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Emerald Explorations

Flying through Washington State

Contents

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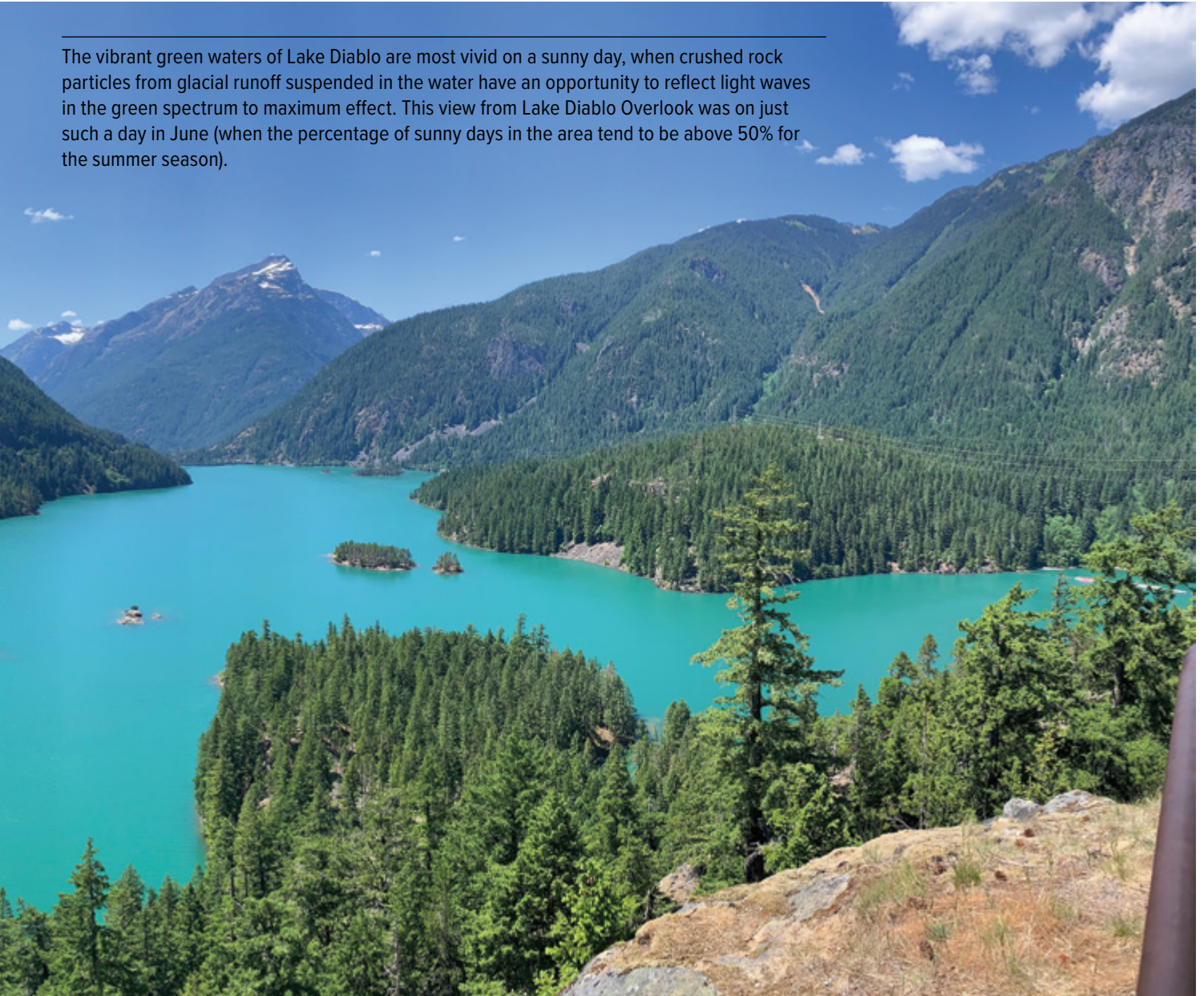
The Upper Left Corner

Part I:

Taking your King Air to explore Washington State's
National Park Lands

by Matthew McDaniel

The vibrant green waters of Lake Diablo are most vivid on a sunny day, when crushed rock particles from glacial runoff suspended in the water have an opportunity to reflect light waves in the green spectrum to maximum effect. This view from Lake Diablo Overlook was on just such a day in June (when the percentage of sunny days in the area tend to be above 50% for the summer season).



