



Carved By Ice, Explored On Snowshoes: Discovering the Sublimity of Montana's Glacier National Park

By Ryan Alford

"Of all the memorable views, the best have been framed by Montana windows." ~William Hjortsberg

I was on a search for the true Montana – one of the last American wilderness areas that the masses have yet to alter or manipulate. Although I wasn't able to cover the majority of Glacier National Park's more than one million acres on snowshoes, I was well satisfied with the meager 18 miles that I checked-off on my "list of things to do before dying." Among the turquoise lakes, creeks and rivers, I found myself feeling some frustration: It had taken me 33 years to gain an acquaintance with one of Mother Earth's greatest treasures. Established in 1910, the Park is a memorial to a planet once unharmed by human dominion and sprawl. I was there to pay homage by snowshoeing among the wilds of a protected land and honor the Park's Centennial commemoration.

Hosting my two-day, three-night excursion was the Glacier Outdoor Center, a charming outfitter and rafting company with 10 log cabins adorning its property. Owners Darwon Stoneman, Sally Thompson and Onno Weiranga recently began offering guided snowshoe trips. During the summer, the family-friendly Center is bustling with guests who are eager to whitewater raft and fly fish. Nonetheless, this is a primary launching point for a number of year-round activities throughout Glacier National Park.

I would also have the pleasure of visiting several villages and towns that dot the landscape to the northeast of the Kalispell populous. After a short United Airlines flight from Denver to Glacier International Airport (located near the outskirts of Kalispell), I found myself enjoying a pint of Moose Drool Brown Ale at a local bar/restaurant called Packer's Roost in the village of Coram. This colorful watering hole is frequented by a gaggle of genuine mountain men and women. This would represent my first encounter with authentic Montana: organic, unrefined and completely appealing.

Known as the gateway to Glacier National Park, the town of Columbia Falls and its citizens seem immune to the big city rat race. The township reveals a society of hardworking men and women that focus on family and community – the last bastion of real America. In many ways, they are the caretakers of the Park and help lead visitors to its doorstep.

Before traveling to Montana, I had spent some time researching the Park's history. A common theme that continuously crept into my investigations was the problems related to climate change. Slowly encroaching on the Park's fragile ecosystem(s) is a crisis of environmental transformation: Melting glaciers are a result of rapid global warming. Today, 25 named glaciers reside in the Park – each representing a flourishing past where gigantic ice fields loomed over the land.

When I arrived in early March, the area's vital snow pack was at 67 percent (in some remote areas, it was less). The El Niño weather phenomenon hasn't been kind to the Rocky Mountains in 2010. As a result, some of the Park trails were muddy, barren and icy. For good snowshoeing snow, I would be hiking up to the higher elevations.

I soon began to appreciate the Park's ability to survive and adjust over time. From the outside looking in (and as a rookie to the climate change subject in general), I craved to know the "why" behind the obvious transformations the Park is experiencing. A two-day snowshoeing tour only represented a small piece of a very large pie.

My first day experiencing the Montana wilderness was a short night's sleep away. I would have to be alert and mindful of my surroundings. Anything could happen.

