

## *Pacific Biodiversity Institute's Unprotected Wilderness Report*

### **Sandy Butte and Little Falls Creek- August 18-20, 2000**

This report describes an exploratory outing hosted by the Pacific Biodiversity Institute to an unprotected wilderness area just north of the Lake Chelan- Sawtooth Wilderness. There were six people that participated in the exploration of the Sandy Butte and Little Falls Creek areas. Three PBI members and one PBI intern went out for two nights. Peter Morrison, PBI executive director, and Aileen Jeffries, PBI board member, participated by meeting up with the group on a day hike, August 20.

### **Access and Route**

The Sandy Butte area can be accessed by taking the North Cascades Highway (Hwy. 20) to FS 100 near Mazama. When heading west on Hwy. 20, FS road 100 is first road to the left (south) after passing Mazama. The FS roads are marked and not difficult to find. FS 100 is a four-wheel drive road and passenger cars are not recommended. Once you are on FS 100, pass the gate and continue. Take a right on FS road 145 and continue to the end of this road. From the road's end there is a user-made trail off to the west (from the end of the road look to the right). None of the trails described in this report are on FS maps.



The trail up Sandy Butte is somewhat intermittent but blazes on the trees mark the trail fairly regularly. The ascent to Sandy Butte is steep and it can be easy to lose the trail. On the plus side are views down the lush Cedar Creek and the interesting eroded shale on the top of Sandy Butte. Our route continued south over Sandy Butte where we picked up the ridge in between Huckleberry Creek and Little Boulder Creek. We camped along the ridge and were able to get water by going down the slope to Little Boulder Creek. The route along the ridge was easy to follow as it gets heavy use from cows. Our route then turned to the east and followed along the border of the Lake Chelan-Sawtooth Wilderness.

The second night we camped along this ridge just below Storey Peak and got water from the headwaters of Little Bolder Creek (see **Grazing**). From McKinney Mountain our group traveled cross-country down a steep slope skirting around the headwaters of Little Falls Creek. This area had closed canopy and navigation was difficult. Just north of Little Falls Creek there is a user made trail that goes to Lucky Jim Bluff. It could have proved problematic to find this trail after going cross-country from McKinney Mountain. Basically we bush-wacked down a steep forested mountainside. Navigation was difficult under the canopy. Luckily we were able to find a trail.

A steep well used trail descends from Lucky Jim Bluff and exits at Wolf Creek Road (county route 1131) just off of Highway 20 south of Mazama.

To access the Lucky Jim Bluff trail from Hwy. 20 turn on Wolf Creek Road (county route 1131), which is in between Winthrop and Mazama, turn south off the Hwy. 20. Continue over the cattle guard, about 1 mile in, and look for a parking area about ¼ of a mile beyond the guard to the right. Park here and go through a gate to the trail. There are many trails and skid roads that veer off from the main Lucky Jim Trail that can lead a hiker astray.

## **Land Use**

### **Logging**

There is a clear cut at the end of FS 145. The clear cut had a number of cows in it, was very dry and brushy. On a scouting trip on August 16, 2000 didn't take the trail up Sandy Butte but instead hiked up just east of the trail on the east side of the north ridge. Interestingly, as soon as we left the clear cut the forest was lush and moist with running seeps. It seemed that the cutting created an incredibly dry area that may have otherwise been lush.

There was cutting for the hunting camp below Storey Peak. The cutting was of trees approximately 6 inches or less diameter and there were probably 25 trees downed to build the corrals and the structure. There was helicopter logging on McKinney Mountain and this may have been a savage log since this area did look like it had been burned. We found the landing pad along our route on top of the ridge at McKinney Mountain. A ring of rocks painted white defined the landing pad and the snags along the ridge had been removed. The striking difference between this ridge and the ridgeline closer to Storey Peak where we had camped was that McKinney Mountain was devoid of birds.

There is logging and thinning near county route 1131 at Little Falls Creek. There are old logging roads and trails criss-crossing this area. As a result of logging and the large amount of soil disturbance noxious weeds including diffuse knapweed and mullein, are problematic in this area.

### **Grazing**

There was grazing along the entire route that we explored. The headwaters of Little Bolder Creek is tramped and obviously contaminated with bovine fecal matter. Not only have the cows destroyed Little Bolder Creek as a source of fresh water but also they have trampled the vegetation and disrupted the meadow systems of this drainage. In President Clinton's roadless directive he specifically addresses the importance of protecting wildlands as a way of insuring sources of clean water. We also observed cows in the Wolf Creek drainage which is not supposed to have any units in it (a unit is a bull or cow, or a cow and calf)

## Mining

We did not see any evidence of mining.

## Recreation

The trails up Sandy Butte and along the ridge were user built and were blazed with hatchet marks on the trees. There seemed to be some horse use and foot travel. There was a faint hiking trail up to the top of Storey Peak. The trails along the border of the Lake Chelan –Sawtooth Wilderness seemed to be used mostly by cows. The trail along Little Falls Creek seemed to be used predominately by foot and horse travel and there was fairly heavy foot travel up to Lucky Jim Bluff. We did not observe any evidence of bicycle use on the entire route.

