

Find Winter Solitude While Backcountry Skiing

by Scott_Staats

Trails leading from Upper Three Creek Sno-Park offer scenic views of Cascades

I pause to catch my breath and take in the spectacular scenery around me. Ahead looms the massive snow-covered South Sister. To my right, through lodgepole pines, I glimpse Middle and North Sister, equally massive and clad in white.

Not a breeze stirs the air; not a cloud appears in the blue winter sky. Occasional chirping of chickadees and nuthatches in the forest around me break the silence. In the distance I hear wind on the 10,000-foot summits of North and Middle Sister, which are about six to seven miles away.

Jeff View Shelter - Photos by Scott Staats My goal for the day is Jeff View Shelter, about another mile up the trail. After a swig of water and a quick snack, I dig in the ski poles and continue on.

From the Upper Three Creek Nordic Sno-park, the trail climbs steadily for over a half-mile until reaching a flat. From here there are occasional views of the Three Sisters.

The shelter is located just off the trail about 2 1/2 miles south of Upper Three Creek Sno-park. To reach the Sno-Park, take Forest Road 16 (Three Creek Road) 11 miles south from Sisters.

Arriving at the shelter, I found the name appropriate as it faces north with a great view of Mount Jefferson. Although "Sisters View Shelter" would also have been a suitable name, as the Three Sisters seemed close enough to hit with a snowball. Even the highest mountain in the state, Mount Hood, could be easily seen on the horizon 100 miles to the north.

Before taking my skis off, I stand near the shelter and simply stare in awe at the 100-mile stretch of volcanic peaks, including the five highest in the state -â€“ wondering when they will erupt again. They shaped the surrounding landscape and will continue to do so in the future. From my lunch spot, however, I decide that today would not be a good day for an eruption from one of the Three Sisters.

A growling stomach brings me out of the trance. I sit on a log in front of the shelter and conclude that this is one of my favorite winter lunch spots ever. A few chickadees and a gray jay drop in, hoping for a handout but have no luck.

Cross-country skiers enjoy the Jeff View Shelter area. Cross-country skiing is fun, aerobic exercise, whether gliding over the level snow or hitting some of the faster downhill sections. I also look at my cross-country skis as a means of transport to get me to areas that would otherwise be hard to reach in the winter.

The Three Sisters Wilderness Area is about a mile from Jeff View Shelter to the west. No motorized vehicles are permitted in the wilderness area but skis and snowshoes allow winter access.

The Snow Creek Nordic Trail brings skiers right up to the wilderness boundary. Several other trails leading from the Sno-park offer short and long loops with a range of difficulty from easy to most difficult. Be sure to pick up a map with trail descriptions at the Sno-park before heading out. A Sno-park permit is also required.

The shelter, built by the Oregon National Guard and the Forest Service, is outfitted with a woodstove and lots of firewood. On a cold, windy day the shelter can seem like a motel to cross-country skiers. Itâ€™s a great place to warm up, eat lunch and dry out clothes. The Forest Service asks that skiers conserve wood for others. Remember to bring matches and some paper to start a fire.

From the shelter there are several possible routes to take back to the parking lot and I decide to try something a little different. Leaving the trail, I bushwhack to the east, knowing that Forest Service Road 16, which turns into a snowmobile trail that leads back to the Sno-Park, is less than a mile away.

The landscape dips gently to the east and I enjoy a fun, gradual downhill through an open forest. I soon hit old log roads and an open flat, which provide outstanding views of Tam McArthur Rim, Broken Top and the Three Sisters.

It's best to ski with someone else or at least let people know where you are going and what time you plan to be back. Bring a daypack or fanny pack with water, high-energy food, warm hat and gloves. Dress in layers, as you will warm up while skiing. Sunglasses and sunscreen on bright days are a must. A GPS or compass will also help you find your way back to your vehicle if a sudden storm comes up and reduces visibility.

The drive back down the road from the Sno-park passes through large ponderosa pine and manzanita and offers some scenic views of Black Butte and the rest of the Cascades.

As I reach the high desert, I look back up at the snow-covered mountains and find it hard to believe that I was up there just an hour earlier. The trails leading from Three Creek Sno-Park offer some of the most scenic cross-country skiing in the state.

Scott Staats is a fulltime outdoor writer who has lived in Central Oregon the last ten years. His articles have appeared in local, regional and national publications.