



Alpine Adventures in the Cascades

By Ray Pomponio

July 10 - 15, 2025, Washington Pass (Mazama WA)

Climbing Teams

Ray Pomponio & Drew Gallagher

Scott Corl & Monica Dayao

Dylan Bargteil & Dan Kanitz

Summits Reached

Liberty Bell Spire, via *Beckey Route* and *The Girl Next Door*

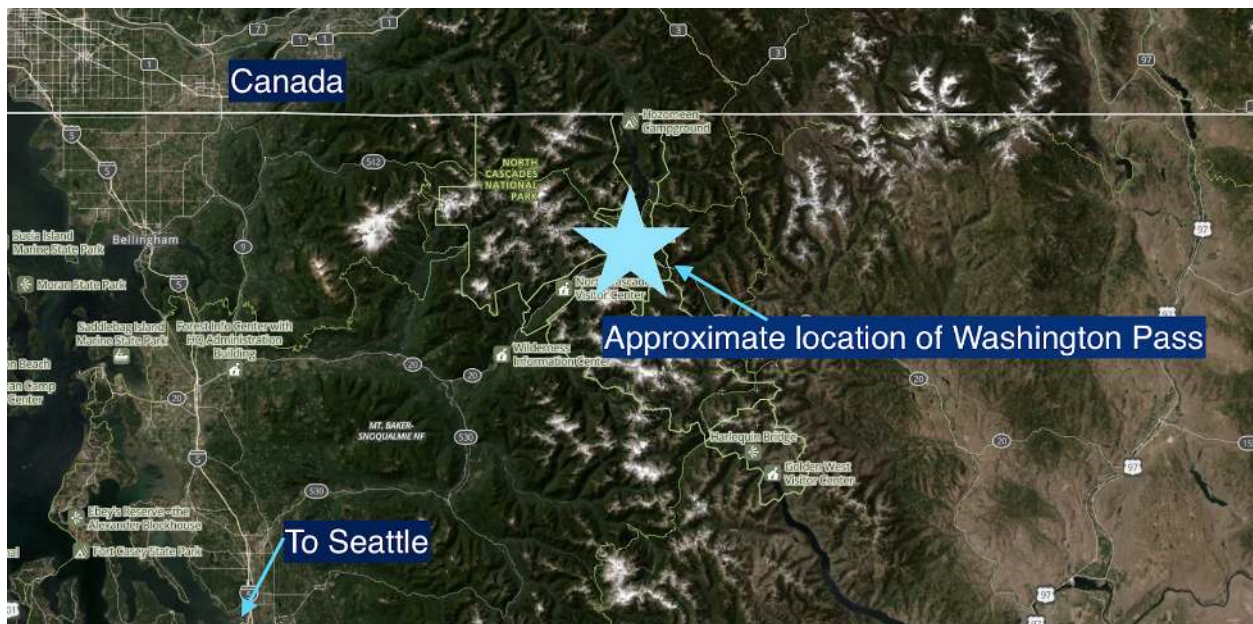
Concord Tower, via *North Face* and *The Cave Route*

Lexington Tower, via *North Face*

South Early Winters Spire, via *Southwest Rib* and *The Hitchhiker*

Kangaroo Temple, via *North Face*

Synopsis



Map of Northwest WA including the location of our climbing objective, Washington Pass

Over a long weekend in July 2025, six ECP'ers convened for an alpine climbing trip in the Washington Pass area of North Cascades National Park. While other ECP'ers were in the region with eyes on Mount Shuksan, our objective was determined based on a general interest in sampling the alpine granite that was known to exist on the eastern side of the park. Ultimately, we found that some of the rock in Washington Pass was less than excellent—while most of the faces were stellar and awe-inspiring, we encountered plenty of questionable flakes, pillars, and rubble piles. The trip was an overall success with every climber tagging at least two summits in the vicinity of the famous “Liberty Bell” group. Several injuries occurred, but these were relatively minor and did not stop the injured members from climbing until the completion of the trip.



