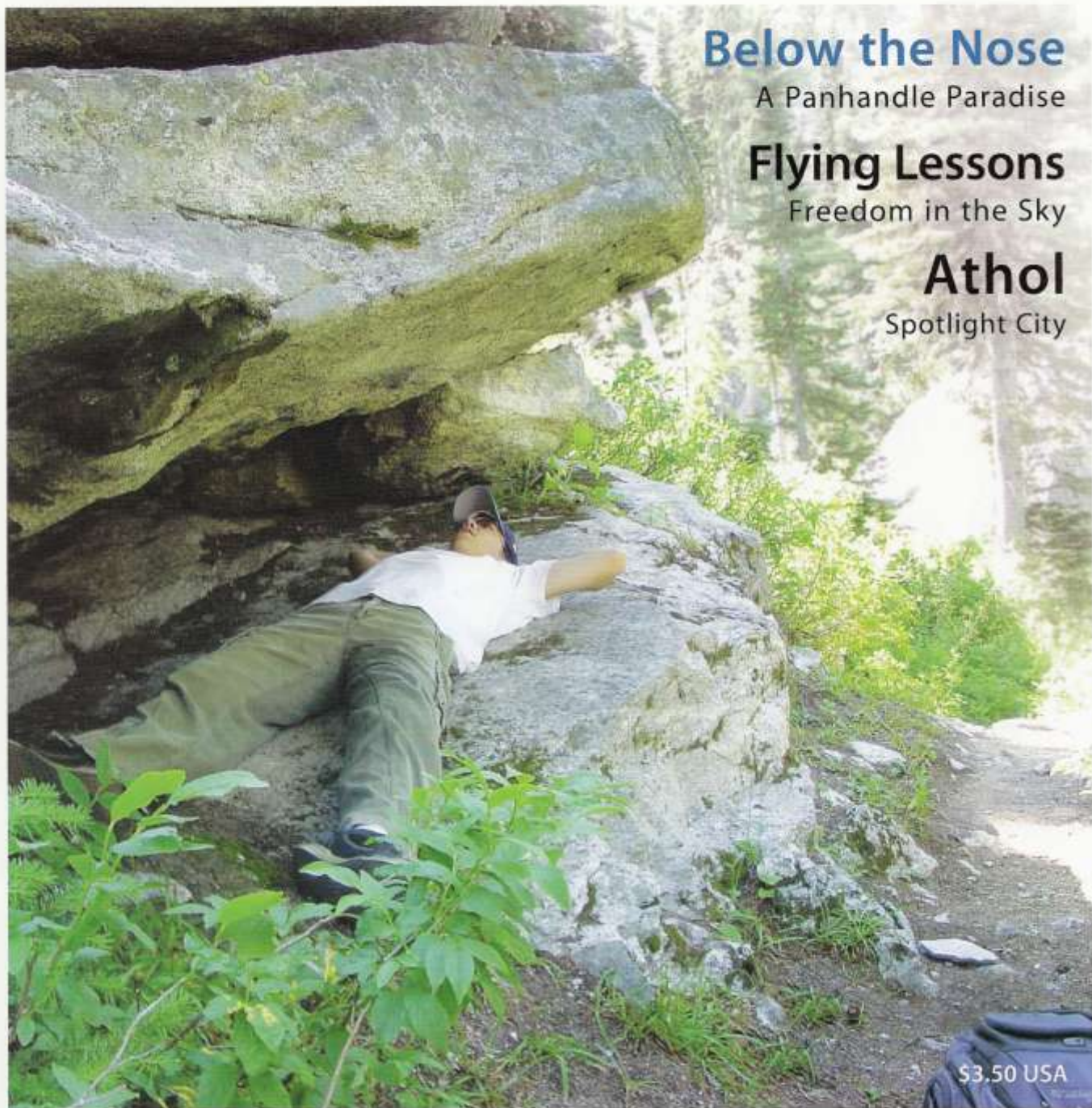


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Below the Nose

A Panhandle Paradise

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Athol

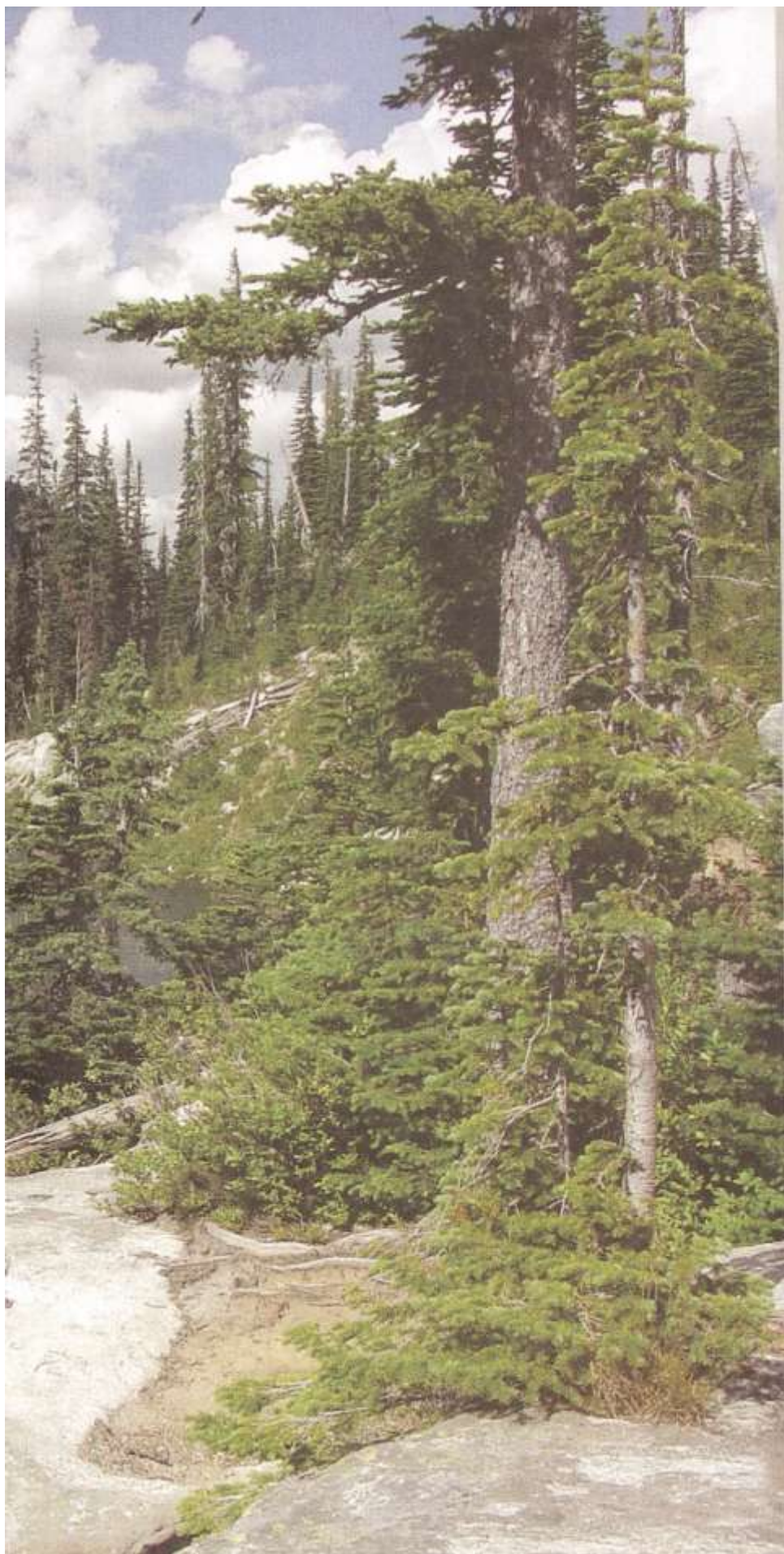
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Below the Nose

*Along the eastern shore—
Upper Roman Nose Lake.*



A Panhandle Paradise

By Nancy Owens Barnes

"We'll meet you at the rock," Tom said before he and Nick, our fifteen-year-old son, trekked around a bend and out of sight. A chunk of granite the size of a bus, "the rock" sits anchored against the eastern shore of the upper Roman Nose Lake, the highest of three lakes below Roman Nose Peak. With a wide, flat top that slopes gently toward the water, the rock's front edge stands fifteen feet or so above the lake's surface, an inviting place to dangle feet or dive into the blue-green water below.