Emerald or jade. Forest or hunter. Turquoise or teal. Whatever adjective one chooses to add to “green,” there is little question you’ll find it in Washington. As a state motto, it’s never been officially adopted, but Washington has long been called “The Evergreen State” for good reason. Seattle, the state’s largest city, is similarly referred to as “The Emerald City.”

Never were these nicknames more applicable to me than while touring North Cascades National Park (NCNP). After electing to take the shorter, but much steeper, route back up the Ross Dam Trail, my kids and I sighed with relief upon planting ourselves in the seats of our rental car. A short drive down the north slope of Ruby Mountain brought us to the Diablo

Lake Overlook. There, the picnic lunch came out, but even our hunger and fatigue couldn’t keep us from lingering at the overlook’s precipice, gazing down at Diablo Lake. The vibrant green hue of the waters below seemed otherworldly, especially set against the nearly cloudless blue sky. How could that color possibly be natural?



Park visitors can still drive across the Diablo Dam to view it from both sides or just to transit the Skagit River to take in different areas of the North Cascades National Park Complex. The dam took advantage of Diablo Canyon's solid granite walls that were less than 100 feet apart yet rose 160 feet above the river. The dam took three years to construct, opening in 1930, and began generating power in 1936. At the time, it was the tallest dam in the world at 389 feet high and 1,180 feet long at the top.

“The 400+ miles of trails within the complex range from casual strolls giving a brief sample of the natural wonders of the area, to day hikes to waterfalls, lakes and overlooks ...”

Beyond the Emerald City

The northwestern most corner of the continental United States is well known for its coffee-loving and rain-soaked signature city, Seattle. While much of Seattle is inviting to tourists, the wonders of nature which surround the metroplex on all sides are both wonderful and expansive. Any Pacific Northwest tour is incomplete without at least taking in a sampling of those areas. For Part 1 of this article, we'll focus on those northeast and northwest of Seattle; the aforementioned NCNP to the northeast and Olympic National Park (ONP) to the northwest, plus associated National Park Service (NPS) sites and areas. Fortunately, the entire area is also well-served by all manner of airports, from major international hubs – Seattle-Tacoma International (KSEA) – to small backcountry strips such as Stehekin State (6S9). The airports in between those bookend examples are the most inviting to general aviation.

Popular airports for business and charter operations on Seattle's north side are Boeing Field-King Co. Int'l (KBFI) and Paine Field Int'l (KPAE), both Class D airports under the lateral limits of KSEA's Class Bravo. Bellingham Int'l (KBLI) Class D airspace is well north

“The densely forested mountains that make up North Cascades National Park are steep, jagged and teeming with glaciers, alpine lakes and lush valleys.”

and less than 15 miles from the Canadian border. As one would expect from having “international” in their names, all have customs services available, wide/long runways and multiple Instrument Approach Procedure (IAP) options available to pilots. Popular and capable pilot-controlled airports in the same area include Arlington Municipal (KAWO) and Skagit Regional (KBVS). Each hosts a mixture of business and recreational aviation, offers standard FBO and fuel services, and has IAPs that



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The 60-foot Madison Falls is accessible via a brief stroll near the Elwha River on the northern border of North Cascades National Park, outside of Port Angeles, Washington.

can help bring instrument aircraft down through the low overcast that often blankets the area. All are easy launching points into the NPS lands east of Puget Sound.

The American Alps

The densely forested mountains that make up North Cascades National Park are steep, jagged and teeming with glaciers, alpine lakes and lush valleys. The proliferation of waterfalls gives the park its name. The landscape is often referred to as “The American Alps” (though, it should also be noted, the same nickname is often used in reference to the Rocky Mountain area within Montana’s Glacier National Park, as well). The airports mentioned above range from 1 to 2.5 hours driving time from the western entrance of NCNP. The North Cascades Complex is much larger than the park itself and includes both the Ross Lake and Lake Chelan national recreation areas. Combined, nearly 685,000 acres of land are protected within the complex, from the Canadian border south to Lake Chelan. Fully 94% of that acreage makes up the Stephen Mather Wilderness (named for the first director of the NPS). Because the park is so expansive and mostly remote, the public

facilities and best-known sites are mainly within the recreation areas. It is within them that visitors will find what limited access there is via paved roadways. Off the pavement, only a handful of dirt/gravel roads exist, leading mostly to trailheads. The 400+ miles of trails within the complex range from casual strolls giving a brief sample of the natural wonders of the area, to day hikes to waterfalls, lakes and overlooks, to some of the longest and best known hiking trails in North America, such as the Pacific Crest Trail and the Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail.

