

GLACIERS

of the Rockies

By Garrett Fisher
Images by Garrett Fisher

I keep getting asked how I came to love glaciers so much. My replies have been to the effect that it's a silly question. Shouldn't everyone know I came out of the womb knowing I like punishing rivers of ice?

I suppose it isn't an irrational question, as I grew up in Upstate New York, where the nearest glaciers are probably actually in Wyoming, and I hadn't seen or heard of a single one of them until adulthood. My earliest recollection of discovering rocky terrain was from a book on a shelf in my third-grade classroom, noting above timberline mountains. I still remember dragging my mother during open house to show her the book, for which I remember her cynical platitudes in response. My revelation merely encouraged her to educate me on the danger of airplanes and mountains, a task that clearly failed.

The history of the most recent Ice Age is a prominent part of science curriculum where I was born, as the entire place was covered in piles of ice during the last glacial maxima, leaving their mark in the form of the Finger Lakes region and an abundance of cirques in what small mountains exist in New York and the Northeast. As a lover of snow, I thought the idea was kind of neat, that so much of the white stuff can fall that it piles up, destroys everything, and scours new terrain. In effect, glaciers represent the ability for the earth to literally move mountains, which in retrospect was fascinating in the stimulus-bereft days of grade school.

When the time came to move to Wyoming, I had come to understand that there were glaciers in the state, eventually researching some curious facts, such as that the largest glacier in the American Rockies is in the Wind River Range, not Glacier National Park, as most would assume. I also came to understand that some

glaciers remain in the Bighorns, a few tiny ones in the Wyoming Absarokas (more across the border in the Absarokas in Montana), the Tetons, and of course, the Wind River Range, which is host to quite a number of them.

There was a certain mystique on my first flight from Colorado to Wyoming, passing the Wind Rivers and Tetons, gazing into these mountain ranges, which were in my opinion more rugged than taller cousins to the south. Simply knowing that "there are glaciers in there" elevated the magnitude of what I was looking at, and I knew from the beginning that I'd have to go and explore them. From "exploration" came the idea to do a book on the glaciers of Wyoming. Once I confirmed that some glaciers did remain in Colorado, I decided to add those in, as I figured our friends



to the south wouldn't mind an honorable mention. Just in my moment of fatigue chasing the last glacier in Wyoming that I needed to photograph, beneath Cloud Peak in the Bighorns, I was on my way on a three-hour flight back to Alpine when I said to myself, "perhaps Montana is too much."

It didn't take long to conquer every single one of them in Montana in the airplane, camera in hand for the entire odyssey.

From end to end, the glaciers of the American Rockies span about 800 miles, from Glacier National Park to northwest of Boulder, CO. For the most part, they are associated with mountain ranges that are near the border of the Great Plains. Having flown this distance, it is something of a curiosity to see great variance in weather characteristics. One summer of living in Colorado featured the lowest summer snowfall at 13,100 feet. The next year living in Wyoming featured a



summer snowfall at 9,500 feet near the Montana border, with frequent light dustings in the shadows of Grand Teton. Timberline at 12,500' in southern Colorado transitions to 11,500' in the middle of the state, later dropping to the neighborhood of 10,000' in Wyoming. Small glaciers than appear at 11,000' in southern Montana change to small glaciers beneath 9,000' near the Canadian border, with quite large masses of ice at 10,000'. Where I was living at 9,360' in Colorado, I was staring at a glacier at the same altitude in Montana.

Since the completion of this project, I have had the chance to explore some glaciers in the Pyrenees of Spain and France, and the Alps in France, Switzerland, and Italy. Curiously, timberline in that neck of the woods is 7,500' (despite being the same latitude as Wyoming and Montana), with glaciers appearing at 10,700' or so in the Pyrenees, and 9,500' in the Alps, with the latter featuring glaciers that look like Alaska. At the same token, it is nowhere near as cold in those mountain ranges as the Rockies, which brings me back to the same question I have in each state in the Rockies: what makes a glacier form?

It is obviously a combination of cold and snowfall. Crank enough of either one up, and annual snowfall turns into a "perennial ice field," and if that piles up enough, it turns into a river of ice that starts breaking things. Why are there glaciers in Montana at 9,000', whereas there are none at 14,440' at the highest point of Colorado? Why is the largest glacier in the American Rockies beneath 13,000' peaks in the Wind River Range, but relatively small ones beneath Grand Teton, at the same height, and about 100 miles away?

I have often noted that flying a Cub at such slow speeds is an exercise in philosophy, if anything owing to grand expanses of time to think. Nonetheless, these curiosities nagged at me in flight, and they still nag at me now, so I get back in the plane and try to figure things out. It is a philosophical exercise of "what if" to contemplate how different our area would look if we changed a few dials on the weather knob.

The project turned into my latest book, "Glaciers of the Rockies." In an effort to spare others a fanatical obsession to chase these glaciers down on foot or by plane, photographs of every remaining named glacier in the US Rockies are included, along with detailed maps. Given that their great distance, quantity, and difficulty prevent most people from visiting on the ground, I do strongly encourage some research, if not a grueling hike to some of the enormous glaciers remaining in the state of Wyoming. They are an undiscovered piece of majesty. [WLM]

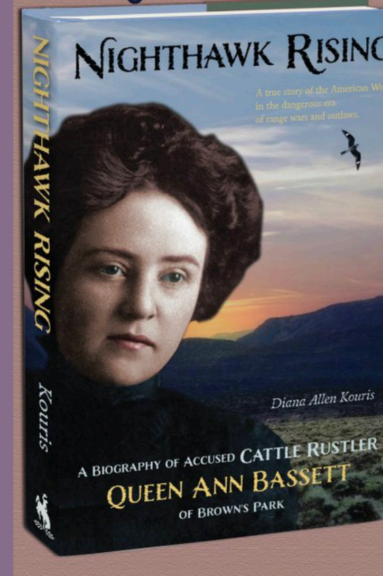


"Glaciers of the Rockies" is available on Amazon.com.

Garrett Fieber is the author of seventeen books, fifteen of which relate to aerial photography. He blogs regularly about his aviation adventures at www.garrettfieber.me.



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