

Out Cold -- Winter in Yellowstone highlights extremes

By Rich Landers The Spokesman-Review

Winter camping has a way of focusing wilderness skiers on their core values, which, in this case, involved peeing in the tent and sharing my sleeping bag with Clif. Blushing, I might add, wastes precious body heat.

Below-zero temperatures dictated the unorthodox overnight regimen during a four-day backcountry trip in Yellowstone National Park, a virtual hot bed of winter attractions.

Making a snow camp involves stamping skis to pack a platform for the tent and digging out a wind-proof "kitchen" in the snowpack, plus other chores. Everything must be done in the balance of keeping appendages from forming into popsicles while avoiding sweating that can lead to hypothermia.

Each evening I would endure a couple hours of melting snow over my MSR stove, doing jumping jacks or going on quick ski-sprints to stay warm between each cup of tea needed to rehydrate after a vigorous day of ski-trekking in stinging cold air and deep powder.

Then, with the sun down and the temperature plummeting even more, I'd crawl inside the tent and under my sleeping bag where I could read with the aid of a headlamp until my mind numbed to a fixation on the virtues of hibernation.

A Nalgene bottle was dedicated to night-time nature calls, preventing exposure to the bitter wind and driving snow outside the tent's thin nylon walls.

Clif - an energy bar that hardens to the consistency of granite in cold temperatures - would be useless the next day if left in my pack, so it found its way into my sleeping bag where it had plenty of company along with my ski boots, water bottles, camera, cheese, gloves, sunscreen and anything else that had to be kept from freezing stiff.

David Moershel and I chuckled at the ordeal of securing comfort in our frosty tomb while plumes of steam billowed from the ground just a couple hundred feet away.

We also were captivated by Yellowstone's harshest season, where hot and cold and life and death are all in intimate proximity.

Bison tails worth watching

Our trip began with a snow coach ride over the unplowed roads from West Yellowstone to the heart of the park at Old Faithful. Although tame by the standards of summer crowds, Old Faithful bustled with the activity of visitors arriving by snow coach and guided snowmobile tours to the luxurious Snow Lodge. Some visitors were exploring groomed ski and snowshoe trails around the complex, where bison, we observed, have little regard for manicured ski tracks.

"Be warned," one park employee told us. "When a bison lifts its tail, it's either going to charge, or discharge."

The Old Faithful ranger station isn't even open to the public during winter. We had to have a lodge clerk call the station to let the officer in charge know we were coming over for backcountry permits.

Out of more than three million park visitors, only about three small parties a year request winter overnight permits for the Shoshone Geyser Basin area, a ranger said.

By the time we shouldered our packs and headed into the wilderness, the park had already delivered a satisfying Yellowstone experience. That morning alone we had:

- Marveled at bison using powerful necks to swing their heads back and forth, sweeping away the deep snow to find forage below.
- Craned our necks to watch bald eagles soaring above.
- Watched elk feeding along the Madison River, where they found it easier to travel in the water than through the snow.
- Challenged ourselves to distinguish the feeding trumpeter swans from the brilliant boulder-size ice formations in the river.
- Witnessed Old Faithful Geyser blow into an epically blue sky.
- Celebrated the rare treat of photographing a lone gray wolf.

The wolf apparently had gorged itself on a winter-killed bison calf.

Leaving little more than a few meager scraps for the ravens, it was on the prowl again, genetically endowed to endure days without food as it hunts for another feast.

Moershel and I also were on the prowl for whatever adventure the winter wilderness would deliver. With half of the earth's geothermal features sequestered in one park, attractions were never far away.

Geysers sear through snow

Yellowstone holds more than 75 percent of the world's geysers in seven major basins. As we skied toward the most remote of these basins, we passed an assortment of the park's 10,000 thermal features, including brilliantly colored hot springs, bubbling mudpots and steaming fumaroles.

Most gentle Rocky Mountain streams at elevations of 7,500 feet are sealed under ice in February, but the upper Firehole River, fed by countless hot springs, seems to flow like tar through a white gorge of deep snow rising from its banks.

