



DANIEL SILVERBERG

FLY-FISHING THE ENCHANTMENTS

Washington State's Alpine Lakes Wilderness is home to a rugged basin high in the Cascades called the Enchantment Lakes. The Enchantments, as they are known, are the holy grail of backpacking in Washington. The Enchantments are characterized by granite spires, glacial cirques, alpine meadows, mountain goats, subalpine larches, and glacially fed lakes and creeks that are home to some very hardy trout.

The Core Enchantment Zone, the heart of the area between Aasgard Pass and Snow Lake, is best thru-hiked with a car shuttle to complete the loop. Many people prefer the long, gradual grind up the Snow Lakes side, gaining 6,000 feet over 10 miles to the bottom of the Enchantments. I prefer storming up Aasgard Pass, 6 miles and 4,400 feet to the top of the Enchantments, with 2,300 of those feet in one mile up Aasgard Pass itself. Allowing three days will leave the most time to enjoy the area, though some adventurous sorts like to hike the whole thing in a day. Regardless, the full 18-mile thru-hike with 6,500 feet of elevation gain, with opportunity for numerous detours, will test the hardest of hikers.

Between June 15th and October 15th, the wilderness plan for the Alpine Lakes Wilderness limits the number of hikers in the Core Enchantment Zone to 60 people at a time. Three-quarters of those permits are issued via a lottery months in advance. Don't count on winning; the *Adventure Journal* recently rated the Core Enchantment Zone

number three on their list of hardest wilderness permits to get in the United States. The remaining quarter of walk-in permits are available first thing in the morning at the ranger station for those fleet of foot.

If you do win a permit, I beg you, bring your rod. After you put in the work to get here, you will kick yourself if you arrive without it. Even if your trip to the Enchantments is not a fly-fishing trip (and it's not for most folks who win an overnight permit here), bring your tenkara rod. You own it for a reason, right? It's lightweight, it's simple, and it's easy to pack. You owe it to yourself to come prepared to fish.

Why? Because fly-fishing in the high country is a pure joy. You will have to earn your entry with ample amounts of luck and sweat, but you will be rewarded. Stop along the trail, string up, and cast. These fish are innocent, naïve, and hungry. They know nothing of our fish-fooling ways. Their snow-free feeding season is

short and intense. These fish feed indiscriminately and ravenously. Not to mention, the fishery is inherently limited by the permitting and the difficulties of access. How many anglers do you know who are willing to hike tens of miles and climb thousands of feet just to wet a line?

The Enchantment Lakes are home to hardy rainbows, west slope cutthroats, cut-bows, and brook trout. The lakes in the Upper Enchantments were stocked as early as the 1930s, but they are not stocked any longer. All remaining fish are from naturally reproducing stocks. Trout persist in many lakes, despite a lack of good breeding areas and regular winter kill. The highest-elevation lakes can be hit or miss, but just because you don't see any fish doesn't mean they aren't there. Also, don't overlook the many tarns fed by creeks between the larger lakes.

The inlets and outlets of the lakes, with creeks cascading between, are the best place to start. Fish cruise the shorelines midday, on the prowl for food. Nothing more than a basic ant pattern attracted every cruiser I saw. Stalking the shoreline, hiding behind boulders on hands and knees, spotting a fish, sight-casting to cruising trout, predicting their path, enticing and anticipating, seeing the strike, bringing beautiful and wild west slope cutthroats to hand, all in the shadow of impossible granite cathedrals... this is a special kind of experience.

Enchanting, to say the least.

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