The Liberty Bell Group, as seen from the east (Mazama), driving on Highway 20

Climber Perspectives

Day 1 - Friday July 11, 2025

Ray

Our first climbing day began under somewhat strained circumstances. We had arrived in Mazama after 10pm the evening before, and we opted for a late alpine start of 5:30am. Sleep was minimal. The Blue Lake trailhead was half-full of cars when we pulled in around 6am. We shortly began the daunting 2,000-foot approach to the West Face of the Liberty Bell, our primary objective. The approach can be roughly divided into two halves; the first is an official trail leading to the lake, but before reaching the lake one exits to a climber's path featuring more rugged terrain. We approached the base of the Liberty Bell spire in just under 1.5 hours.

Next came the crucial selection of routes. The West Face of Liberty Bell offers many parallel paths to the summit at relatively moderate climbing grades. There was a party ahead of us climbing the classic Beckey Route (5.6), but they were more than a pitch up by the time we arrived. We decided that Drew and I would tackle the Beckey Route while Scott and Monica explored the less-popular Girl Next Door (5.9).

We came to realize we were staged halfway up the first pitch of Girl Next Door on a low-fifth class ramp. This meant that Scott and Monica were just a few feet from the first set of bolts on their route, and that I had to traverse right to gain the intended start of the Beckey Route. When I completed this traverse and began the exciting "tunnel" pitch to begin the route proper, I was out of sight from Scott and Monica.

I emerged from the tunnel feeling giddy and playful, then heard someone's shouting reverberating on the steep walls to our right. I radioed my belayer to find out that Scott had taken a fall on the second pitch of Girl Next Door and slammed his feet onto a slabby section of rock. Immediately my jubilation was deflated. I was reminded of the unpredictable and hazardous environment we were climbing in, and I asked the other team if they needed anything. I half-expected our day might end early with a self-evacuation so that Scott could get



medical attention, but he responded optimistically and said he would try to finish the pitch. I returned my focus as best I could to the rest of the Becky Route and expected that I would get updates from the other team upon reaching the summit.

The Becky Route is three excellent pitches of moderate, fifth-class climbing, followed by a fourth-class scramble to the summit. Each pitch offers a comfortable belay ledge to stand on. The third pitch includes a memorable, traversing layback on low-angle slab to gain views of the true summit, some 200 feet upwards. It is a classic for a reason, and there were multiple parties waiting to climb the route by the time we summited, roughly 10am.



Ray P. nearing the top of the classic Becky Route (5.6), on Liberty Bell Spire

Despite a setback due to Scott's fall, he and Monica arrived shortly after us at the summit of the Liberty Bell. I learned that the fall was caused by a hold breaking in Scott's hand, hurling him down the side of the mountain before he could react to what had happened. Fortunately his gear, which was not far below his stance at the time, held. Plus thanks to Monica's catch, Scott only suffered a moderate sprained ankle where a more-forceful impact could have meant a rescue. We were lucky to be standing at the summit with so much time left in the day and nearby peaks to climb. Cautiously, we decided to push forward.

We took advantage of the remainder of the day without more of an approach by climbing the nearby Concord and Lexington Towers. Concord Tower's north face is a darker shade of granite and tends to have sharp features. While I was leading the first pitch of The Cave Route (5.8), I snapped a flake in my left hand, sending a shower of choss down onto the notch between Liberty Bell and Concord. I yelled "Rock! Rock!" but thankfully no one was crossing under me at the time. Even more luckily, I hadn't put my full weight on that flake so I was able to stabilize myself as soon as it broke. I was still rattled to feel the sudden explosion of



poor-quality rock in my hand, and I carefully finished the pitch while testing every questionable hold I could identify.



