

Eagle Cap Wilderness, Oregon, July 2008

During the last week of July, I went on a backpacking trip with my friend Dave Sumner, who is an English professor at Linfield College in McMinnville, Oregon, an hour's drive south and west of Portland. We have done a number of extended trips together over the past 8 years: two in the Sawtooth Wilderness in Idaho, two in the Eagle Cap Wilderness in Oregon, one in Dark Canyon in Utah's canyon country, and a couple of winter trips: one in the Oregon Cascades and one near Yellowstone Park. These trips are a tonic for me and seem to only increase in importance (at least from my perspective) as time goes on. It doesn't get any easier to find the time to go, which is part of the reason why they end up being so sweet, I think. Also, as life's bludgeoning instance increases yearly, it becomes more difficult to touch the pure-joy within. These trips, unfailingly, bring that joy forth; though on this trip it took several backcountry days for that to happen, which was longer than ever.

There was a time when Dave and I would spend most of the daylight hours on these trips talking about "deep" philosophical questions, but nowadays we just hike our asses off and keep our mouths shut a fair amount of the time, as nowadays we find suffering to be more redemptive than philosophizing. Also, I'd say that these trips are for us like a pilgrimage is to the religious (neither of us attends church): hardship, companionship, spiritual renewal, yaddah, yaddah, yaddah.

Anyway, this is my first journal about one of these trips. I've taken pictures on only two of them. Below is a sample from this year's adventure, together with two poems that I wrote following our last two trips (2006 and 2008), both of which were in the Eagle Cap. Incidentally, this awesome place is, at 300 miles drive, closer to Missoula than a good deal of the rest of Montana.

Here's to Wilderness, my church.

<p>A Larger World <i>to Dave Sumner</i></p> <p>Our minds were quiet after five wilderness days, traveling from lake to lake; the highest was still frozen. That morning we climbed Eagle Cap, then boot-skied the south bowl snow fields.</p> <p>It was our last night, and we sat quietly, near the edge of a cliff in a steep canyon, the sound of crashing water constant, watching the fire, sated, after burritos (again) and the last of the whiskey.</p> <p>Then, at the precipice, on a dead-tree-branch, an owl quietly landed. We heard the muffled wing-beat and turned. She left her perch and us with a larger world.</p>	<p>High Country <i>to Dave Sumner</i></p> <p>Standing on a rock, on the shore of Swamp Lake, sun setting, rays warm on my back, whiskey buzz, twilight sky, pine, fir, stone, snow down to the water. After five days,</p> <p>I feel changed, finally. I dive in, and cool water rushes along my skin, then I'm to shore and out. Warm clothes on, I sit by the fire, enjoying the night and our final evening's conversation.</p> <p>In the morning, we hike out, snow still deep on the high pass, but slowly disappearing as we descend, and the streams swell. At the car, tired, we drink beer kept cool by the creek.</p> <p>A burger in town, a quick good-bye, handshake, and the long drive home, with a bath in the Clearwater River on the way—lakes, mountains, rivers, the road: this day is worth all the rest.</p>
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Mirror Lake, morning of day two.



Day two hiking.



Eagle Lake, day three.



Big brookie, night three.



Campfire, night three.



Swamp Lake, night five.