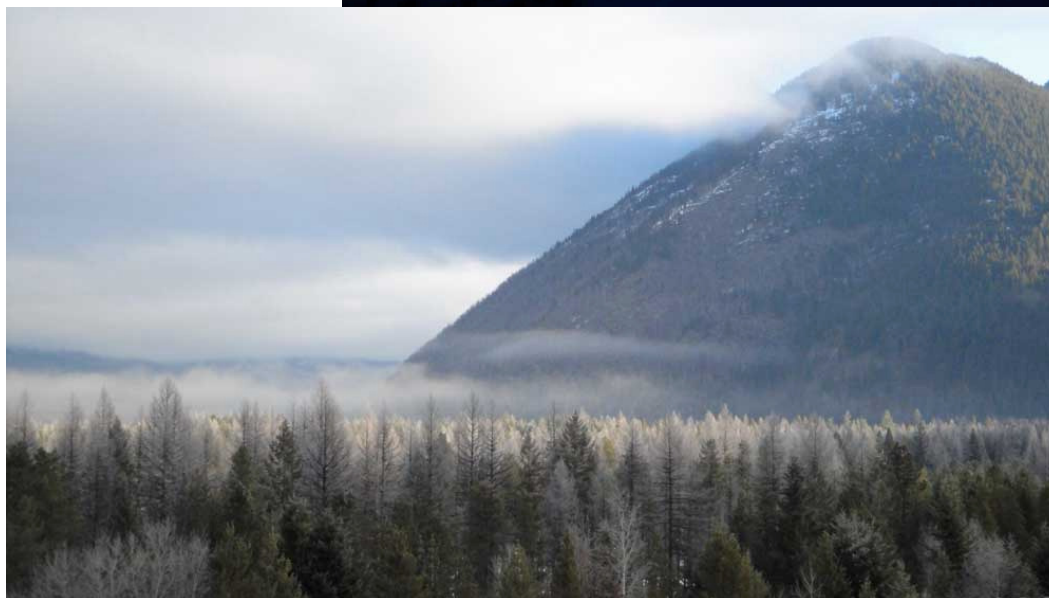
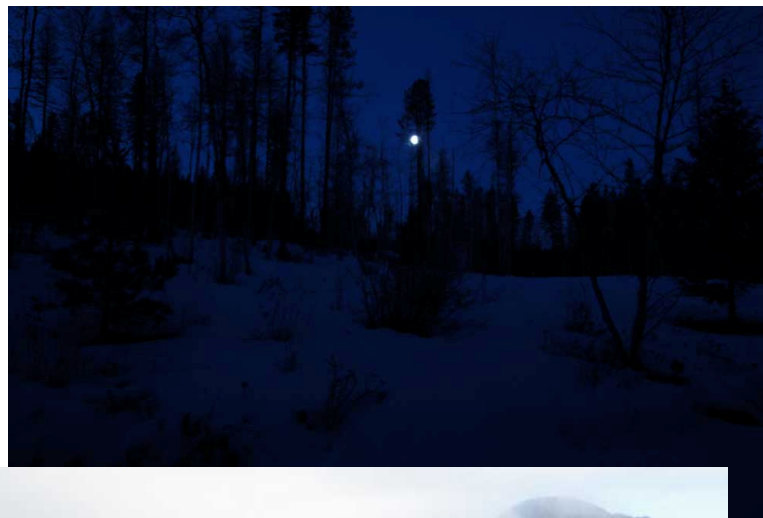
Hypnotized

"So when you go to bed tonight, and you hear a noise, whatever you do, don't look out the window...because there might be a bear!" ~John Candy, The Great Outdoors

I woke to see a bright, somewhat full moon peering through the window blinds. It was so brilliant and intense that it showered the surrounding snow near my cabin with an icy extraterrestrial glaze. I could finally examine the Montana wilderness as it truly existed: The last of its kind in the lower 48 states.

To start the morning, I brewed a pot of Glacier Blend coffee. Instantly, the aroma of coffee filled the cabin. This would be my first indulgence for the morning.

For my second indulgence, I opened the front cabin window blinds to reveal a distant





blanket of fog draping the forests that coated the Belton Hills. The piney tops were frosted, and the frigid air solidified the atmosphere of the Glacier Outdoor Center compound. Everything was tranquil. Silent. At peace.

Still groggy from my slumber, I quickly slipped on my boots, threw-on my softshell jacket, stuck on my hat, grabbed my camera and stepped outside. What ensued from that point on was somewhat alarming but also serendipitous. Evidently, I didn't adjust the door lock properly before leaping out into the cold.

In other words, I was locked out of my cabin.

The Glacier Outdoor Center isn't entirely remote and removed from civilization, but it isn't exactly the local hangout on a Friday at 7 a.m. either. The current situation called for some exploring and landscape photography; it was time for a short hike around the property.

Ultimately, it's what I needed: No cell phone, no gloves, a solid craving for freshly brewed coffee, and a vague idea of my general location. Paranoia took over.

Wait...what was that sound? Shhh...be quiet. Nevermind...that was my stomach. I'm hungry.

The Splendor of the Middle Fork, the Calm of Lake McDonald

"Many people do not realize that the snowshoe can be used for a great many things besides walking on snow. For instance, it can be used to carry pancakes from the stove to the breakfast table." ~Jack Handey

Saved! Hilary Hutcheson from Outside Media arrived to pick me up for breakfast around 8 a.m., which means I was aimlessly exploring the Glacier Outdoor Center for about an hour. Embarrassing? Yes. A funny yarn to spin at a party? Also, yes.

I was off to eat breakfast at the Trapline Café: Half restaurant, half gas station and 100 percent warming to the soul. Joining me for breakfast was Hilary, Darwon Stoneman and Outside Media's Amy May, my snowshoeing buddy for the morning.