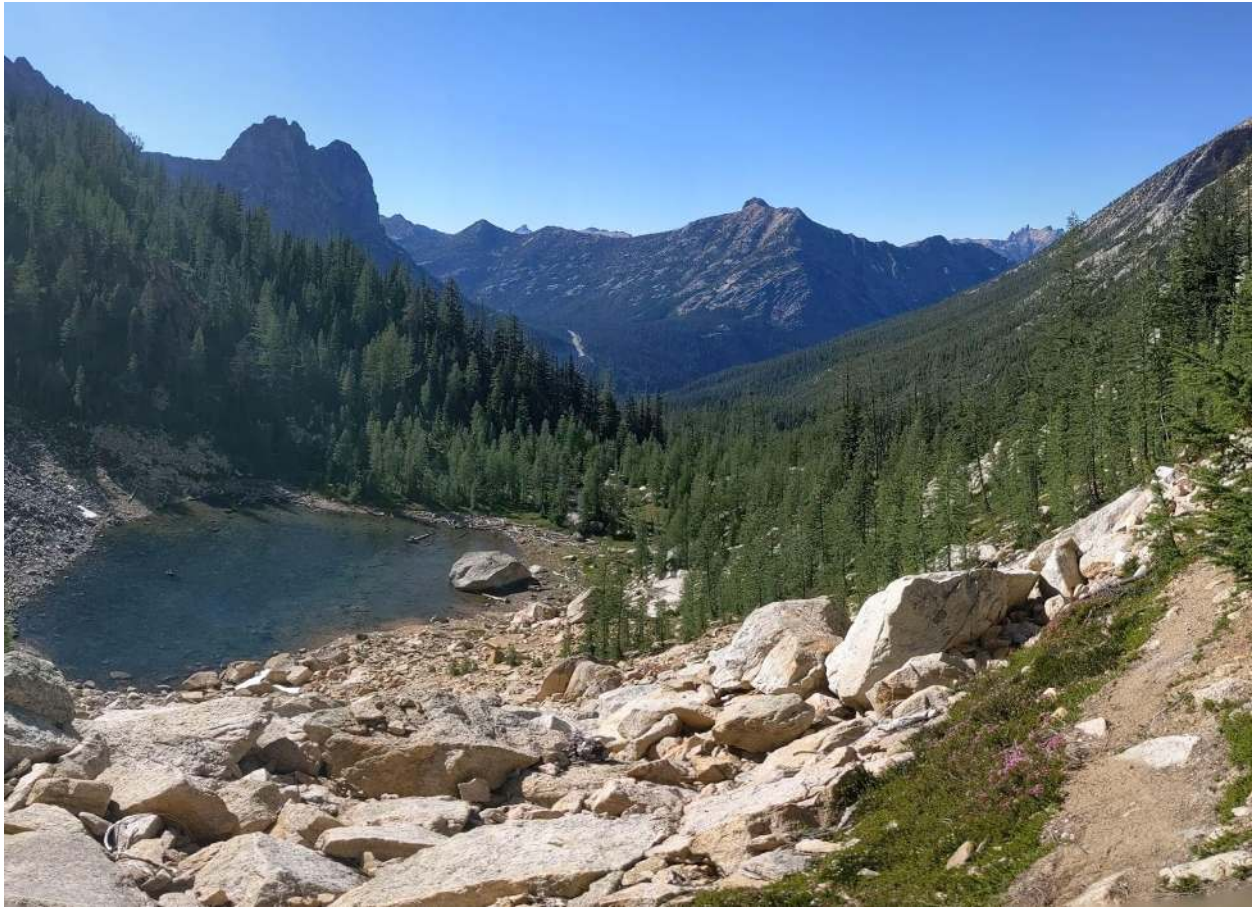
(Left to right) Ray P., Scott C., Monica D., and new member Drew G. atop Lexington Tower, the third summit of the day

On reflection, the day was a near-perfect introduction to climbing in Washington Pass. I wish we had all been more cautious with respect to rock quality; The reality that Scott and I both pulled rocks loose reflects a combination of objective hazard, mild carelessness, and bad luck. However, every adventure into the alpine is somewhat educational, and we left with an opportunity to learn from our experience. I applied some of the lessons from Day 1 to my choice of route on Day 3 (below), by pursuing a route of a far different character.