NCNP’s main road is North Cascades Highway, which traverses the park mainly east/west. Much of this road is generally closed November through April due to snow accumulation and, at times, conditions force its closure as early as October or can keep it closed well into May. So, the NCNP touring season is a short one (June-September most realistically, with May and October as bonus months most years). As a result, lodging is often heavily booked a year or more in advance. Plan accordingly.

Assuming an approach into the complex from one of the airports mentioned to the south and west, the most common route would be via Highway 20. Little

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“The scenic drives and short hikes to waterfalls and overlooks are beautiful ... However, for those up to the task, the true wonder of the area lies beyond.”

towns like Concrete, Rockport and Marblemount dot the route and contain quaint hotels/motels, restaurants and convenience stores. Just past the NCNP Visitor’s Center at Newhalem Creek is the village of Newhalem. This company town is populated by employees of the hydroelectric company and government agencies which use a system of dams and hydroelectric plants to produce much of northwestern Washington’s electrical power. Yet, it is also picturesque, welcoming to tourists and educational, too. A great little “watering hole” when entering or leaving the complex.

The vastness of the NCNP complex defies words and is certainly beyond the scope of a single article. The damming of the Skagit River and the lakes those dams have created is fascinating in both technical and biological terms. Human hands built the triple-dam system that created Ross Lake, Lake Diablo and Gorge Lake. The projects took a half-century and over \$250 million to complete. Today, that dam system provides up to 90% of the electricity used in Seattle. Nature’s 300+ glaciers in the area, though rapidly receding and melting away, continue to shape and paint the lands and waters alike. The vibrant green of Lake Diablo, for example, is indeed natural. Suspended particles of rocks and minerals, pulverized by glacial movement and swept into glacial streams, eventually deposit into the lake. There, this slurry (known as glacial flour) refracts sunlight, reflecting light in the green wavelengths, while mostly absorbing the other color wavelengths. The scenic drives and short hikes to waterfalls and overlooks are beautiful, to say the least. However, for those up to the task, the true wonder of the area lies beyond. There, only your feet and a backpack can take you.



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The author's son inside the dead-standing remains of a burned-out cedar tree. The mighty trunk remains vertical over a century after being killed by a devastating forest fire near Newhalem, Washington.

The Blue Hole

On the west side of Puget Sound, a different but equally stunning national park awaits. If you choose to leave your aircraft east of the Sound and drive there, Washington State has an efficient and economical system of bridges and car/passenger ferries to help you island hop over. Such a trek opens many opportunities to enjoy the little communities and state and county parks along the way. You're also likely to see some of the flight activities to/from the very active Naval Air Station on Whidbey Island. However, as pilots, most of us would prefer to just reposition the aircraft to one of the many airports on the Olympic Peninsula.

The Olympics are well known for their copious annual rainfall. Much of the mountain range is a literal rainforest, receiving 100-150 inches of rain annually. There is also a phenomenon known as the Olympic Rain Shadow. Prevailing winds in the area come from the Pacific (west) side, and on this windward side, the air is forced up the mountainsides. As it rises, it cools and condenses, causing both clouds and precipitation to develop. On the leeward side, however, the air rapidly descends, warms and expands, which inhibits clouds and precipitation and a rain shadow develops. This "blue hole" is so

“ ... ONP covers almost a million acres but is incredibly biodiverse. As a result, it looks and feels very different in various park sections.”



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common on the north/northeast slope of the Olympics that the towns under it average less than 20 inches of rainfall per year (not to mention, prevailing VFR conditions). So, it should be no surprise that several airports reside there. Sequim Valley Airport (W28) and Port Angeles' Fairchild International (KCLM) are pilot-controlled fields. Both towns have ample lodging and transportation choices, but CLM is the larger and better equipped airport facility, including Jet-A fuel and rental car availability. Inbound pilots should use caution for the numerous private strips in the area, as well as the Port Angeles Coast Guard Air Station.

