

Craig Rigdon

Notes from the Field Winner

Three Trees

The ground is definitely frozen. I know this because the first step I take plants me face first into the hillside. The second step I take with more caution, a bit more deliberately. It holds. Where I stand, at the base of a nameless ridge rising steeply to meet the distant Iris Point, the temperature is sixteen degrees below zero—cold enough to freeze my ambition as easily as my toes. But I have been thinking of this little hike for far too long to worry about my extremities just now. Out in the sun, something this slope never directly sees, it's at least five degrees warmer. I am amazed to think that eleven below sounds warm. This cold snap, which crept into Western Montana about a week ago, has turned the Clark Fork River into a jumbled confusion of ice. The same goes for Rock Creek, which joins the Clark Fork not far from here. If a guy were stupid enough to try it, he could probably cross it. Hopefully I am not that stupid.

It was early summer when I first hatched this plan, to hike up to the big trees that hide on this hill. The rivers and creeks were just beginning to cloud up with snowmelt, the cottonwoods in the bottomlands were leafing out, and the mosquitoes were nothing more than a distant high-pitched whine in the back of my mind. I had fallen into a job fixing up an old cabin at the confluence of Rock Creek and the Clark Fork, which entailed, among other things, nursing a couple of grim looking apple trees back to health and battling the unbreakable occupation of spotted knapweed and leafy spurge out in the meadows. But my first task, as described by my employer, was to rid the cabin's crawlspace of the persistent stink of a skunk that had, a few weeks before, repeatedly unloaded everything it had on his dog. Without the slightest idea of how to clean out the odor, but eager to get busy, I threw back the rotten cellar door and climbed down into the darkness.

I lasted all of thirty seconds before scrambling back up the ladder, holding my breath. It must have been a pretty big skunk.

While I was lying in the sun, letting the afternoon winds carry the last few minutes out of my lungs, I saw the little grove of trees that would taunt me for the next six months. They were western larch and, from the looks of them, they were big. They towered over everything else, with limbs locked in poses that only old trees can claim. Their needles, which had only recently emerged, still bore the lime-green hue of spring. The contrast with the rest of the slope, which was dominated by the dark, almost purple, crowns of Douglas fir and a smattering of ponderosa pines, added at least one more dimension to the otherwise two dimensional distance. I studied the slope for over an hour, fully intending to take a walk up to the trees at the end of the day. But I didn't get up there.

The cabin was built in the late 60s by a guy who had, upon returning to the States after two tours in Vietnam, found himself unable to deal with life beyond the confines of the creek, the river, and the mountains. He built it with timber taken from his own land, and did it all by himself. He even dug the crawlspace by hand, no small feat in the river cobble that underlies the deep alluvium of the valley bottom. Sometime in the 80s, the guy died. Nobody I talked to knew exactly when. One day he was just gone. The property, which covers some two hundred acres, was riddled with tree stands and barbed wire. I was warned that the place might be booby-trapped, and occasionally I found pits dug in the ground, or a rusted-out wire snare, but nothing too dangerous. The work dried up at the end of the summer, and I went on to other things, but I swore I would make it up to those trees.

Of course six months later, here I am, on the coldest day of winter. I had to jump my truck this morning. After that failed, I walked to the nearest gas station to get enough fuel to thaw out my fuel line. I jumped it again, and it started. Painfully. It took half of the twenty six mile drive from Missoula to the Rock Creek exit for the display on my truck's radio to thaw out. I'd be lying if I said

I didn't consider bagging the hike this morning, like when my gloveless hand briefly froze to the steering wheel, but the sun was up and the sky was high. Beyond that, sometimes a thing like this just becomes necessary. After making a few turns and negotiating a two-track with frozen ruts, I park at the cabin and start off without another thought.

The thin veneer of snow on the ground is beyond crunchy—each step elicits a high-pitched squeak. Aside from my own breathing, it is the only sound I can hear. Not even the wind is bold enough to blow today. I relish the thin sun for a few more steps before plunging into the endless shadow of a true north slope. It's steep enough that all the trees bow out on the downhill side, fighting the ponderous current of the mountain as it slowly relents to gravity. A lacework of game trails stitch my zig-zag route up the hill, cutting across the pitch of the slope, and since that first slip, I have made pretty good progress. The ground is covered in mossy ice and a thick layer of needles; no snow has penetrated the dense canopy of spindly Douglas fir. I follow the delicate prints of white-tail deer and the frozen tracks of elk, gaining just a few feet of elevation at every switchback. By my reckoning, the first of the larches is only a few hundred yards up the slope, off the hiker's right.