Day 2 - Saturday July 12, 2025

Dylan

Dan and I arrived Friday night after several frustrating travel mishaps, but planned to ease into the alpine environment with the North Face of Kangaroo Temple, a three-pitch 5.6 accessed via Kangaroo Pass. The trail up to the pass weaves through forest and bush and crosses several talus fields making it hard to follow, but with the pass clearly visible once out of the trees it is easy to course correct. Just before the pass, we passed a beautifully clear alpine lake that called out to us to dawdle, gawp, and relax.



Typical alpine setting in the Cascades: pine forests mingling with white granite, and clear lakes abound. Pika, marmots, and mazama goats inhabit this environment.

On the far side of the pass the trail is more distinct and contours below Kangaroo Ridge towards a gully northwest of the Temple. Ascending (and descending!) the steep, loose gully proved to be the crux of the day, especially since we were without trekking poles. We were surprised to find a party of six on this less traveled route when we arrived, so we rested at the base, enjoying each other's company and the company of the prolific mazamas. Unfortunately we also shared company with relentless biting flies and mosquitos, which fiercely dogged us all the way up the mountain. The prevalence of bugs and loose approaches made me wonder if better conditions might be found in the shoulder season.



A mazama contemplating following Dan up the blocky first pitch

The route consists of a long, wandery first pitch with blocky, but mostly solid terrain. Many variations are possible on the first pitch, and steeper direct variations may be advisable to reduce rope drag. The next two pitches are short, and each features a blind balancey traverse around blunt corners with minimal hand holds. The final 15 feet are the only 5.6 moves on the route, ascending from the third pitch traverse up to ledges with easy scrambling to the summit.

On the summit ledges, I charged up a low angle slab towards the summit block only to find that halfway up the slab the rock broke down into kitty litter clumps. What appeared to be viable footholds would pulverize under the slightest pressure, and he was forced to reverse and follow Dan around a less direct but more solid line. We enjoyed a summit lunch and gazed out towards Glacier Peak and Mount Stuart, though identifying any peaks was beyond us.

Given the slow pace of the day and the involved approach, we decided to forego the five-pitch 5.7+ Northwest Face of Kangaroo Temple and finish our hike out, but I suspect it is a superior route to the North Face with more consistent climbing and starting further down the gully, saving a bit of suffering on the approach (though not the descent). Speaking of the descent, we once again lost the trail in the woods on the way down from Kangaroo Pass and ended up squishing around in a drainage. The day truly isn't over until it's over, but we made it back to the cars shortly thereafter satisfied with our summit and that while we would have to deal with the hazards of the alpine, we at least wouldn't be getting sandbagged by grades.



Dylan B. and Dan K. atop the summit of Kangaroo Temple

Day 3 - Sunday July 13, 2025

Dylan

Torn between wanting to maximize our climbing and wanting to take it easy after the Kangaroo Temple descent worked our knees, Dan and I decided to hike to the Liberty Bell group to try to get photos of the other two groups on their respective routes. If we were feeling up for it, we would make our way up the gully between Concord & Lexington and climb the North Face of Lexington for a better vantage point on the Southwest Rib of SEWS where Monica and Scott were climbing. When we realized that Dan's drone was unfortunately unable to fly its full range due to lack of internet connectivity, our secondary plan became our primary plan.

To our surprise, despite an average slope angle just under 40° and more than double the rise compared to the Kangaroo Temple gully, we found relatively easy passage up climber's left almost right up against Concord Tower. This time we also each had one trekking pole! After scrambling 800' of gully, we reached the base of the short route to the summit. The crux of the route is right off the ground with an awkward diagonal crack with tempting but chossy jugs just above the crack. While the protection is good, awkward wide stemming and high smeary feet to surmount a bulging slab feels heady so close to the deck. The pitch then wanders up and right through blocky terrain to a final short steep step. The second pitch wanders more through blocky and mossy terrain (though as is often the case, steeper and more direct variations are possible). At this point we were able to peak through a notch to wave at Scott and Monica on the summit of SEWS. The final ridge "scramble" to the summit block was delightful and exposed.

