

Autumn Gold Backpack Adventure into Mt. Holy Cross



By Frosty Wooldridge

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In late September, changes arrive in the High Country of the Rocky Mountains. A whisper of cool winds rustles through the trees. The mountain creeks run low over their rocky beds as the snowfields diminish from their summer melt. Forever green pines cover the mountains like a silent blanket. Within their realm, every kind of animal, insect and plant prepares for the harsh winter ahead.

The ground cover turns every color of the rainbow and more: topaz, burgundy, red, yellow, pink, orange, purple, and endless shades in-between.

This is the time to take an autumn backpack trip.

Steven and I slammed 35 pounds of gear into our backpacks. Tent, sleeping bag, air mattress, food, water, bear spray, water filter, rain gear, long johns, jacket, wool socks, stove, cookware, compass, map, toothbrush, floss and paste.

“Man, these packs get heavier every year,” Steven said.

“Yeah, well, we keep getting older every year,” I said.

“Well, let’s get a move on it,” Steven said. “I don’t want to be caught in the dark on our way up to Magic Lake.”

We tossed the packs into his car along with our walking

poles. Within minutes, we hit the mainstream of traffic on I 70 heading west toward Loveland Tunnel Pass, Vail Pass, Battle Mountain Summit Pass and finally into the Mt. Holy Cross Wilderness.

There's something about traveling through deep canyons in the Rocky Mountains. You're at the bottom. You look up to see all that green covering the peaks all the way up to the tree line at 12,000 feet. As you travel upward, entire sides of the mountains turn gold with the aspen trees dominating patches randomly spread hither and yon.

"Man," Steven said. "We're hitting the mountains at peak color change. It's like a golden extravaganza."

"Sure is," I said.

We crested Loveland to travel through the tunnel. Back down into Frisco, and then, up over 10,400-foot Vail Pass. Through Vail, and then south on route 24 through Minturn...over Battle Summit Pass, and then, a turn on an old dirt road into the Mt. Holy Cross Wilderness. We drove in five miles to hit the trailhead to Magic Lake.

It's a 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ hour trip up a steep, rocky trail that passes through golden aspen groves, across streams, and upward into the evergreens. It gains elevation from 8,000 to 11,000 feet. Every step of it, shouldering a 35-pound pack, and maintaining the rocky trail...takes 100 percent concentration. You can't afford to turn an ankle.



The mountain man John Muir said, "Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wildness is a necessity; and that mountain parks and reservations are useful

not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life."

(Backpacking into the wilderness of Mt. Holy Cross, Rocky Mountains.)

At rest stops on big boulders or fallen tree trunks, we looked around us to see such sublime beauty. The white trunks of aspen trees lifted into their golden leaves with a blue-sky background burnished with puffy, white clouds. Some hadn't turned gold yet, which provided a green contrast...and many times, the leaves turned red/pink/orange.

"This sure heats the heck out of a walk in downtown Denver," said Steven.

"Oh, man," I said. "And look at that hawk."

"It's a redtail," Steven said.

"Yeah, he's looking for lunch," I said.

We ate energy bars and drank plenty of water. Once again, we donned our heavy packs for the journey upwards. We passed a whitewater stream that rushed over huge boulders, lots of fallen timber and mossy rocks.

Into the third hour, we looked back across the valley behind us to see dozens of golden aspen groves decorate the green meadows. Green, gold, green and gold. The show never let up...to our great visual light.

Finally, 4 $\frac{1}{4}$ hours later, we arrived at Magic Lake, at 11,000 feet, about six acres in size, with pine trees surrounding it, crystal clear, cutthroat trout surfacing for bugs, and Mt. Whitney at 13,500 feet behind it. The glass-smooth water provided a perfect mirror to reflect the mountain, trees and massive rocks surrounding the lake.

"Man," said Steven. "Never get tired of this view."

