



BEN PIERCE/CHRONICLE

The backbone of the northern Bridgers lacks the established trail that extends from Sacajawea Peak to the College 'M' on the southern face of Mount Baldy. In the northern Bridgers, the ridgeline presents hikers with shear drops, talus slopes and dramatic vistas like this one above Frazier Basin on Monday afternoon.

NORTHERN EXPOSURE

Off-trail hike in Bozeman's backyard unveils rugged beauty of the northern Bridgers

By **BEN PIERCE**
Chronicle OutThere Editor

His remark came simply enough: "The Bridgers always surprise me."

I'd just set out hiking from Fairy Lake Road up to Frazier Basin in the northern Bridger Mountains with Chronicle photographer Sean Sperry. We were working our way up a broad meadow with Sacajawea Peak looming behind us and the jagged outcroppings of the Bridger ridge rising skyward on the horizon.

We were talking about how familiar the Bridgers had become over the years. We'd each explored numerous trailheads from the College 'M' to Flathead Pass. We'd both been up Sacajawea Peak — the range's high point at 9,665 feet. And we'd each gazed longingly at those peaks on summer days and wondered what more there might be to see.

Too often we'd traveled to distant ranges in pursuit of adventure, we decided. To be sure, the peaks of the Crazies, Absarokas and Beartooths have never failed to satisfy — but rarely had we thought of the Bridgers in such a light.

So it came as something of a shock when we crested the knoll at the height of the meadow and peered down with fresh eyes into Frazier Basin.

Set in a tight cirque just out of view from the pinnacle of nearby Hardscrabble Peak, Frazier Basin is rimmed by a collection of unnamed mountains ranging in elevation from 8,687 to 9,474 feet. No marked trail leads to the basin, but it can be reached with relative ease by ascending the valley just west of the Shafthouse trailhead on Fairy Lake Road.

It takes roughly a mile of route-finding to arrive at the head of the valley. For the most part the trekking through this stretch is easy this time of year, but a number of fresh water springs combined with snowmelt could make things a muddy go during the spring.

The initial panoramic perspective of the cirque is breathtaking. The south-facing inclines are ablaze



with red, green and yellow hues from mineral deposits found in the upthrust rock and patches of thick vegetation. The dry bed of Frazier Lake — a seasonal body of water — is nestled in the base of the cirque. The surrounding landscape is dotted with stands of wind-gnarled Douglas fir. It looks like bear country.

Sperry and I descend a little more than 400 feet to the base of the cirque, crisscrossing the steep terrain. We paused intermittently, looking west into the basin which revealed itself in increasingly spectacular increments.

(More **Northern Bridgers**, Page C2)

SEAN SPERRY/CHRONICLE

Chronicle OutThere
editor **Ben Pierce**
hikes above **Frazier**
Basin in the **Bridger**
Range on **Monday**.



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BEN PIERCE/CHRONICLE

Chronicle Photographer Sean Sperry descends into Frazier Basin where surrounding peaks rise precipitously to more than 9,450 feet.

Northern Bridgers/ from Page C1

I'd heard of Frazier Basin from another friend who described it as, "the real deal."

I was beginning to catch his drift.

Slowly it occurred to me, as I gazed up at the raw rock walls now thrusting skyward around our position on the valley floor, that many of those ski photographs from the northern Bridgers I'd so admired were likely captured here. I tried to visualize skiers bombing down those slopes as I munched on a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

I couldn't do it.

With our energy renewed, Sperry and I determined to ascend one of the couloirs plummeting from the ridgeline. Our plan was to follow the spine of the Bridgers back to the saddle between Hardscrabble Peak and Sacajawea Peak where we would descend along the established trail there.

We chose a ravine dotted with red stones — apparently laced with iron or some like mineral — for our ascent. It was sluggish going as we sifted through a plethora of extraordinary rocks and spoke of gold prospectors from a hundred years ago and fossils

from a time long before that.

We arrived at the ridgeline panting. The west wind so typical on the backbone of the Bridgers chilled us, so we dropped our packs and donned our rain jackets to break the slight sting of the cool mountain air.

To the north the Bridger Range undulated in golden domes toward Flathead Pass. The towns of Clyde Park and Ringling and Wilsall sparkled under the watch of the Crazy Mountains to the east. To the west, Manhattan and Three Forks occupied the view dominated by Bozeman when hiking on the southern extent of the Bridgers. And to the south rose the lofty pinnacles of Frazier Basin.

Somehow they looked even more imposing from above.

The going is rough on the ridgeline atop the cirque. This is not the same trail that ushers hikers from Sacajawea to Mount Baldy each summer. Here, it is debatable if a trail exists at all. Mostly the terrain is vacant of all but the tiniest flowers and wind-blasted scrub that somehow manage to eke out a living on the exposed slopes.

Above Frazier Basin, the topography is mostly unstable. The razor-sharp scree underfoot often gives way. Hiking can be reduced to a balancing act best left to the capable hooves of mountain goats — of which we saw 16.

Rounding the apex of the cirque, Sperry and I gazed down near-vertical chutes that during the winter season challenge backcountry skiers far braver than I. From the knife edge of the ridge, the land drops more than 1,000 vertical feet to the boulder-strewn floor below.

It must be an incredible ride.

Traversing the ridgeline to Hardscrabble Peak proved considerably more strenuous than we had anticipated for a pleasant afternoon hike in the Bridgers. I can't quantify how many times we fell as the loose ground below gave way, but there were certainly a number of minor cuts and scrapes incurred along the route.

By the time we rounded the crown summit of Frazier Basin we mistakenly identified the next crag to the south for Sacajawea Peak. The vision faded rapidly however as the switchback trail leading downhill from the summit

was nowhere in sight.

Rather than push over the hump, we decided to explore the small cirque separating Hardscrabble Peak and Frazier Basin. The tempting meadow speckled with yellow wildflowers appeared pretty tame. We felt confident there was a likely route to the road after consulting our map.

With Sperry leading the way, we navigated a narrow wash that acted as something of a natural staircase. The sun dipped behind the ridge midway

down the slope, illuminating the mountains to the east in a tepid glow.

Having witnessed the precipitous walls of Frazier Basin, we had legitimate fears of being cliffed out, but our zeal for off-trail travel carried us on.

Indeed, there are numerous cliffs, bluffs and impassable terrain for unprepared backpackers in the basin. We took it slow and found a route that was safe, traversing the east face of the mountains to the Sacajawea Peak trail.

We joked about spraining our ankles on the 300 yards to the trailhead — and we almost did.

We arrived back at my Jeep a little after 6 p.m., thoroughly exhausted having spent seven hours in the mountains. In short order we were both back in town behind giant plates of food with a new-found respect for those mountains so close to home.

Ben Pierce can be reached at bpierce@dailychronicle.com and 582-2625.

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