Touring in the Shadows

Much of the northern portions of Olympic National Park fall within the rain shadow, greatly increasing your chances of enjoying them in relatively good weather. Nonetheless, ONP's most popular season is similar to NCNP's. The popular Hurricane Ridge Visitor Center, high atop Hurricane Hill (elevation 5,757 feet) suffered a fire in early 2023 that closed both the facility and much of the Klahhane Ridge Road. Until those facilities are rebuilt and reopened, the ONP HQ and Visitor Center in Port Angeles should be your first stop for the latest info and park alerts.

Even bigger than NCNP, ONP covers almost a million acres but is incredibly biodiverse. As a result, it looks and feels very different in various park sections. Highway 101 runs along the northern forest sections and offers access to several side roads into the park's northern viewpoints, waterfalls, lakes and trailheads. Continuing west on Hwy 101 will take you across the peninsula and provide access into the other two ecosystems the park encompasses. The separate coastal section is only a few miles wide but over 60 miles long. There, one can wander from beach to beach all day, beachcombing, rock scrambling, hiking or just taking in the incredible views. The beaches in the middle sections get the most crowds, so if it's desolation you want, branch out north and south along the coastal sections.

There are two entrances into the temperate rainforest sections in the park's western (non-coastal) areas. The Hoh Rain Forest and Quinault Rain Forest are vastly different from the dryer forest and sub-alpine areas farther north and east. Touring there puts the tourist in the shadows, humbled beneath the canopy of massive trees and dense blankets of moss. The plant and animal life in the rainforests is simply incredible to behold and the NPS has created a great way to see it via accessible loop trails and scenic drives. Specific

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Huge trees blanketed with thick moss within North Cascades National Park's Hoh Rain Forest. It's a rare treat to be able to take it in on a dry day.

examples of native trees that have survived and thrived in these virgin forests for hundreds (even thousands) of years are often noted on the park maps and trail guides. Outside of the coastal redwoods and giant sequoias, ONP protects some of the biggest trees on the continent. In fact, ONP's rainforest sections contain the largest known examples of at least a half-dozen species of spruce and fir trees in the U.S. and, in some cases, the world. Many stand in the 200-foot-tall range, while one 13-foot diameter Douglas fir towers over 300 feet.

If your time is limited and you've flown into the northern peninsula, the Hoh Rain Forest is closest and will not disappoint. However, if your flight itinerary has you going to Bowerman Field (KHQM), near Hoquiam, on the peninsula's southwest coast, you'll be nicely situated for a day trip to the Quinault Rain Forest area. There are also a number of airports on the south and east sides of ONP, but they are poorly situated for terrestrial tourism. There are few roads into the park's south and east sides and those areas are mostly the domain of hardy hikers doing full-day or even multiday thorough-hikes.

Circle to Land

Seattle is relatively centrally located between NCNP and ONP, with Puget Sound bisecting the area. Much has been written about the wide variety of airports on and around the San Juan Islands. Indeed, there are many

and flying into them all is an adventure unto itself. But many are unlikely destinations for a King Air. The larger airports mentioned earlier, however, could all attract King Air traffic for business, charter or personal reasons. From those places, day trips or multiday explorations into those NPS areas are both feasible and rewarding.

In the next issue, we'll continue the circular tour around Seattle, with tips for visiting Mount Saint Helen's National Volcanic Monument, Mount Rainier National Park and the airports near them. **KA**

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Matthew McDaniel is a Master & Gold Seal CFII, ATP, MEI, AGI, & IGI and Platinum CSIP. In 34 years of flying, he has logged over 21,000 hours total, over 5,800 hours of instruction-given, and over 2,500 hours in various King Airs and the BE-1900D. As owner of Progressive Aviation Services, LLC (www.progaviation.com), he has specialized in Technically Advanced Aircraft and Glass Cockpit instruction since 2001. Currently, he is also a Boeing 737-series Captain for an international airline, holds eight turbine aircraft type ratings, and has flown over 130 aircraft types. Matt is one of less than 15 instructors in the world to have earned the Master CFI designation for 11 consecutive two-year terms. He can be reached at: matt@progaviation.com or 414-339-4990.