The Trapline had that "home cooking" appeal – combining a dining room full of friendly local guests and a rustic ambiance. For a Denver Omelet that's made-to-order and not short of the right ingredients, the Trapline is the place to dine. I scarfed down the omelet and didn't leave room for the hashbrowns and toast. Now I had some calories to work off during my snowshoe outing on the South Boundary Trail – my first taste of what Glacier National Park has to offer.

After breakfast, Amy and I grabbed a couple pairs of MSR Denali Evo snowshoes from the Glacier Outdoor Center and headed for the trail. The day was gorgeous: In the 50s, clear skies and still traces of snow that catered to our short hike. The piney aroma of Redcedars and Hemlocks wafted through the air. The morning served a sensory overload. I was cognoscente of every moment, every sound and every smell.

Before snowshoeing, Hilary toured me through the village near the Park's West Entrance. Many of the Park's employees live in several bungalows and cottages that surround the main headquarters. The tour was especially unique because of Hilary's memories. During her childhood, this was home. This is where she spent time exploring the immediate wilderness that was her backyard. For an instant, I was viewing the Park through the eyes of Hilary as it existed yesterday.

On our way to the trail, we crossed the Belton Bridge; at the same time, I found myself gazing at the Middle Fork of the Flathead River. The glacial silt from the



Park's melting glaciers turned the river a lustrous blue with hints of green. In fact, I found this to be one of the few things beautiful about shrinking glaciers and global warming. This was an artist's dream: So many colors to capture and appreciate. I could only imagine what the Park looks like during the fall season.

Amy and I began our snowshoeing adventure in the late morning. Although we didn't have a destination in mind, we set off to find whatever it was that crossed our paths. We were purely exploring. This was also Amy's first time on snowshoes. Immediate pro.

One of the interesting facts about the Park is its multiple ecosystems. Most of my time was spent in the south and southwest portions. Surprisingly, both are unique and very different from one another. This is also true for the east and north sides of the Park.

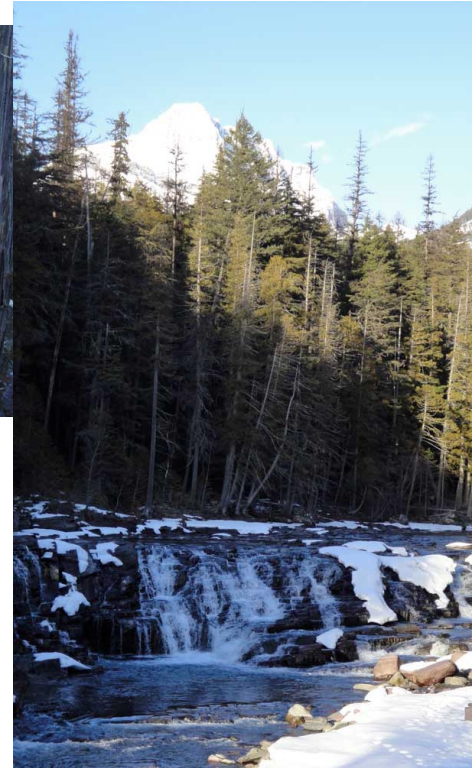
During my morning hike, I brushed by lush foliage – areas of bright green plant life that I've never seen before (a species of Wood Fern caught my eye, as pictured). Most of what I spotted seemed more akin to the vegetation of the Pacific Northwest. Despite the low snow pack, Glacier National Park has received an inordinate amount of late winter rain and bouts with dryness. From what I understood, this wasn't normal.



The South Boundary Trail – one of the Park's largest – primarily follows Highway 2 and the Burlington Northern and Santa Fe Railway. In total, there's more than 700 miles of hiking trails in the Park. Amy and I were trekking along the western side of the trail, which provided plenty of sun, scant snow and patches of ice.

After a brown bag lunch from the village of Coram's Glacier Grill, I met up with Karsten Carlson – manager of the Glacier Outdoor Center's gear shop. To round off my snowshoeing for the day, Karsten provided me with a guided tour near the head of Lake McDonald. To get there, we drove along the famous Going-to-the-Sun Road, which offered some amazing views of Stanton Mountain and Mount Vaught (looking north over the lake). The Lake McDonald Lodge parking lot was a suitable staging area for our short snowshoe hike up to McDonald Falls and Sacred Dancing Cascade Falls.

Many of the Park's lakes resemble New York's Finger Lakes; they are linear in shape and each is oriented on a northeast-southwest axis. For my visit, Lake McDonald boasted clear, motionless water. The temperature was steady in the 50s and the sun continued to shine.