While the snow pack averaged about 6 feet deep, our route toward Grants Pass occasionally would traverse a thermal area covered by only a few inches of snow that turned to slush under our skis. Seconds after getting back on normal snowpack, we would have to scrape away the slop that quickly froze to the bottoms of our skis and smack our ski poles against trees to knock off the baseball-size ice clumps that formed below the baskets.

Deep wind-blown snow can cover margins of thermal areas with drifts that look like firm snow from above, but are hollowed by the heat below.

Twice I found these spots with the shock of dropping through a trap door 3 or 4 feet to the ground.

A two-person backcountry skiing party has the advantage of flexibility and the freedom to pause frequently to appreciate every track in the otherwise unadulterated winter landscape.

That's about the only advantage.

Groups of four to six are better for reasons ranging from safety to mileage.

After the first day of breaking trail through deep powder, Moershel and I realized we probably could not safely execute a 22-mile round trip to the Shoshone Geyser Basin in four days.

The next morning, however, our goal became attainable as four Park Service scientists skied past our camp, thanking us for breaking trail to that point. They were headed to Shoshone Lake to stay at a patrol cabin and set up instruments for noise studies.

Suddenly, six skiers were sharing the chore of trail breaking. Everybody was happy. Life was good.

Even the tense side-stepping across an icy three-log bridge over Shoshone Creek seemed less risky as a group experience.

After splitting from the scientists, Moershel and I explored the Shoshone Geyser Basin, which steamed into the cold blue sky as though hundreds of witches had convened to cook up caldrons of evil brew.

We skied to the edge of thermal area for a lunch break. My water bottle had started to freeze even though it was protected in my pack against my back. The water was so cold it seemed to sear my throat and paralyze my stomach.

As I snacked on nuts and a Clif bar, my fingers soon functioned with the dexterity of frozen sausages while I stood just 20 feet from a hot spring that bubbled with boiling water.

I tossed a chunk of ice into the hot pot. "Psst." It vaporized in a sizzling heartbeat.

Moershel and I were keenly aware that we were in a winter wonderland that could kick our asses in a heartbeat.

As we skied over 8,000-foot Grants Pass, we had seen precious few signs of life in the unblemished new snow. A pine marten track here, an ermine or grouse track there. The occasional raven flew overhead but never paused, indicating there was little below, dead or alive.

The snowshoe hare, buoyed atop the powder by its oversized feet, is one of the few critters that prospers from deepening snow. Each storm adds a layer that acts as a ladder enabling the hare to feed on winter foods such as buds, twigs and conifer needles that were previously out of reach.

But Moershel and I realized the next storm that appeared to be brewing on the horizon could make our life difficult by filling in the ski tracks through the wilderness and leaving the two of us to bust our way out.

Good gear a must

We camped the last night just five miles from Old Faithful, a distance we could cover to meet our snow coach even in a storm.

We had found our comfort zone in below-zero temperatures, adjusting clothing layers with the ebb and flow of our activity and synchronizing our daily routine so neither of us had to submit to numbing cold while waiting for the other.

We ate our last freeze-dried dinner faster than wolves putting away their first meal in a week. Then we retreated to the tent as the storm revved up with occasional gusts sounding like jet aircraft roaring through the forest.

Warmth was seconds away as I crawled into the minus 20-degree down bag I bought in 1983 for a climbing expedition to Mount McKinley. To regulate heat, I wrapped a retro-pile jacket around my neck and shoulders so I could easily create ventilation if I got too hot or plug drafts if I got too cold.

To prevent condensation from building up on my sleeping bag and reducing the insulation value of the down, I would bury my face in the retro pile for warmth. When I woke in the morning, the condensation would freeze almost immediately into ice flakes that could be brushed off, leaving the pile virtually dry.

We skied out to Old Faithful in a blizzard that had caused two snow coaches to run off the groomed road routes that morning. A couple of snowmobilers pointed cameras at us as though we were migrating bison.

At that point I was just about as comfortable in the Yellowstone winter as the beasts themselves.

Indeed, the most shocking cold-induced discomfort I endured all week came when I returned home and crawled into a real bed to be greeted by the two iciest products of an Inland Northwest winter.

My wife's feet.