

The perfect weather negated the need for tents in our last days, sleeping out under the stars on the giant gravel bars of the river, building campfires to cook over, discuss life, and savor the memories. Jen and Erik’s group even constructed a temporary and traditional “sweat lodge” to sweat out the bad humors, and concluded the ritual with an icy cleansing dip in the Hoh River. While Jen and Erik made their way out of the Hoh, Tim and Christina’s group moved on to the ocean beach where they spent two further nights under the stars, reminiscing around campfires, completing a service project (digging out and carrying an old canoe and car tire to the trailhead), and breathing in the rhythms of the ocean. Some of the lowest tides of the year afforded great views of anemones, sea stars and other intertidal creatures. Common murrets, marbled murrelets, pelagic cormorants, and bald eagles seemed to swarm around the rocky islands where they feed and in some cases breed.

As our groups reunited on the last day, stories of adventure abounded. We headed out to the beach for our final campfire and feast. All pitched in to make dinner: A first course of fresh salad, followed by potatoes, corn on the cob, and salmon all baked over a fire

nestled amongst the drift logs. In teams of 3 we boiled and ate Dungeness crab over camp stoves. The salmon and crab were caught in the waters off the beach by members of the neighboring Quillayute Indian tribe. (Though salmon runs are low this year, we made a decision to support the Quillayutes and their way of life—a tribe that has persisted here as stewards of the land, for thousands of years, long before the arrival of Europeans—this kind of decision, a constant reminder of how difficult it is to balance the needs of humans with those of the environment, and ultimately, how directly dependent on the environment we are for resources. Nowhere are this dependence and balance more starkly obvious than they are on the Olympic Peninsula). And of course, we ended with our traditional ice cream feast. With tummies and spirits mightily satisfied, the western sky turned a pink orange. As a fiery sun slid below the horizon, we shared our final thoughts and memories around the fire. The pelicans and seals in the surf drifted away to their night roosts across the swells, and so did we as the distant sounds of the ocean back at Mora lulled us to sleep on sea of memories.