

Multiple skiing opportunities available with snow's arrival

Mark Morical Published Dec 7, 2016 at 12:09AM

The groomed tracks had ended, but on classic skis, I could pretty much go wherever I wanted — no grooming required.

So I veered off through the woods in the relatively deep snow, adding a little more adventure to the beautiful morning at Virginia Meissner Sno-park west of Bend.

While skate skiing (which requires groomed trails) has surpassed classic skiing in popularity in Central Oregon, a lot more terrain is available to classic skiers at sno-parks throughout the region, mostly because classic skiers can pretty much go anywhere.

“The visitor use and demand is unbalanced,” says Bob Madden, trails coordinator for Meissner Sno-park. “We’ll have thousands of people skiing the groomed trails, and you go over to the ungroomed, and nobody’s been on them for a week. There’s so many more miles of ungroomed trail opportunities than there are groomed opportunities.”

Skate skiing is typically performed on a wide-open groomed trail and involves a V-step and glide motion. Classic skiing is usually done with the skis in set tracks and the skier employing a kick-and-glide motion.

Whatever type of cross-country skier you are, skate or classic, plenty of snow is now available at sno-parks west of Bend and at the Mt. Bachelor Nordic Center to enjoy a solid outing of skiing.

Last Thursday, Meissner had just been groomed for the first time this season, and I took to the trail on an out-and-back trip of about 5 miles. Other skiers I passed had big smiles on their faces, no doubt excited to be back on the snow.

From the Meissner shelter, I took in the view of Broken Top to the west and Bend to the east. It felt good to be back on skis, shaking loose from a lazy shoulder season to plow ahead into full winter sports mode.

The sno-park had about a foot of snow last week, just enough to run a snowmobile groomer over it, but more snow fell over the past few days, allowing for sno-cat grooming on certain trails.

Last year, Meissner — at an elevation of about 5,400 feet about 10 miles southwest of Bend — had enough snow for skiing by Thanksgiving. But the winter before that was a tough one.

“We only had about 10 days worth of good, skiable snow,” Madden recalls of the 2014-15 season. “The climate trends are making our elevation range a lot more vulnerable. Last year we had a pretty good year but it melted early. The higher-elevation trails closer to Swampy (Lakes Sno-park), we had really good coverage. Those lower-elevation trails are the ones that seem to melt out the earliest. The last several years the reliability of our lower trails hasn’t been really good.”

Larry Katz, the operations manager for Meissner, says he groomed about 5 to 7 miles of trail there last week with a snowmobile and pull-behind groomer. But with more snow in the forecast throughout this week, more grooming with the sno-cat is expected.

“It always snows in Central Oregon one way or another,” Katz says.

Meissner includes about 40 kilometers of groomed trails most winters. Grooming is scheduled for Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays, Saturdays and Sundays, and every day during winter break, the last two weeks of the month. Because the parking lot often fills up on weekends, Madden recommends parking at Swampy Lakes Sno-park just a few miles up Century Drive from Meissner. Most of the trails at Swampy — where a new shelter was built this year — are ungroomed, though.

“We encourage people on those busy weekends to just park at Swampy and hop on the trails there,” Madden says. “The skaters are kind of limited to the groomed snow. We have a really good network and our terrain is really nice and variable for skiing. But if you look at the ungroomed trail system coming out of Swampy, there’s just miles and miles there that are underutilized.”

After my ski at Meissner last week, I drove another 10 or so miles up Century Drive to the Mt. Bachelor Nordic Center. The 60 kilometers of groomed trails there included plenty of snow after about 2 feet had fallen over the previous week. While Meissner is free of charge and runs on donations (although a sno-park permit is required), Bachelor costs \$19 per day for adults.

Shares

But the nordic center offers free common corridor passes, which skiers can use to reach ungroomed trails on the north side of Cascade Lakes Highway.

I cruised along one such trail toward Dutchman Flat Sno-park, enjoying the quiet of a wintry afternoon and finding some solitude in the woods. Bachelor was shrouded in fog as I turned back along a challenging up-and-down trail.

From Bachelor, nordic skiers can venture to Todd Lake and even farther on a series of ungroomed trails.

Elsewhere in Central Oregon, Walton Lake Sno-park and Bandit Spring Sno-park in the Ochocos offer nordic skiing opportunities. Near Sisters, Corbett Sno-park and Three Creek Sno-parks (upper and lower) are also good locations for cross-country skiing.

“There’s a lot of good places in Central Oregon to ski other than Century Drive,” Madden says. “Century Drive is close to town and convenient, but it gets awful crowded up there on weekends.”

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Andy Tullis / The Bulletin Anne Harris, left, leads her friend Megi Morishita, both of Bend, on a classic cross-country ski trip on the groomed trails at Virginia Meissner Sno-park.



Andy Tullis / The Bulletin Bend resident Kenny Wolford, right, leads a group of skate skiers taking part in an XC Oregon camp, training on the nordic trails at Mount Bachelor.