

## CROSS COUNTRY SKIING AT PILCHER CREEK RESERVOIR NEAR N. POWDER

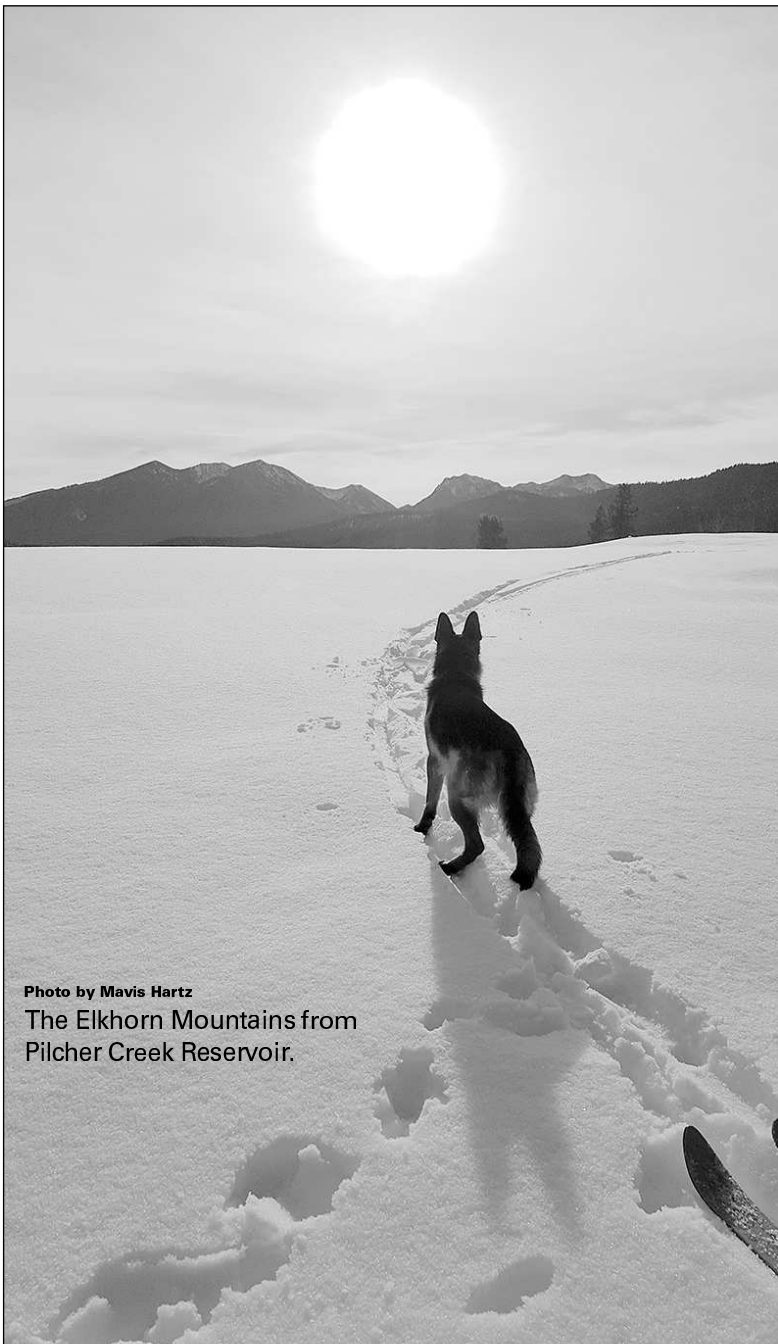


Photo by Mavis Hartz  
The Elkhorn Mountains from Pilcher Creek Reservoir.

Photo by Mavis Hartz

Hazel and Whitfield Hartz enjoy a day of cross country skiing at Pilcher Creek Reservoir west of North Powder.



# BREAK OUT OF CABIN FEVER

Winter is here and it is time to chase away the cabin fever. The glistening snow invites the animals out of the hills and the Norse goddess Skadi and those like her to travel by sled, ski and snowshoe. An incredible Union County Park for enjoying the winter wonderland, located 10½ miles west of North Powder, is Pilcher Creek Reservoir.

Pilcher Creek Reservoir is owned by Powder Valley Water Control District, which allows recreation to happen as guided by Union County Parks. The camping is free, though limited to a handful of days, the fish wily, the setting gorgeous, and the birds majestic. During the summer the campground is often full of campers, anglers and children floating in the water. The birds are many and those with binoculars might spot the bald eagle nest that has been monitored and documented since 1997, while others may get lucky enough to see an osprey dive for its lunch.

Pilcher Creek delineates where montane true fir forest, ponderosa pine forest and perennial bunch grassland intersect, making it the perfect meeting place for various animals, fowl and humans. The Pilcher Creek area is marked for the discovery of some of the oldest know human artifacts in the region. Those artifacts — a stemmed windust and lanceolate crescent projectile points — were sandwiched between the volcanic ash of the explosive Mount Mazama, which created Crater Lake, and Glacier Peak, a prolific volcano in the Cascades of Northern Washington. The layering of the great cake of Oregon's geological history makes it relatively easy to suggest that the Pilcher Creek area was inhabited 8,000 to 11,000 years ago with na-



## THE NEXT RIDE

MAVIS HARTZ

tives who hunted elk, buffalo and deer and dined on camas, huckleberries and other bounty.

