

Making tracks in the Ochocos: Snowshoeing and skiing into the heart of Central Oregon's mountains

by Scott_Staats

Ahead of us lay a thick blanket of sparkling snow, like a white down comforter giving warmth to the otherwise brisk winter morning. Behind us, our snowshoes left sets of Bigfoot-looking tracks.

The landscape resembled a candied forest -- as if a giant truck dumped loads of powdered sugar over everything. The snow- and ice-covered trees made a stark contrast against the Crater Lake-blue sky.

Aspen trees in the Ochocos (All photos by Scott Staats) When my wife and I donned our snowshoes in the parking lot at Walton Sno-Park on the Ochoco National Forest, a cold wind cut through the air. Upon entering the protection of the trees, the air became still and only the rhythmic swooshing of our snowshoes could be heard.

The snow was about the driest I've ever seen, with a thin layer of feathery frost on top. I hoped the weather would remain cold as these were perfect conditions for snowshoeing or cross-country skiing. I often choose snowshoes over cross-country skis since they can be used in just about any snow conditions. Oftentimes, morning snow is icy, warming to sticky snow by noon -- making cross-country skiing difficult and frustrating at best.

The best part about snowshoeing is making your own tracks, as shown here near Walton Sno-Park. The best part about snowshoeing is making your own tracks and not following where others went earlier. Snowmobiling is popular at the Sno-Park on weekends, but we had the morning to ourselves. Groomed snowmobile trails take off from the parking lot, heading north and south. We decided to weave our own trail in and out of the ponderosa pines and firs.

A fog bank rose up to the east from Big Summit Prairie, giving a false impression of billowing clouds of smoke from a forest fire. Squirrel and snowshoe hare tracks interrupted, yet added to, the pattern of the forest floor. A flicker called off in the distance, breaking the world of white and blue silence, perhaps wishing us or its mate a Merry Christmas. The experience epitomized a perfect winter day.

Even at its highest point, the sun seemed only a few feet above the southern horizon, casting long shadows across the snow. Now with the passing of the Winter Solstice, the days are finally getting longer.

When Prineville is socked in with fog, the Ochocos often rise above the cloudbank providing spectacular views of an ocean of white with forested islands jutting upwards and the Cascades providing a backdrop.

Walton Sno-Park warming cabin comes complete with wood stove and picnic table. Back at the parking lot, we checked out the large warming cabin complete with wood stove and picnic table. This experience happened a few years ago on a Christmas day. More recently, my wife and I headed up toward the base of Lookout Mountain on January 2 to check out the snow conditions, which were okay but not great with about a foot of snow.

Mountain chickadees and red-breasted nuthatches chirped from nearby trees as we made our way upward from the trailhead. The orange and black bark of the ponderosa pines stood out against a backdrop of white. From an open aspen stand there were great views out at Wildcat Mountain and the rest of the Ochocos.

We never made it to the top of the mountain but a few days earlier George Wilson did and said the conditions were great. He went up the Independent Mine Trail and came down the East Trail. He even cut some good telemark tracks on the way down. Skiing to the top of Lookout Mountain is a bit more difficult than other ski trails should not be attempted by inexperienced skiers.

Wilson is president of the Ochoco Nordic Club, which is one of the chapters of the Oregon Nordic Club. The primary purpose of the club is to promote skiing, especially in the Ochoco Mountains. The club schedules a variety of ski events through the winter months that includes guided ski tours, beginner ski lessons, a moonlight dinner and ski trips to other areas. There is usually a scheduled ski tour twice a month and a group that skis once each week during winter, usually on weekdays.

The local ski club has been around for at least a dozen years and works in conjunction with the Forest Service to mark, clear and maintain about 30 kilometers of ski trails in three areas of the Ochocos including Walton Sno-Park, Bandit Spring and Lookout Mountain. Trails are marked with blue diamonds.

View of the Ochocos near Lookout Mt. Snow conditions in the Ochocos can be hit and miss but the last few years have been good. Wilson said there are about four months of good snow at the Walton Sno-Park area and maybe three months of good snow at the Bandit Spring area. Lookout Mountain usually has the best snow conditions through the winter.

The club's web site (www.onc.org/ochoco) has printable maps and trail information as well as a schedule of tours. Annual dues are \$9.00 for an individual and \$13.00 for a family. There are currently about 20 members. Some of the best trails, said Wilson, are at Bandit Spring. However, it usually has the least coverage of snow, he added. To join the club or to get more information call 462-3158.

On a winter outing, it's very important to carry water, high-energy food, warm clothes and matches. And always let someone know where you are going and when you plan on returning. On bright days be sure to bring sunglasses and sunscreen. Don't try to go too far on the first few outings. Pace yourself and add more mileage to future trips.

The roads to Walton Sno-Park and the Lookout Mountain trailhead are usually icy past the Ochoco Ranger Station. It's best to have four-wheel drive or chains. Sno-Park permits are required and can be picked up at most outdoor retail stores.

Whether you choose the shushing of cross-country skis or the scrunching of snowshoes, it will be a memorable outing in the Ochocos.

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.

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