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Eye on the Environment:

Sharing September Snow

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for the Seeley-Swan Pathfinder

In September of 1989, I decided to climb Holland Peak in the Swan Range. Holland Peak, at 9356 feet, is the tallest mountain in the Swan Range and was named after B. B. Holland, the first settler to homestead in Swan Valley.

Although I had yet to set foot on the summit of Holland Peak, I had been in the vicinity several times camping and fishing at both Lower and Upper Rumble Lakes, as well as exploring and hunting nearby basins and ridgelines.

I knew that it would be a strenuous undertaking as there was over 4800 feet of elevation gain between the start at the Cooney Trailhead and the top of Holland peak. That figure was based on a straight line of nearly three miles from bottom to top. Like so many routes in the rugged mountains, this climb would be anything but a straight line. It would be a variation of the old mountain saying, "Sometimes you have to go north to get south". The actual route that I would take was a bit over five miles one-way.

I was planning to attempt the climb in one day so I packed light. I brought along adequate clothing, food, water, emergency supplies, ice axe, and fishing

pole. I decided early in the planning that I would see how I felt when I got to Lower Rumble Lake. If I felt strong and energetic I would keep pushing upward to Upper Rumble Lake. If not, I would fly-fish the lower lake and save Holland Peak for another day. I would repeat my evaluation at Upper Rumble Lake and if I still felt good, I would continue up toward the peak. No matter how the day turned out, it would be a great day in the backcountry.

I woke before dawn on the day of the climb to check the weather. It rained during the night, but the clouds moved out and nothing but bright stars shone in the predawn sky. After a quick breakfast, I was on my way to the Cooney Trailhead at the end of Rumble Creek Road.

In the half-light of dawn I started up the trail. In less than half a mile this section of trail merged with the old lower foothills trail running in a north-south direction along the base of the Swan Range. This old trail was built by the US Forest Service in the late 1920's, early 1930's and once went along the foot of the Swan Range from Lion Creek south to the Holland Lake area. The only section of this trail that is still maintained is the stretch from here approximately six miles south to the East Holland Connector Trail above the northeast corner of Holland Lake.

I hiked south along the lower foothills trail for roughly a half mile before leaving the maintained trail less than a hundred yards past Rumble Creek. The easy part of the hike was over. Turning east on a faint path, the route to Lower Rumble Lake and beyond weaved for the most part straight up the steep face of the

ridge that separated Rumble Creek from the South Fork of Rumble Creek.

According to John Stark, an early-day Swan Valley resident, Rumble Creek was named for an early settler by the name of Rumble who had a cabin near the creek. The 1903 survey map had that cabin site shown on it.

The air was crisp and cool as I climbed the steep path to Lower Rumble Lake. The vegetation was wet from the previous night's rain. Making good time and still feeling good, I paused only briefly at the lower lake before resuming my climb upward. A few fish were rising on the placid, emerald-colored water as I skirted the southwest corner of the lower lake. I hiked through the scree rock, my route angling upward to the south of the waterfall that poured over the rocky cliff band that held Upper Rumble Lake in its high alpine basin. The waterfall, spectacularly beautiful earlier in the season when the melting snow waters gushed out of the high country, was reduced now late in the season to a trickle of water flowing down the face of the rocky cliff.

Upon hoisting myself over the lip of the rock cliff, I startled a mountain goat that was feeding nearby. It quickly climbed up the sharply angled shoulder of rock immediately to the south and shortly disappeared from sight.

Upper Rumble Lake is a beautiful high alpine lake situated at 7890 feet. Most of the area is rocky with scattered patches of heath meadows. What few trees grow in this area are short and stunted. In the whole basin, there is only one tree tall enough to hang food in bear bags suspended from ropes. A steep

snowfield tucked in the cirque headwall at the south end of the lake persists throughout the year.

It was still early in the day, so I continued upward toward Holland Peak. I proceeded up the steep shoulder of rock that the mountain goat had scampered up earlier. Upon reaching the top of the shoulder I hooked around onto the ridge that separated Rumble Lakes from Buck Basin.

Buck Basin is a remote beautiful basin that is not easily accessed. Thinking that I might find some wildlife wandering about the area, I glassed the basin with my binoculars. In the distance of the large basin, I spotted a black bear feeding in an open meadow. I watched the bear for several minutes before heading up the ridgeline toward what I called 'Marmot Peak', a bump of a mountain along the Swan Divide at 8852 feet that always seemed to have a hoary marmot on or near its summit.

From the summit of Marmot Peak, I looked north at Holland Peak. The upper elevation of the lofty mountain had received snow instead of rain during the previous night. From where I stood a layer of thin ice coated the scree rock. Previously, I planned to climb the exposed and slightly tilted slab rock along the ridge separating the two peaks. With the layer of ice coating my route, I changed my plans. Instead of attempting that dicey route, I dropped down east of Marmot Peak into the Bob Marshall Wilderness. I then traversed over toward the east ridge of Holland peak. From the safer and gentler east ridge, I angled up toward the summit.

To my surprise I found that when I reached the snowline, I was not alone that morning on my way to the top of the mountain. In the heavy powder snow that had fallen the previous night were fresh mountain lion tracks. Already excited about getting close to the reaching the summit, my adrenaline spiked another notch. I stopped and scanned the slope above me, but saw nothing but white snow and blue sky. I continued up the route wondering what a mountain lion would be doing up here on the tallest peak in the Swan Range. I followed the mountain lion's tracks to the summit. In the snow I read the lion's story. The mountain lion reached the top, walked about the summit, and then headed down the steep north ridge. With my binoculars I glassed the route that the lion had taken, but saw nothing of the animal. I figured that he was probably hunting the area for mountain goats, but did not rule out that like myself, the lion also enjoyed a good view.

The view was sensational as I turned in a circle to take in the various scenes. Almost 1500 feet straight down the headwall of the west face of Holland peak and directly below me was Upper Rumble Lake. Looking westward beyond the country that I had climbed through earlier in the morning lay the broad expanse of the Swan Valley and the bordering Mission Mountains. To the north and south stood the rugged chain of mountains that make up the Swan Range. To the east was the vast Bob Marshall Wilderness with its sea of mountains and rugged terrain.

A few feet to the west of the summit and tucked under a rock shelf was a memorial plaque dedicated to a mountain climber, who died somewhere

else with his ashes later spread on Holland Peak. The plaque stated simply that he met an untimely end, "Death by Misadventure".

After some time on the summit, I retreated back down my earlier route. I dropped in elevation to below the snowline where I found a nice ledge to sit on to eat lunch and enjoy the view looking east into the Bob Marshall Wilderness. It was a great feeling sitting in the sunshine and gazing at wild country as far as the eye could see. It was times like this that reinforced why I loved living in the beautiful Swan Valley with so much wild country nearby to explore and experience. Sharing the September snow on Holland Peak was an experience that I would never forget.