Karsten and I trekked on the Sun Road for a while and then we slipped into the forest to snowshoe along McDonald Creek. As we hiked away from the road, we found ourselves in a heavily wooded area. The sounds of the Park's indigenous birds could be heard around us. Spring was certainly near as the Park was slowly waking from its winter hibernation. Eventually, the trail led us to McDonald Falls. In an instant, the creek went from being the peaceful headwaters of Lake McDonald to a rushing torrent of snowmelt.

I had to see more.

Further up the trail, Karsten and I stopped by Sacred Dancing Cascade Falls, a more serene set of waterfalls. The water rushed over rock formations that resembled a wide set of stair steps partially covered with heaps of snow. Late afternoon sun peered through the pines to warm our surroundings as sunset approached.

We used Sun Road for our return hike and were lucky enough to see three White-tailed Deer, which moved quickly after they were alerted to our presence. And best of all, we were able to catch the alpenglow over Howe Ridge as it reflected off of Lake McDonald. The day was a success – snowshoeing about 10 miles total.



Later that evening I enjoyed a pint of Slurry Bomber Stout at The Bandit Saloon in Columbia Falls, dinner at The Craggy Range Bar and Grill, and some table shuffleboard at The Great Northern Bar and Grill (both located in Whitefish).

Tomorrow would prove to be challenging. Not only would I be attending another guided snowshoeing tour but I also had to concentrate on not locking myself out of my cabin.

Scalplock Lookout

“I’d like to see a bear today.” ~Marc Evans

I spent the morning preparing for a long snowshoe trek up to Scalplock Lookout. A fresh pot of coffee, some fruit, and protein-packed granola mix made for the perfect breakfast.

Our snowshoe tour guide for the day was Marc Evans. During the summer, Marc helps with fly fishing trips and backcountry excursions – all provided by the Glacier Outdoor Center. Marc’s day job involves grooming the ski slopes at Whitefish Mountain Resort. During the winter he also works for the Center offering guided snowshoe and cross-country ski tours.

Joining us on the tour was Dillon Tabish, a reporter with the Daily Inter Lake (Northwestern Montana’s newspaper); Naomi Taylor, a customer from the Kalispell area; and Jane Brown, a customer from North Carolina. The day promised, yet again, clear skies and temperatures in the 50s. Perfect.



“So, did you pack any bear spray?” one of the group members asked.

“No,” Marc replied. “It’s too early in the season for that.”

Too early? Maybe so. Later in the trip, I did catch Marc sharing his desire to see a bear. Deep down, I wanted to see one as well. And that certainly wasn’t too far from reality: The Park reported several recent bear sightings due to the warm weather. This is another sign that spring has definitely arrived early in Montana.

We started our snowshoeing trek from the Walton Ranger Station, which is near the village of Essex and the Railroad Depot. It’s also near Izaak Walton Inn – a historic (and very unique) lodge built by the Great Northern Railroad in 1939.

In addition to lodges, Glacier National Park boasts two backcountry chalets that are still operating: Granite Park Chalet and Sperry Chalet. The Belton Chalet is just outside the Park in West Glacier and is celebrating its Centennial as well. The Belton was the first chalet, or hotel, that was built by the Great Northern Railway. It was also my dinner destination for the evening, which would be a well-deserved treat after a full day of shoeing.

The Park also has some very unique designations. Because it's adjacent to Waterton Lakes National Park in Alberta, Canada, the two Parks together have a UNESCO designation as the Waterton Glacier International Peace Park. Established in 1932, Waterton-Glacier was the world’s first International Peace Park, which honors not only the area’s outstanding natural attributes but also the peace and goodwill between the United States and Canada. Glacier National Park is also a biosphere reserve, which means the area is a learning ground or a classroom for the world. Finally, Glacier is a world heritage site, which means it’s recognized around the world as a place of value to protect.

The climb up to Scalplock was a good test of my snowshoeing abilities. The trail combined several switchbacks and false



summits. Before long, many of us were shedding layers after the combined physical exertion and the warm sun. The dense forest provided ample shade, but I was glad Marc suggested I pack more water than I had originally planned. It was a strong hike to an elevation of about 6,000 feet.

Higher elevations and warm weather also mean avalanche danger. Before trudging up the trail, Marc gave us all Ortovox avalanche beacons and provided a demonstration on their use. Marc explained that a combination of warm weather conditions and human influence cause avalanches. Certain sharp sloping areas are particularly dangerous, but Marc focused his demonstration on safety and the proper use of the beacons.