Though summer at Pilcher Creek Reservoir is wonderful, winter at the park is magical. There are fewer two-legged visitors, though the rest rooms stay open and camping and fishing through the ice are still allowed. The Elkhorn and Eagle Cap mountain ranges are illuminated by a rosy alpine glow that glistens on the pristine white snow and trees that show a cold blue, reminiscent of the Tang dynasty porcelain and their imported Persian cobalt. I have been fortunate enough to spend hours ice skating, hot dog roasting, snowshoeing and skiing in the area. Today I will focus on skiing.

Cross country skiing in an area like Pilcher Creek is marvelous because the terrain is moderate and thus very unlikely to avalanche, and involves land that is usually off limits due to the high water content in the soil. I suggest using backcountry Nordic or a lighter touring ski in the untracked loveliness of this choose your own adventure. BC Nordic skis are a little stiffer and heavier than the touring ski but they offer a bit more stability and the opportunity to turn on steeper terrain.

Nordic skis fall into two categories — waxed and wax-less. As impossible as it sounds, both categories require the user to apply wax. The wax-less ski doesn't require the application of a kick wax through the center of the ski, which is compressed by the skier's weight to allow them to propel themselves



Photo by Mavis Hartz

A meadow along Anthony Creek where state workers feed hundreds of elk each winter.

forward or up hill. Skis that fall into this category are easy to spot due to the fish scales under the ski binding. To prevent the snow from clumping on the bottom of the ski it is still important to wax the ski with a paste or iron-on wax that matches the temperature gradient of the snow.

Wax skis are for the geeks of the Nordic world. The lack of fish scales allows for precise location of the kick zone to reduce drag and academic matching of wax to snow conditions. Racers generally seek out high quality, light wax skis. If you are unsure about which skis to use, or looking for a pair to rent, swing by Mountain Works Bicycles and rent a pair.

Park in the campground, put on your skis and head out for some fun. The Union County Park boundaries are up on the knoll to the west and the high water mark along the rest of the reservoir. Enjoy an approximately 1.5-mile tromp around the lake until the terrain on the east side becomes challengingly steep.

At that point, have a snack and enjoy the view. On the northwest side of the reservoir you will see a barn with a green roof. That land belongs to the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife's Elkhorn Wildlife Area. In 1971 John McKean, a biologist and administrator with the ODFW, began amassing land to relieve the conflict between animals, and in particular elk, looking for winter forage and humans raising crops and cattle.

Due to the convergence of multiple habitats this area offers the perfect protected wintering grounds to a large number of inhabitants that call the Elkhorn Mountains home. The Elkhorn Wildlife Area now manages 9,600 acres of land and maintains 10 large mammal feeding sites. From April 10 to Dec. 1 the acreage is open to hikers, mountain bikers and horseback riders. From Dec. 1 to April 10 the Wildlife Area is closed to the public to allow the animals to winter in peace so

they can preserve their energy for reproducing and surviving, and to reduce the chances the elk will bypass the feeding sites and start munching on ranchers' hay supplies. There are two elk feeding stations with public viewing areas. One, the Auburn Tract, has a viewing station southwest of Baker City along Old Auburn Road. The other, Anthony Creek, is a short drive south of Pilcher Creek.

Return to the campground at a faster, smoother pace — Nordic skiing is always easier when a trail is broken in. Upon leaving Tucker Flat Road turn west on River Lane. A short distance, less than a mile, down the road is the Anthony Creek elk viewing area. The elk love to hang out in the trees close to the open meadow and can be viewed and enjoyed through a good pair of binoculars. Spring brings babies and protective elders to the scene so keep your distance and enjoy the fabulous place we live in.

## POWDER

Continued from Page 1A

(A sign that might require some digging to get at if the wintry weather pattern continues.)

The spot, just a few hundred yards from dredge, is where two streams — McCully Fork and Cracker Creek, both of which head high in the Elkhorn Mountains — come together.

From here on the waterway is known as the Powder River as it absorbs dozens of sources, ranging from rivulets that carry water only briefly, to

considerable streams, such as the North Powder River, Eagle and Pine creeks, that during the peak of the spring runoff can swell the river's volume twofold.

Just downstream from the headwaters we crossed a bridge that was nearly filled with snow, making the safety rails rather less effective than engineers no doubt intended.

We saw in several places evidence of beavers.

The industrious rodents have made deep ruts in the snow, rather like bobsled runs, during their apparently frequent trips between clumps of

willow, which bear the species' distinctive tooth marks, and the river.

When we had last hiked here, in early September, a section of trail was inundated by a pond created by a beaver dam.

But the frigid temperatures and snow have solved that dilemma, making it possible to snowshoe most anywhere within the park (it borders private property, but the boundary is amply provided with signs — and signs rather taller than the Powder River headwaters sign). We did avoid the obvious ponds among the dredge tailings, neither trust-

ing the solidity of the ice nor wanting to make even a short hike back with a drenched child.

Because the entrance road to the dredge visitors center and parking lot is blocked by snow,

parking is limited.

There is a small plowed area on the left side of the highway, just before you reach Sumpter's business district, where a State Parks Department pickup truck is usually parked,

that has room for three or four vehicles.

From there you can walk west to the dredge. The route crosses a busy snowmobile trail, so make sure the way is clear.

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