

An alternate route at North Benson Sno-Park

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If you are looking for a nice cross-country ski outing but don't have all day, here is an alternative route into an area you may already be familiar with. The North Loop Trail of Ray Benson Sno-Park is a popular Nordic ski trail right at the summit of Santiam Pass.

The last time I skied this area, I took the conventional North Loop Trail route from the Ray Benson parking area, just past the Hoodoo Autobahn. For something a little different this time, however, we elected to tackle just the northern portion of this route.

Depending on snow conditions, this route is actually a little easier than the full loop, even though it is roughly the same total distance – about four miles. The route is quite flat, with only a few gradual ups and downs. There is one steeper stretch just north of the North Blowout Shelter, but it is relatively short.

This alternate route provides a little extra adventure (very little) because, initially, it is off-trail and may require a little bit of thought and some mild orienteering. We began our outing from a small parking area that is hardly more than a wide spot in the road. Perhaps the most difficult part of the trip was climbing up over the snow berm at the side of the road.

Under blue skies and sun, we headed southeast across untracked snow, with the idea of joining up with the marked North Loop Trail.

It is pretty hard to get lost in this area, since Highway 20 is less than a half mile to the north, and the Hoodoo/Big Lake Road provides a boundary to the west. Still, just passing through an unmarked and untracked area such as this provides a real feeling of oneness with the winter wilderness.

While soaking up the placid grandeur of it all, however, I had an unexpected wakeup call. Most of this route is through a portion of the 90,000-acre B & B Burn of 2003; so, in spite of the rapidly growing lodgepole pine saplings popping up here and there, the way seemed rather clear most of the time. Imagine my surprise when my right ski suddenly plunged about three feet down into what turned out to be a hidden tree well. The small tree, itself, was buried in snow; so I wasn't expecting a hazard.

Fortunately, I remained upright; and, after flailing around a bit and firmly planting my left foot, I was able to do a one-legged standup and extricate myself from the hole. If nothing else, it showed that mishaps can happen even under the most favorable conditions; and I was certainly glad that I wasn't traveling alone.

In accordance with our plan, sure enough, we soon encountered the more traveled track of the "official" North Loop Trail, which is traced by blue diamond markers on the burned tree trunks. Once on the main trail, we encountered a few other travelers on our way to our eventual goal of North

Blowout Shelter.

Before too long, we spotted the shelter up ahead; reaching your goal always provides a sense of accomplishment. The shelter was originally built in the 1980s by the Willamette Chapter of the Oregon Nordic Club but destroyed in the B & B Fire. The rebuilt shelter sits on a high point and looks out across a scenic, if mostly burned, panorama to the east. Black Butte is also part of the vista.

Uncharacteristically, snowmobiles had not touched the wide plain below and to the east of the shelter. It was the first time I hadn't seen the entire area crisscrossed with the characteristic track marks of mechanization.

On this day, the two of us were also part of the largest crowd I've ever seen at the site. There were nine of us! The shelter's inner walls are lined with benches facing a wood-burning stove. The little log cabin has a heavy canvas door and two large plexiglass windows. There was an ample supply of firewood. Since it was a relatively pleasant day, we saw no need to deplete the firewood supply, but enjoyed the dry bench seating while munching on snacks that we had packed in.

On the westbound return



PHOTO BY CRAIG F. EISENBEIS

With Mt. Washington in the background, a Nordic skier retraces his off-trail route connecting to the northern part of the North Loop Trail out of Ray Benson Sno-Park.

portion of the trip, we encountered only a handful of people, but I've never known the area to be particularly crowded. We veered off to the northwest a little farther east than our inward-bound route, so we covered slightly different ground.

Our return route skittered around behind the ODOT sand and gravel piles at the summit of Santiam Pass, and soon we could see the traffic heading into the Hoodoo Ski Area for another of

the banner days they have enjoyed this season. We covered the entire trip in less than three hours.

The Ray Benson Sno-Park is located at Santiam Pass 20 miles west of Sisters on Highway 20. The south-leading access road to Ray Benson and Hoodoo is clearly marked. For this abridged ski-in route, there is a small, plowed pullout on the left, shortly after turning off Highway 20. Sno-Park permits are required.

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