

BACKCOUNTRY SKI TOURING — DETAILED INFORMATION

Steamboat Springs Over the Hill Gang

For the 2022-23, season, backcountry ski touring will again be organized by Harry Zinn (bcski@ssothg.org, hcinn@comcast.net) with help from Erica Lindemann, who often acts as co-leader or substitute leader.

On our backcountry trips, we typically drive to Rabbit Ears Pass and park at one of the winter trailheads. Then we head off on our own instead of sticking to the marked trails. Occasionally, we go to North Routt, Pleasant Valley, or another area. Over time, we have found many beautiful routes and destinations and enjoy sharing them.

This is backcountry touring: We seek rolling terrain with moderate climbs and moderate downhill. Avid backcountry downhillers are likely to find our trips insufficiently challenging. Cross-country skiers on narrow, lightweight gear designed for groomed trails are likely to be frustrated by the deep, soft snow.

You do not need to be an expert to participate: You should have some experience with non-resort type skiing, and you should be comfortable skiing 3-4 miles of moderate up-and-down terrain at a leisurely pace. If you are comfortable skiing any of the Rabbit Ears Pass winter trails, you will be comfortable on these trips.

When and where: Every other weekend on Saturdays. Meet in the Safeway parking lot at 9:20 am, confirm the destination, check equipment, arrange ride-sharing, etc., and leave at 9:30 am. Return to the Safeway parking lot between 1:00 and 2:00 pm.

| Tentative Schedule for Backcountry Ski Touring 2022-2023 (May be modified for difficult or dangerous conditions) | | | | Steamboat Over the Hill Gang |
|---|------------|------------|------------|---------------------------------|
| December | January | February | March | April |
| Sat. 12/03 | Sat. 01/14 | Sat. 02/11 | Sat. 03/11 | Sat. 04/08 |
| Sat. 12/17 | Sat. 01/28 | Sat. 02/25 | Sat. 03/25 | (if conditions permit) |
| Sat. 12/31 | | | | |

SAFETY AND WHAT TO BRING

Even though our trips are introductory, safety is the first and biggest concern. In winter at high elevation and away from roads, events like breaking a piece of equipment, getting injured, experiencing a medical emergency, or getting lost present immediate, serious challenges. Even near the highway, rescue typically takes hours—not minutes—and it is possible to get caught out overnight. In addition to appropriate skis, boots, and poles (see below for more information), each skier needs to carry the following basic safety and survival gear.

- Sunglasses or snow-glasses. Protect your eyes from sunburn and from getting poked or slapped by a tree branch or bush.
- Layered clothing you can adjust for changing conditions and exertion levels.
- At least 16 oz. of water in a container you can protect from freezing.
- A generous supply of easy-to-carry food—energy bars, protein bars, nuts, dried fruit, dried meat, etc. Bring twice as much food as you think you need in case we are caught out longer than expected.
- A rescue whistle, an inexpensive compass, and a little toilet paper.
- An extra layer of protection for emergencies. A small tarp, an “all-weather thermal blanket,” or an emergency “breathable biv” is best, but they are expensive and bulky. A “space blanket” is small, lightweight, and inexpensive, but it tears easily and does not breathe—when you wrap up in it, before long condensation will get you wet.

As trip organizer, Harry carries a basic first aid kit and gear for patches, repairs, and fire-building. He is an experienced backcountry navigator and carries maps, compass, and a modern satellite communicator that can contact search and rescue services, even without cell service. (On our trips, cell service is inconsistent. Near the

top of ridges or peaks, service is sometimes pretty good, but in the valleys between ridges or peaks, service is usually non-existent.)

A note about avalanche danger: For many of us, avalanches are the first backcountry safety concern that comes to mind. We do not ski in terrain that is subject to avalanches.

MORE ABOUT SKIS, BOOTS, AND POLES

Nearly all of us use metal-edged “wax-less” skis with fish-scale bottoms, and the fish-scales are generally enough for the climbing we do. Despite their name, “wax-less” skis benefit from being waxed to prevent or reduce “sticky” snow from freezing onto ski bottoms. Equipment options include:

- Traditional 3-pin boots and bindings with wide cross-country skis.
- Modern NNN (New Nordic Norm) boots and bindings with wide cross-country skis.
- Modern AT (Alpine Touring) boots and bindings mounted on wide cross-country skis or lightweight downhill skis.
- Lightweight Telemark gear.
- **Note:** This year, Rottefella of Norway is introducing a new backcountry boot and binding system called “Xplore.” To me it looks like a hybrid between lightweight Telemark and AT systems. It looks promising but be aware that it is brand new and untested.

Each equipment style has its advantages and disadvantages. If you are thinking about buying equipment, it is very valuable to try two or three different styles before buying.

Adjustable-length backcountry poles with large diameter “powder baskets” are much easier to use than resort-style poles.

Equipment rental: At least three shops in town rent backcountry touring gear. Backdoor Sports rents both traditional 3-pin cross-country gear and modern AT (Alpine Touring) gear. Straightline Sports rents modern NNN cross-country gear. Ski Haus rents both modern NNN cross-country gear and modern AT gear.

At all three shops, ask for a ski package for the Rabbit Ears trails, and they will know how to outfit you. DO NOT just ask for “backcountry gear,” because you are likely to be given equipment that is far more massive, heavier, and more expensive than you will need.