Having arrived at the trailhead by 6:00 a.m., no other hikers were around when we slipped on our backpacks and headed up the trail. Tom and Nick knew my hiking habits well—the way I stopped often to browse, to collect blueberries, to sit on outcrops and make notes in my journal, or to simply rest and admire the view. With Tom anxious to toss a fishing line into the lake and Nick anxious to toss himself into the lake, they had little patience for my easy pace. And now, with them far ahead, I reveled in solitude.

Some summers we drove great distances to hike beautiful trails and enjoy the mountains. But with no such plans this year we were returning to one of our local favorites, only a short distance from home—practically in our own back yard.

The August sunlight had already clipped the tops of the mountains and now slanted sharply across the terrain as I hoofed up the lower portion of



PHOTO BY TOM SAHMS

the trail. The thump and crunch of my boots on the gritty path resonated crisply in the cool morning air. With the rising sun at my back, sun-bleached branches and roots of long-dead, toppled trees snaked and tangled brightly against the blue sky ahead of me.

Deep in the Kaniksu National Forest, the Roman Nose Lakes lie in sub-alpine granite bowls in the

Selkirk Mountain Range. To the west, over Roman Nose Peak, the land tumbles toward the Pack River, which carries rain and snowmelt south to empty into Lake Pend Orielle near Sandpoint. To the east, the area drains into Caribou Creek, which flows toward the Purcell Trench and the stretch of land between Sandpoint and Bonners Ferry, then north to the Kootenai River.

The Roman Nose Lakes trail is not a difficult one. With an elevation gain of less than 400 feet, the hike to the upper lake measures only three to five miles round trip, depending on whether one includes the Scenic Loop Trail. The two-mile-long Scenic Loop takes hikers near the timberline and adds another 200 feet or so in elevation gain, providing exceptional views across the lower



OPPOSITE: *From below the Nose—
Roman Nose Peak.*

ABOVE: *Along the trail—Toward
Upper Roman Nose Lake.*

LEFT: *Indian paintbrush—Blooms
flash their colored wares.*

Roman Nose Lake and terrain.

About a mile up the trail, I encountered a marker indicating Scenic Loop to the left and the upper and middle Roman Nose Lakes to the right. This was the lower junction of the Scenic Loop Trail, which curves to the southwest, eventually working its way back to join the Roman Nose Lakes trail above.

I bore right, passing sprays and

patches of wild flowers where fiery Indian Paintbrush flamed in the sun. Fireweed, named for its aggressiveness in reclaiming ground following wildfires, bloomed toward its crest, warning of summer's end.

One of the most devastating wildfires in the Roman Nose area was the Sundance Fire of 1967, a racehorse of a fire that reportedly grew from 4,000 acres to nearly

56,000 acres in less than twelve hours. The inferno narrowly missed the town of Bonners Ferry and burned, at times, a square mile every six minutes, killing a two-man bulldozer crew working in its path. A young Forest Service worker at the Roman Nose peak lookout survived miraculously by crouching among bare rocks as flames blazed past him.

I missed the second marker that



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would take me to the lake and found myself zigzagging up the mountain. As I moved nearer the timberline, the entire mountain appeared to be a single, giant, granite rock. Time and weather had softened its edges. Rust-green moss chinked its crevices and foot-high pines, try as they might, grew from what seemed to be no more than shallow saucers of soil. Eventually, the trail took a permanent

turn to the southeast, urging me toward the opposite side of the ridge that separated the lower and upper lakes. I did an about face and backtracked to the missed junction, where I found my way to the upper Roman Nose Lake.