“Of course this doesn’t mean you’re avalanche certified, but you will have a general idea of what to do in an emergency situation,” Marc explained.

Unfortunately, we were unable to report any rare wildlife sightings, but we did see evidence of a few kills. Bone fragments, tufts of fur, and dots of blood covered some areas of the trail. Marc speculated that wolves were responsible for the mess – as noted by small piles of scat left in the area. Either way, it was exciting to see.

For the entire day, not a soul made an appearance on the trail – with the exception of a few Mule Deer. We seemed to be the only humans exploring the mountain that day. When we reached the open ridge near the top of Scalplock, the snow was deeper and more difficult to trudge through. It seemed like a logical place to stop for lunch and enjoy the panoramic views of Snowslip Mountain and surrounding peaks.

Thankfully, Marc brought his binoculars to spot wildlife and avalanches. The latter was evident all over the opposite ridges. Several avalanche chutes had broken and seemed fresh from earlier in the day. Marc noted a number of wildlife tracks all over the mountain: “There are definitely some adventurous animals out there. I see tracks on some very steep terrain.”

The hike back was quick. Once we returned to Walton Ranger Station, we had snowshoed a total of eight miles – by Marc’s estimates. It was a long day, but highly rewarding. Before going back to the Glacier Outdoor Center, we stopped by the Goat Lick Overlook. We happened to notice five to six Mountain Goats lounging on the top of the ridge above the river. It was a great way to cap-off a day of snowshoeing. I was exhausted.

Before sleep, I had the unique pleasure of dining at the historic Belton Chalet, which featured some live music that evening. A very



unique group of women played what sounded like Irish folk music. Their choice of instruments included the harp, classical guitar and the dulcimer.

Before the meal, I started with a pint of Rogue Hazelnut Brown Nectar Ale and Anaheim Chili Peppers as an appetizer. Going with a popular choice, I selected the German Plate. The dish included red cabbage, bratwurst, pan seared pork cutlets, and potato pancakes served with house made mustard and applesauce. Nothing went to waste. Delicious.



Luckily, I was able to dine with Hilary and a few members of her family. It was an excellent way to end the day. I would sleep well that night.

Celebrating 100 Years of Glacier National Park

"National parks are the best idea we ever had. Absolutely American, absolutely democratic, they reflect us at our best rather than our worst." ~Wallace Stegner



I had the pleasure of interviewing Kass Hardy, centennial coordinator with Glacier National Park. Kass was able to provide more details on the Park's Centennial celebration, which was already in motion during my visit. During the summer, when the Park is extremely active, the Centennial festivities will be in full swing.

"The Centennial is a completely community-driven project – with more than 75 volunteers who sit on seven different sub-committees," Hardy said. "The whole idea of celebrating a Centennial is very much new to the National Park

Service. We wanted to make our Centennial celebration a statewide initiative. Glacier is an anchor to the state and its tourism.”

The Centennial program was created to observe the Park’s rich history and to inspire personal connections and partnerships. Hardy’s role is to facilitate how the program is implemented, ensure the program helps engage people and sparks interest in the Park’s future.

“The last piece of our mission is to engage new stewards or future stewards of the Park,” explained Hardy. “It has this parallel mission of ‘past, present, future’ and ‘celebrate, inspire, engage.’ It’s been a solid foundation for the whole program. In the end, we’ll look back and view these standards as what helped make it a more sustainable program, rather than this ‘one-time sugar rush’ or birthday party.”

Another core feature of the Park’s Centennial celebration is the surrounding communities’ involvement. Because the towns and villages that border the Park depend on a successful tourism program, their participation is essential.

Hardy has worked tirelessly to make it all happen. After extensive planning “more than 100 activities are listed as part of the Centennial commemoration. A lot of area organizations adopted this and got involved. Some of the signature events include a rededication of the Park, which includes a formal ceremony in our community building. Several retired National Park employees will lead a tour through the historic compound to showcase a number of history hotspots. On July 10, the Glacier Symphony will perform a revived version of the Glacier Park Song. There are eight alumni reunions on the calendar. Several businesses in the area are hosting different types of reunions for people who worked in the hotels, people who worked in the chalets, the National Park Service, and many others. This will be a great way for people to reconnect.”

A Crisis of Change

“I’m no longer skeptical. I no longer have any doubt at all. I think climate change is the major challenge facing the world.” ~Sir David Attenborough

In addition to my conversation with Kass about the Centennial, I inquired about the Park’s battle with climate change. As it’s no surprise, many of the Park’s glaciers are shrinking at an alarming rate. The science behind it all is simple: The globe is warming and the effects are apparent. Mother Earth is in disarray.



