



# Twilight Of the Glaciers

From First Travel Page

well-sequestered Pumpelly Glacier, for example, at 8,420 feet, and its close neighbor, the Pumpkin Glacier.

Other glaciers are nearer a trail, but still display their remote and frigid glory at some distance, and in a way the craggy surroundings make them even more vivid. I chose the Siyeh Pass Trail because it affords a prolonged, spectacular view of the Sexton Glacier from below.

Alpine glaciers like Sexton don't look like peaks or cubes. A couple of miles into the hike, as the trail opened into a valley, it came into view: a massive, ragged smear of snow-laden ice, perched just under the sawtooth granite skyline.

My audio track, meanwhile, was the cascading water of Baring Creek, which runs parallel to much of the trail. Descending from the glacier, it charges over a series of red-rock ledges and then makes its way down into the azure St. Mary Lake far below.

As the trail continued, the bottom edge of Sexton became visible — a violent crumble, broken loose by gravity and temperature. Glaciers are forceful, slow-flowing rivers of ice. With binoculars, I could see Sexton's thickness and true magnitude. The perspective also offers, if you're up for it, a rather stunning view into the future. As I pushed ahead, a graying volunteer ranger approached me at a nimble gait. No bears sighted, he reported. (O.K.!) He was a veteran of decades here, it turned out. We craned our necks up at the still-formidable Sexton, and he said that it had once looked far larger to him. I read later that it has, in fact, lost at least 30 percent of its surface area since the mid-'60s.

There are several measures of what qualifies as a glacier. One generally accepted rule of thumb is that they are a minimum of 25 acres in size. The most recent report has Sexton at 68.

I moved on, ascending the switchbacks that pull the Siyeh trail up toward the 8,000-foot pass. I was well above tree line by now, and only a few peaks away from the Canadian border. Not far off, out on the moraines, a quartet of mountain goats appeared, munching and then settling.

A good idea. I was tired, too. According to Stephen Ambrose's "Undaunted Courage," which follows the cross-country trek of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, Lewis was able to bushwhack 30 miles in a day. I was going to do 11, and without the whacking. (The Lewis and Clark expedition came within sight of these mountains in 1806.)

As I rested I heard women's voices come from up the trail, sounding like an exuberant traveling book group. They seemed delighted to find a sprawled, worn-out guy to greet in passing. "How do you like it? This is our backyard!" the leader announced, adding that they were from Kalispell, Mont., just southwest of the park. I responded in superlatives, and asked whether folks here talk much about what's happening with the glaciers.

There was a pause and the temperature seemed to decline a degree or two. "God will take care of everything we need," one said.

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CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT Pumpelly Glacier; a big-horned sheep; Many Glacier Hotel; Bob Schuster talks on "Where have all the glaciers gone?"; a "red jammer" bus; boat on Swiftcurrent Lake; Lake Josephine.

"I don't think man has anything to do with that," her friend put in. (A bartender at one of the lodges, not-authorized-to-speak-publicly-on-the-matter, confided that not all locals share these views.)

After a bit, they warmed enough to point out some huckleberry bushes nearby. (This is a popular shrub around here, and not just for bears; after a few days in the area, I can attest to the virtues of locally marketed huckleberry beer, jam, pie, syrup, Riesling, lip balm, French toast, soda, cobbler, lemonade, ice cream, daiquiris, tea and milkshakes.)

Retracing my steps back down to the trailhead, I was alone again — not a wise practice, according to park brochures. Lewis recounted that one grizzly, already shot four times through the lungs, charged and dispersed a six-man hunting party while its stalwarts were still firing. Still, over the past hundred years, and despite tens of millions of visitors, only 10 fatal grizzly attacks have been recorded here. They do, however, take up a fair portion of mind space.

The Siyeh Pass Trail can either be an extended loop or a somewhat shorter out and back of about 11 miles — the option I chose. As I headed back down into the valley it wasn't much of a stretch to think of the looming Sexton as alive. The pressure of the glaciers' weight causes the ice to flow forward over the landscape; colder temperatures allow for a buildup of ice, which speeds up the flow. Heat — a warmer day, season or era — is the competing force, and the glaciers ebb. That movement is a defining feature, part of what makes glaciers distinct from your more prosaic all-year patches of snow.

The day before, I had spoken with Daniel Fagre, who coordinates climate change and glacial geology studies here for the United States Geological Survey. He is a 20-year veteran of research at the park. The retreat of the glaciers began around 1850, he said, as part of a slow, natural climatic variation, but the disappearing act has accelerated during the last hundred years. Until recently, his research projected that, as global warming hit its stride, the park's glaciers would all be gone by the year 2030. Now he thinks it may be as soon as 2020.

Outsize snows this past winter, which kept many park roads and trails closed well into July, could briefly forestall the meltdown, but the longer warming trend is inexorable, he said.

No reprieve? "No, I think we are continuing on that path," he said.

The science is preliminary, but it's clear that this loss will be more than aesthetic for the park's ecosystem, he said. Those glacial reservoirs provide a steady supply of cool meltwater through hot summers and dry spells, helping to sustain a constellation of plants and animals, some rare — big-horned sheep, elk and mountain goats among them.

Passing again under the glacier as daylight faded, the trail neared its end. Those prospective losses weighed heavily — nostalgia, of a sort, laced with dread.



MORE pleasantly, the park celebrates nostalgia of a different sort — from the Art Deco typography on the official signage to the fleet of low-slung, roll-top tour buses known as "red jammers," which date from the '30s. These ply the roads between robber-baron-era hotels, offering full- and half-day tours to various sections of the park (\$30 and up).

There's a wealth of accommodations along the eastern and western boundaries of the park, especially in the towns of East Glacier Park and West Glacier. Despite their names, these towns, with populations of only a few hundred each, are more like distant cousins than identical twins. West Glacier, half an hour from the Kalispell airport, is generally newer, and sprawls.

East Glacier Park, two and a half hours north of the Great Falls, Mont., airport, is a charming, tumbleweedy throwback with a string of weathered eateries and motor-court lodgings that are only slightly post-World War II. There's also the Backpacker's Inn, a combination hostel and super-cheap motel with a mostly youthful clientele who like the clean, spare single rooms for \$30 a night. I've stayed in each of these places a time or two, but this night — after a fiery, pepper-laden dinner of