There is a semi-permanent camp near Storey Peak, complete with corrals, a structure with walls, wine bottles littered about, and piles of plastic sheets. Compared to other camps this one was not particularly bad in regard to the amount of trash in the area, yet trees had been cut down to build the structures.

## Flora



### Trees

Up Sandy Butte there are open areas of well spaced old-growth Douglas-fir like the one shown in the picture to the left. Note the person standing in the left corner for scale.

#### Checklist:

- Engelmann spruce (*Picea engelmannii*)
- Subalpine larch (*Larix lyallii*)
- Ponderosa pine (*Pinus ponderosa*)
- Douglas fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*)
- Subalpine fir (*Abies lasiocarpa*)
- White bark pine (*Pinus albicaulis*)
- Lodgepole pine (*Pinus contorta*)

### Shrubs

#### Checklist:

- Western serviceberry (*Amelanchier alnifolia*)
- Thin-leaved blueberry (*Vaccinium membranaceum*)
- Kinnickinnick (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*)
- Snowberry (*Symphoricarpos* spp.)
- Oregon-Grape (*Berberis nervosa*)

Spirea (*Spiraeas* spp.)

## **Wild Flowers**

Checklist:

Lupine (*Lupinus latifolia*)  
Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*)  
Sandwort (*Arenaria capillaris*)  
Scarlet Gilia (*Ipomopsis aggregata*)  
Stonecrop (*Sedum* spp.)  
Columbia lewisia (*Lewisia coumbiana*)  
Heart-leaf arnica (*Arnica cordifolia*)  
Indian-paintbrush (*Castilleja* sp.)

## **Fauna**

### **Birds**

Checklist:

Barred Owl (*Strix varia*)  
Red-breasted Nuthatch (*Sitta canadensis*)  
Sharp shinned hawk (*Accipiter striatus*)  
Red-tailed hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*)  
Golden crowned sparrow (*Zonotrichia atricapilla*)  
Clark's nutcracker (*Nucifraga columbiana*)  
Common Raven (*Corvus corax*)  
Chickadee (*Parus* spp.)  
Spruce grouse (*Dendragapus canadensis*)  
Hummingbird (*Selasphorus* spp.)  
Woodpecker (*Melanerpes* spp.)

### **Mammals**

The one of the most exciting finds was a cougar print on the trail along Little Falls Creek. We did see deer, squirrels, and some bear scat.

## **Wilderness Potential**

The Sandy Butte area is a highly contested area, having been the proposed site of the Arrowleaf Project, a huge ski complex. Obviously, the wilderness characteristics of this area have been in grave danger in the past, and presently, the area is suffering a slower, yet persistent, deterioration from over grazing. Julie Monahan commented on the Sandy Butte trip by saying:

*This area is very special to me, for its wildness, its solitude, its diversity. But each visit raises feelings of ambivalence. On this trip we passed up campsites too*

*despoiled by the feces of grazing cows to use; I flinched at the site of a wetland pitted with muddy footsteps of roaming cows. One stream was so tramped, we filtered, boiled and added iodine to the water. We found that escaping signs of these farm animals was nearly impossible; the cows were able to go to surprisingly high elevations in search of food, walking and trampling delicate sub-alpine plants.*

This area offers examples of over-grazing, logging, and user abuse yet, this area has the breath-taking views, biodiversity, is generally the type of area that people are used to seeing in National Parks and in Wilderness areas. Silver Star jets up above the jagged Snagtooth Ridge and the talus slopes of Mount Gardner hold snow all year. From Sandy Butte one can look down into the lush and diverse Cedar Creek, a popular attraction because the roaring falls are just a mile and a half hike from Highway 20. The cliffs of Lucky Jim Bluff offer views of the Methow Valley below.

Despite some of the careless uses of the Sandy Butte area with its stock driveways and tramped headwaters this area does retain wilderness characteristics. George Wooten, a local botanist conducted a biological survey of this area in 1996. Like our group he found evidence of over grazing and interesting shale barrens. He also may have a new record of *Senecio* for Washington! Wooten has received some amount of support from other botanists that the plant he found is indeed *Senecio porteri*, a rare plant.

According to President Clinton's roadless directive of October 13, 1999, some of the reasons to protect the remaining FS roadless areas include increased opportunities for recreation, protection to endangered species, and to protect fresh water sources. Clinton's directive seems to speak specifically to the area that we explored. The Sandy Butte area represents over 50 square miles of unprotected wilderness that were excluded from the Lake Chelan-Sawtooth Wilderness. Could it be that this area was excluded due to the timber value of the trees in these biologically diversity river valleys? Or because someone thought it would make a good ski resort? We propose that the Sandy Butte area from Washington Pass to Wolf Creek be added to the Lake Chelan-Sawtooth Wilderness.

## **References**

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