

SPORTS

Warm season adds to options



Usually by Late January most elevations in the Cascades above about 2,000 feet have enough snow for cross-country skiing or other winter pursuits. This year is proving to be an exception, though, as persistent unseasonably warm weather has kept the snow mostly above 4,000 feet.

The result has been a below-average mountain snowpack, and although most Cascade alpine ski areas haven't suffered too much, the choices for other popular winter recreation have been cut down considerably. And that's too bad because some of the prime spots — usually covered with plenty of snow by now — have either no snow at all or just an occasional slushy patch.

While this may not be the best possible scenario for outdoor enthusiasts, it does open up some rather unique opportunities. Those people who just can't live without trips in the snow still have the higher elevations in which to enjoy the white stuff, but the unusual weather means everyone else can hike to some places that are almost always snowed-in at this time of year.

There's something fun — almost daring — about hiking into areas during the middle of the winter that typically require long treks by snowshoe or on skis. And for people who either don't like traveling over snow, or don't have any experience doing so, warm winters open up rare chances that aren't usually open to them.

One of the easiest of these trips is the 2.3-mile trail to

Pamela Lake, which is situated at the foot of Mt. Jefferson at the 3,900-foot level. There are still snowdrifts along the trail, but with up-close glimpses of old growth conifers, rushing mountain streams and — on clear days — impressive views of Oregon's second-highest peak, this rare opportunity is worth the effort.

An added bonus is that Pamela Lake is open to fishing all year; full regulations are available in the Oregon fishing synopsis. One word of caution here: Although it is beyond the scope of this column, ice-fishing can be dangerous and anyone interested should get more information before trying it. Ice conditions in the Cascades are very unpredictable.

The Pamela Lake trailhead is located at the end of the Pamela road, which branches east (left) from Highway 22 about 4 miles north of Marion Forks. This paved road turns to gravel after about 1.5 miles, but it isn't rough the rest of the two miles to the trail.

Although the road is not plowed, the warm weather has cleared away most of the snow, and the trailhead is accessible without four-wheel drive. There is a large parking area at the beginning of the trail, complete with a forest service sign, bulletin board and restrooms.

This wide, well-graded trail is one of the most popular in the Cascades during the summer, when as many as 300 people may use it during July and August weekends. It winds through an ancient forest for the first half-mile, roughly following splashing Pamela Creek on an almost level grade. The trail is bordered closely by rhododendron plants that burst forth with red blossoms in May and June.

At about the half-mile point the trail passes close by Milk Creek, a stream that starts on Mt. Jefferson's slopes to the north. It is one of the many small creeks heading on the mountain that have names such as milk or white, indicative of the murky tone they have during the spring thaw when sand and silt from Mt. Jefferson's glaciers fill them.

From this point the trail again follows Pamela Creek, rising gradually with a few short, moderate stretches to the creek's outlet at the lake's edge. The trail gains only 700 feet of elevation on the way to the lake.

There are other options for the adventurous at this point. Grizzly Peak offers one of the best views of Mt. Jefferson's west side, but its ridgetop viewpoint is more than two miles away — and 2,000 feet higher — than the lake; this is a trip only for a strong snowshoer.

Hunts Cove, a small basin right at the base of Mt. Jefferson at the 5,800-foot level, is almost four miles past the lake. This, too, is not a trip for the beginner, but it can be skied by those with downhill or telemark skills. Neither of the longer trips should be attempted in anything but perfect weather or by anyone without winter survival training.

But the real beauty of this trip is that it's an easy walk right to the lake. In most years a trip to Pamela Lake in late January requires a five- or six-mile trek through the snow, as the unplowed road off Highway 22 usually isn't passable all the way to the trailhead.

Jayson Jacoby is a sports reporter for the Emerald.

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