“Hey, look at that across the lake,” I said. “That’s a big racked moose. He’s stepping into the water. Heck, he’s swimming across the lake.”

Right in front of us, we watched a big male moose swim across the lake. We just stood there in wonder of our good luck. When he got to the other side, he shook himself off and vanished into the wood line.



John Muir said, “How many hearts with warm red blood in them are beating under the cover of woods, and how many teeth and eyes are shining? A multitude of animal people, intimately related to us, but of whose lives we know almost nothing, are as busy about their own affairs as we are about ours.”

(Glass-still Magic Lake in the Rocky Mountains.)

“That was way too cool,” Steven said. “Let’s get the tents up, campfire and dinner.”

“I’m with you all the way after that little treat,” I said.

We pitched camp about 50 feet from the water’s edge. Our tent flaps opened to the lake, Mt. Whitney and the night sky. Ponderosa pines towered over us. They were so close; we could smell the sap. Squirrels dropped down pinecones above our heads. We built a campfire, cooked our dinners and ate in the quiet of the evening sun going down over the lake’s waters. In the final moments of the day, the sky turned pink, backlit clouds and the first stars twinkled in the sky.

After dinner, we talked about everything and nothing. Just a good time under the night sky with stars twinkling all the way to the ends of the universe.

There's something about friendship that makes life worth living. It comes into focus around a campfire. Steven and I have skied together, climbed to the peaks of mountains, and packed into the wilderness. We know the woods. We appreciate each other's company. We share thoughts about God and the wilderness. We understand our place in the scheme of things. We help each other during good times and otherwise. Friendship may be the most important "love" in a person's life. It gives us strength, honor, courage and understanding. To have a dear friend is one of the miracles of the universe. To have a friend share a campfire, must be one of the great joys of life.

Have you ever sat by a campfire?
When the wood has fallen low.
And the embers start to whiten,
Around the campfires crimson glow?

With a full moon high above you,
That makes the darkness so complete.
And the night sounds all around you,
That makes silence doubly sweet.

Tell me were you ever nearer,
To the land of heart's desire,
Than when you sat there thinking,
With your face toward the fire?

"Can't get over that moose swimming across the lake," I said.

"Sure was a treat," Steven said. "Life is good."

Later, we let the fire burn low into the rocks. The temperature promised to turn below freezing that night. We climbed into our zero-degree bags for a good sleep under the canopy of the universe. I got up for a bathroom break around 2:00 a.m.

"Gees," I muttered. "The Big Dipper, Orion and all the constellations are distinct in this moonless sky. What a lucky dude I am."



(Frosty Wooldridge at Magic Lake, Mt. Holy Cross Wilderness)

Next morning, we did a little fly fishing out over the still waters of the lake. It was a perfect mirror reflection of the trees and mountain ridges. Just incredible! We caught four trout, but it's "catch and release" on this lake. Always fun to bring them in and let them go.

Later in the morning, a gray front approached. We broke down the tents in the rain. We put all our gear on to keep dry. We checked the campground for "Leave No Trace", as if we had never been there.

One the great joys of the wilderness comes from the unexpected. As we made our way downward along the trail, the ground cover had turned to yellow/green. We felt like we were walking along the yellow-brick road from the "Wizard of Oz." It was THAT profoundly beautiful.

Later, we dropped back into the aspen groves. At one point, I took a shot of Steven sitting on a rock while he starred out at a half circle of golden aspen. From there, we walked into them. The wind kicked up that caused millions of golden aspen leaves to drop onto us.

"It's raining gold right out of the sky," I gasped.

"I've never seen this before," Steven said. "This is incredible. It's a golden rain-shower."

You know something, I'm going to leave off with this moment, this packing through a golden rain-storm. Life, it doesn't get any better than this.

"Camp out among the grass and gentians of glacier meadows, in craggy garden nooks full of Nature's Darlings. Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves." John Muir, 1888, Sierra Mountains

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