Tom cast his fishing lure across the water.

"Nothing yet," he said when he saw me coming.

When I reached the rock I shed my backpack where Nick sat swaddled in a large towel. His lips were purple.

"Cold," he said.

After a while we each drifted toward our own interests. Nick changed back into his dry clothes, hung his wet trunks on a branch and headed for higher ground to view the lake from a new perspective. Tom,



PHOTO BY DON OWENS

OPPOSITE: *Lake outlet—At the northeast end of Upper Roman Nose Lake.*

ABOVE: *Moss-coated granite—An eye-catching sight in a small stream.*

BELOW: *Sitting and dangling their feet—Tom and Nick enjoy a few quiet moments on “the rock.”*



PHOTO BY DON OWENS

with an urge to peek over the northwestern ridge to see Snow Lake, leaned his fishing pole against a tree and began following the shore to the far side of the lake. I, however, eyed white slabs of granite at the edge of a boulder field near the south end of the lake, where the sun had firmly established itself.

Maneuvering over rocks and rounding stands of tall pines and spruce near the shoreline, I worked my way around the lake. As I neared the boulder field, I came upon one of nature’s impressive formations. Across an expanse of stones, swept a wide swath of soft green where moss wrapped the tops of the stones. Along the center of the fuzzy green display trickled a delicate stream. Highlighted by the morning sun, the contrast of the white granite with the bright green of the fragile moss was striking.

As I rock-hopped boulders along the lake’s edge, tiny minnows darted back and forth in the clear, shallow water below me. Algae had fuzzed the long-fallen trees and branches that lay beneath the water into a soft focus. Water striders zipped in and out of shadowy tunnels between the rocks.

The boulder field lies at the base of a steep bluff where, over years, chunks of granite have calved off the mountain and tumbled into the lake. Even though the bluff stands at the foot of the northern face of the 7,260-foot Roman Nose Peak, one cannot see the peak from there.

After locating a rock with a shallow, comfortable-looking curve, I untied my sweatshirt from my waist, rolled it into a makeshift pillow, and reclined against the sculpted



A sunlit spot—"The rock" sits along the lake's eastern shore.

PHOTO BY DON OWENS

Getting There

The Roman Nose Lakes area is located approximately twenty-three miles southwest of Bonners Ferry. Approximately three miles south of Bonners Ferry, turn west off of U. S. Highway 95 onto the Old U. S. Highway 2. Follow Old Highway 2, then Westside Road, to Snow Creek Road No. 402. Take Snow Creek Road to Forest Service road No. 1007. Follow F.S. No. 1007 through Caribou Pass, then take F.S. No. 2667 to the lower Roman Nose Lake parking lot and trailhead for Roman Nose Lake trails 160 (middle lake) and 165 (upper lake).

For additional information, contact:

U. S. Forest Service
Bonners Ferry Ranger Station
Highway 95 South
Bonners Ferry, ID
208-267-5561

slab. I closed my eyes, welcoming the warm sheet of sunlight that draped across me. Before long, the sun washed across my daydreams in soft waves as patches of gauze-like clouds passed overhead, heating my closed eyelids and burning against my face. I lay surrounded by the Selkirk Mountains near the heart of north Idaho's panhandle—a panhandle paradise.

Near lunchtime, roused from my rest by the quick chatter of a squirrel, I lifted myself from the summer-warmed granite and worked my way back to the rock. Tom and Nick had already returned. Nick dug sandwiches out of the backpacks while Tom told us about his climb up the northwestern ridge to see Snow Lake, and his encounter with a grazing moose.

"I'm not sure who spooked who," he said, "but the moose ran first."

After eating lunch and squandering a couple more hours lounging on the rock, we eventually gathered our belongings and headed for home.

As I followed Tom and Nick down the trail, I began preparing a mental list of the things I would do when I got home: feed the geese, prepare a light supper, watch the Mariners baseball game. But the hiking, the water and the scenery of the past several hours below Roman Nose Peak soon pushed through those thoughts, reconfirming the idea that one may not need to travel far to find paradise. ■