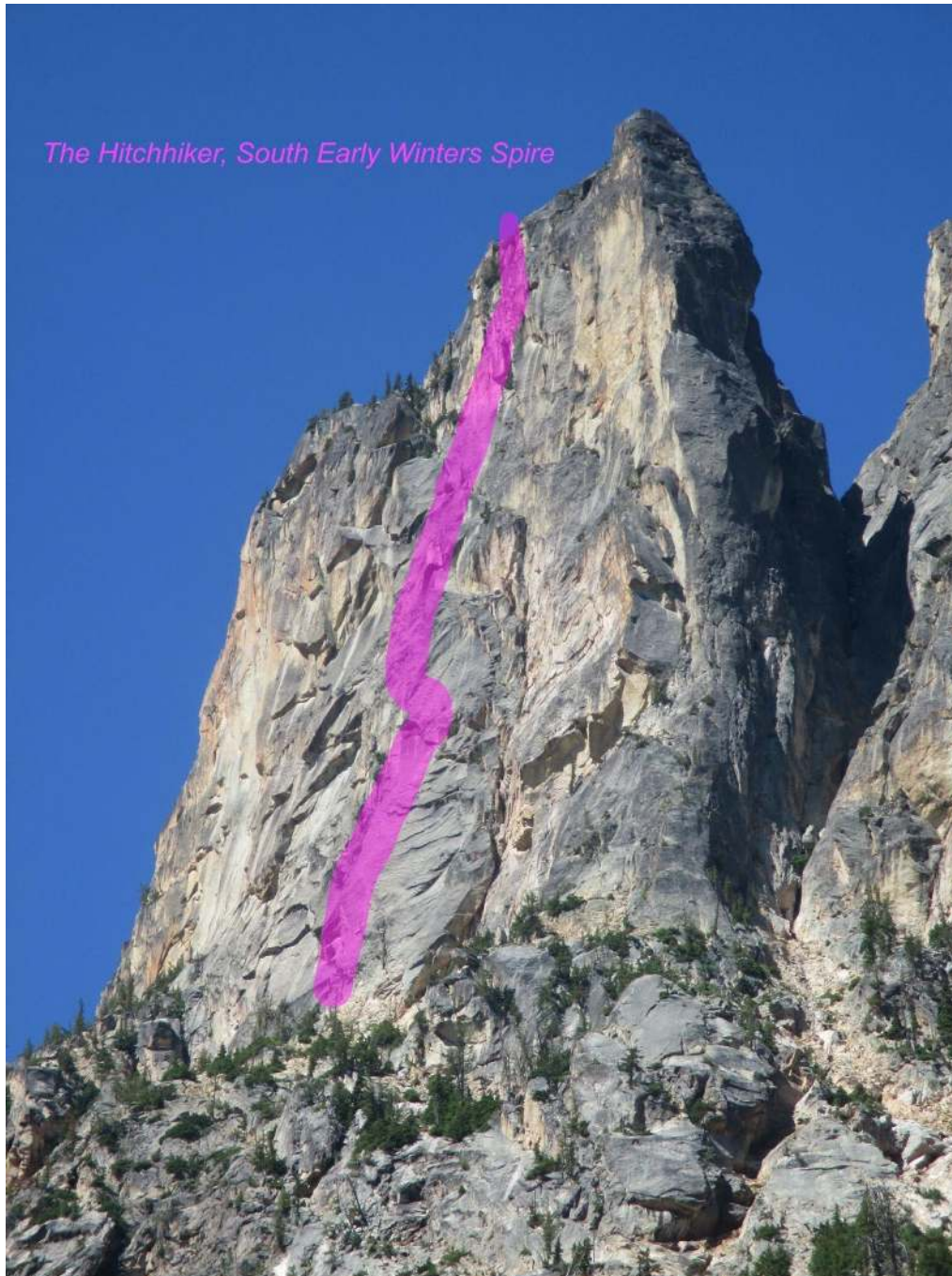


Early Winters Spires from the summit of Lexington Tower. Monica & Scott visible as very tiny bumps on the summit of SEWS (the further tower on the right).

