

Every Place Needs a Patch

by Austin Routt

Walking around the bookstore of a little mountain town, I came upon a small wicker basket containing iron-on patches. Some had the name of the town and some had the names of local attractions or tourist sights. One of them, however, happened to have the name of the glacier that I had traveled here to see. Of course, it was unexpected to me; here I was in this little tourist town, surrounded by skiing, shopping, and hotels, and yet somebody thought there was enough public interest in this particular glacier to possibly turn a profit on a patch bearing its name. I purchased it thinking I could perhaps put it on my pack. It was still a day out from the hike to the head of the glacier, so I returned to my hotel thinking about the community I had just joined into by sporting this patch and declaring my passion for this tiny chunk of the cryosphere on my pack. Was there really a group of people that knew about

this glacier, cared about it, considered it to be of specific importance within this landscape? Until beginning my own work, neither I, nor anybody I spoke to, were even aware of the existence of glaciers in the state, much less the existence of enthusiasm directed at one special representative. The next day, on the hike, I would pay attention to the people around me and try to get a sense of who else was heading up the mountain.

On my drive into the park the morning of the hike, I could catch glimpses of the cirques adjacent to my target and their respective cryospheric secrets. At the parking lot, the ranger at the gate was shoos a group of visitors away from a few elk and warning us to move off the trail if we happened to stumble upon a large, potentially aggressive bull she had seen earlier. It was an odd time of year, both for field work and for recreation, but I just wanted to get a look at what I was hoping to study the next summer. As for everybody else hiking that day, they must have been outdoor recreation enthusiasts, perhaps the kind inclined to

wear the patch I found. Perhaps they just didn't know what the park was like this time of year. The trail was steep but clear and I made steady progress through the morning. I kept passing a couple of other hikers, then taking a break only for them to pass me, and we went back and forth like this for the majority of the hike. I kept wondering if I would see marmots, as I had in previous hikes when I had risen above tree line. Instead, when my eye finally caught movement, it was a pika, darting through the talus.

Pika, as many know, are easy to overheat and have been found to be moving ever higher in elevation as the lower elevations warm up due to climate change. I knew this then, and as I listened to them chirping while I kept hiking higher, I realized their eventual fate was to run into the toe of the glacier if they kept moving higher up the mountain. Then what? Would the grip of the cryosphere higher up give way to warming and melting, exposing new habitat, or would they be forced to live amongst the ice, making ever riskier trips downslope to

gather food? Either way, if they reflected on their own predicament, surely, they would see the glacier above them as an obstacle as they pushed ever upward. Of course, its melting would mean the pika would lose the vast store of water it slowly releases over the summer as well.

Finally, as I could start to clearly make out the summit above where I would turn to the south and follow the ridgeline to the glacier, I began to notice a strange feeling in my stride. My foot placement felt imprecise, and a dizzy feeling set in. Altitude had never been an issue for me before, and yet, perhaps too small a breakfast, too little water, or too little sleep conspired against me anyway. There isn't much choice when that happens, and with harsh, cold wind getting worse as I climbed higher, the choice was easy. I turned back, resigned to waiting until at least spring to try again.

I have yet to attempt the hike again, largely because I shifted my study topic and methods before the following summer and did not need to return for field work. I hope the pika never have to worry about running

into the ice or losing the water it slowly releases every summer. I hope the other hikers, choosing to spend hours in the cold just because they love the place, get to keep seeing the glacier when they visit the park. It isn't the only glacier or snowfield we stand to lose, but it is the only one with its name featured on an attractive blue patch that can adorn your outdoor gear. I wish every special place or thing we stand to lose to climate change had a patch, because every one of them has hikers, enthusiasts, animals, or something else that needs it just as much.