“At this point, we have 25 named glaciers that are larger than 25 acres in size,” said Hardy. “It’s expected by 2020 that we will have no glaciers that remain 25 acres in size. In 2005, the U.S. Geological Survey set the expectation for 2030. Within a very short period of time, it changed from 2030 to 2020. The USGS model not only shows the ice disappearing but also how the vegetation will transform, especially the ridgeline and treeline. Many of our National Parks are experiencing a lot of changes due to climate change,



but Glacier National Park has an iconic group on the ground doing a lot of actual science. From a management perspective, it’s a totally different focus. We are trying to both adapt and mitigate.”

According to Hardy, the Park is recognized as a climate-friendly Park: “We follow a set of guidelines to encourage decreasing the impact of our operations – whether it’s replacing our fleet of vehicles, choosing solar energy, or introducing a shuttle system.”

As part of the Park’s structure of monitoring climate change, it considers only a few animal species as “canaries” or indicators of a problem. These species are watched via a Park program called “High Country Citizens Science.” Everyday citizens

that visit the Park can count the species they see while visiting. This allows guests to contribute and provide the National Park Service with vital assistance.

“We launched this program a couple years ago through our Crown of the Continent Research Learning Center. We have anywhere between 70 to 150 volunteers who have maps with suggested areas to look for species like Mountain Goat, American Pika and Clark’s Nutcracker,” Hardy explained. “Those are the three main species that I would consider canaries of climate change. Through this program, we have been able to get a general idea of what’s going on with these species at this point in time. The Bull Trout and the Harlequin Duck are other species of concern. They depend on ecosystems with very cold water, at certain times of the year. Once we stop seeing these species in the Park – for migratory purposes or reproduction purposes – they become significant climate change canaries.

“The National Park Service is working on a climate change response strategy, which will be available for public review in the next couple months.”

Gold and Silver

“In every true Montanan there is something that says, ‘I am a last holdout.’” ~David Lamb

When I was in my teen years I remember driving through Montana with my parents. We made it as far west as Butte. It was a vacation I didn’t appreciate, simply because I was too young to be amazed by the wild Montana frontier. After snowshoeing around Glacier National Park, I have a newfound appreciation for the state.

Montana’s motto is “Oro y Plata” (meaning “gold and silver” in English), referring to its economy and future. From my point of view, the “gold and silver” of Montana is Glacier National Park and the many people who have helped preserve its glory.



The “gold and silver” are the villages and towns (like Columbia Falls and Coram) that haven’t compromised and strayed from their roots.

The “gold and silver” is the proud heritage that every Montanan adopts. For two days and three nights I shared in that same Montana legacy. My snowshoeing adventure allowed me to recognize the brilliance of Glacier National Park, its neighboring communities, and the people who gladly welcome others to experience it all.

Indeed, the state is one of the last American holdouts. Give Montana a try, and lock yourself out of your cabin. No regrets.

(Thanks to Hilary Hutcheson from Outside Media for picking me up from the airport and organizing my weekend of Montana fun.)

Resources:

Belton Chalet - <http://www.beltonchalet.com>

Big Sky Brewery – <http://www.bigskybrew.com>

Columbia Falls – <http://www.firstbestplace.org>

Glacier Brewing Company - <http://www.glacierbrewing.com>

Glacier Centennial 2010 - <http://www.glaciercentennial.org>

Glacier National Park on Twitter - <http://twitter.com/glaciernps>

Glacier Outdoor Center - <http://www.glacierraftco.com>

Izaak Walton Inn - <http://www.izaakwaltoninn.com>

Official Glacier National Park Web Site - <http://www.nps.gov/glac/index.htm>

Outside Media – <http://www.outsidemedia.com>

Outside Media on Twitter - <http://twitter.com/outsidehilary>

Gear mentions:

Columbia – <http://www.columbia.com>



HaberVision - <http://www.habervision.com>

GoLite – <http://www.golite.com>

Keen Footwear – <http://www.keenfootwear.com>

KT Tape - <http://kttape.com>

Marmot – <http://www.marmot.com>

Ortovox – <http://www.ortovox.com>

Outdoor Research – <http://www.outdoorresearch.com>

Talus ColdAvenger – <http://www.talusoutdoor.com>

Photography by Ryan Alford (taken with a Sony Cyber-shot DSC-W290). Belton Chalet photo courtesy of BeltonChalet.com.