Ray

With a rest day to regroup, I had outlined an ambitious objective for the final day of climbing: the southern aspect of South Early Winters Spire (SEWS), via *The Hitchhiker* (5.11-, Grade IV). My partner Drew was willing to follow me on the nine-pitch, mixed-protection route. Meanwhile Scott and Monica would be blitzing the classic *Southwest Rib* (5.8+) to the summit of the same spire.

I had read two possible approaches to the route, which was established in 2007 during a wave of modern development in the area. The easiest approach seemed to repeat what we had done two days earlier from the Blue Lake trailhead, only this time hiking behind the base of the SEWS, through a saddle, and down to the start of the route. I heeded the guidebook's warning about the alternate approach—technically shorter—up a heinously steep scree field from the hairpin turn on Highway 20. I cannot recommend that option after seeing the scree myself.



A rough overlay of the route selected on South Early Winters Spire (SEWS)

Strategically, we would be leaving some gear and shoes at the base of the South Arete (5.4), which is the common descent route from the summit of the SEWS. For the last ten percent of the approach, we had to down-scramble from the saddle to the base of The Hitchhiker in our rock shoes. The idea was to lighten our packs while attempting to climb a very steep and sustained route—no pitch is easier than 5.10 and most of the terrain is technical. I think this strategy ultimately succeeded although we spent 45 minutes searching for the start of the route, which was further downhill from the saddle than I had thought.

Finally, at the base of the first pitch by 8am, I put on my harness and started up a steep dihedral protected by a mixture of bolts and traditional gear. I was immediately challenged by the technical nature of the climbing; anytime I looked for footholds, I was presented with small scoops and dishes in the granite that offered opportunities for smearing only. But my improvised technique was working; I inched up the corner as the pitch lessened in angle and found myself climbing comfortably to a small ledge with bolts and a tree. I



excitedly clipped the anchor and radioed down to my belayer. At 5.10 and roughly 80 feet long, this first pitch was an important test of our fitness for the route.

We would be tested continually by the exposed character of the route, as well. Pitches were steep, often demanding liebacks in corners or requiring difficult mantle moves to gain the few ledges with opportunities to rest. By the time we arrived below the fifth pitch, I was physically taxed. But the next section would call for mental commitment, leaving the relative security of the belay ledge and traversing over enormous exposure on 5.11 slab. I cautiously made the opening moves and found relief in clipping the first two bolts off the belay. The next move required a delicate span to a right-hand crimp, which was out of reach and just beneath me as I stood on a vague sloping shelf. I resisted every urge to back away, trying desperately to find something to pull with my left hand to create opposition. I ultimately fell at the crux move, wishing I could've kept a cooler head. But the bolt kept me safe—luckily the entire route was equipped with new stainless steel hardware—and not wanting to lose too much time, I pressed on and finished the pitch with occasional “French free” aid.



Drew G. clinging to a slab high up on The Hitchhiker (5.11-, IV)

The remainder of the route was physically stout and intimidating. The seventh pitch had me aiding a bulging finger crack positioned over the most exposure yet! The effort required to complete the final pitches seemed insurmountable. I contemplated bailing with two pitches to go—a more-moderate exit exists, though it is not recommended—and questioned whether I could gather courage to tackle another 5.11 crux and a steep hand crack to the finish. When we relayed our progress to the other team, we learned that they were waiting at the summit for us to finish, expecting that we would descend together. This gesture was enough to encourage me to try to finish the route as intended. We were properly on-pace despite the physicality of the day so far. I suspected we would make it to the summit by 6pm—overall, a 10-hour push.



The final two pitches were extraordinary and, in keeping character with the route, extremely difficult. The overhung corner on pitch eight is likely the technical crux of the route; it is bolted generously for aid (to which I happily resorted). The steep hands on the ninth pitch were thin (#1 Camalot), with poor feet. I fought with every ounce of reserve strength to free-climb the last pitch and arrived at the summit ledge just before 6pm. Drew arrived around 6:30pm, and our teammates Monica and Scott were generously awaiting our arrival. We quickly snapped some summit photos and began the technical descent of the South Arete. We made it down before dark and soaked in the sunset views of the surrounding mountains. The trip was coming to a successful close.