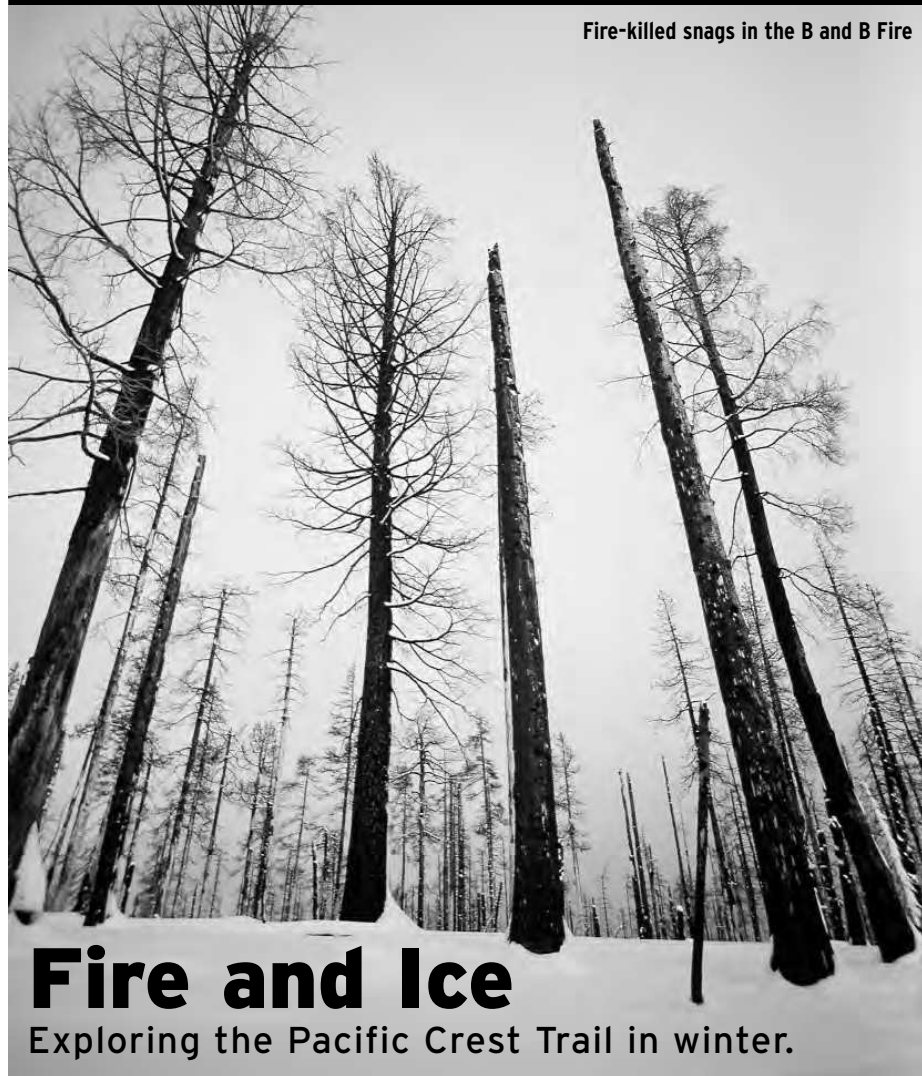


Fire-killed snags in the B and B Fire



Fire and Ice

Exploring the Pacific Crest Trail in winter.

To the casual observer, the ancient forests that blanket the Cascades can seem timeless and unchanging. In reality, they are dynamic and violent landscapes. Since the last ice age, the forests of the Cascades have been re-shaped by forest fires. Often fires burn hot, killing most of the trees in vast swaths of forest, beginning the process of forest succession that may not end for another 500 or even a thousand years until the next fire roars through the mountains. Other forest fires burn quite frequently, clearing away brush and leaving large trees intact.

The process of forest rebirth has been demonized by none other than the U.S. Forest Service, which has spent millions of the taxpayers' dollars over the past 50 years trying to convince the public that forest fires are a death knell for wildlife (and that logging is somehow good for critters). They even kidnapped an innocent bear from the wild to serve as an unwilling spokesman for their campaign.

Don't believe the hype. People don't make their homes out of live trees, and most wildlife doesn't either. Fire-killed snags are a combination diner and hotel for hundreds of species. And a burned forest — far from being a devastated moonscape — has a stark beauty all its own.

One of the best ways to see it for yourself is a ski trip along the Pacific Crest Trail through the B and B Fire, which burned almost 100,000 acres just east of the Cascade Crest in the summer of 2003.

To get there, drive Highway 126 east of Springfield, staying to the east at junctions near the top of the mountain, following the signs for Bend and Sisters. About 32 miles northeast of McKenzie Bridge, look for Benson Sno Park on the left at the top of Santiam Pass (it's about a 75-mile drive from Springfield). Park in the large parking lot and find a ski trail to the east of the innertubing hill. This trail parallels Highway 126-20 for about a quarter of a mile before hitting a snowed-under logging spur. If you can't find the trail from the snow park, simply walk up the highway for a quarter of mile and take a left at the sign for the Pacific Crest Trail).

A quarter of a mile up the road is the trailhead for the Pacific Crest Trail and the boundary of the Mount Jefferson Wilderness. The PCT is NOT flagged or signed for winter travel. The trail typically gets enough use that you can navigate by others' ski tracks. Cross-country travel is easy and rewarding, too. But do not venture off the marked trail unless you have a map and a compass and know how to use them.

The PCT will take you all the way to Canada if you have the time, but skiing a couple miles north and back is far enough to get a good sense of the burn — thousands of ghostly burned trees, the bark scorched black and the exposed wood bleached silver.

A quarter mile up the PCT you'll come to an intersection; the right hand turn will take you to Square Lake, 2.2 miles to the east. Staying to the left, ski another 1.2 miles to a trail intersection that takes you to Santiam Lake. Stay right here, and the trail begins to climb to the top of a ridge. The first good views — of Three-Fingered Jack to the north, Black Butte to the east and the Three Sisters to the south — is at the top of the ridge, about three and a half miles from the trailhead.

On clear days you can see the full extent of the fire, which was contained a year and four months ago after burning for more than a month. To the east the Deschutes National Forest is planning a massive "salvage" timber sale that will strip-mine the recovering forest of valuable habitat as well as nutrients to re-grow the next generation of forest.

Experienced backcountry skiers should contemplate the fantastic multi-day traverse around Three Fingered Jack, or a shorter cross-country loop back to Square Lake. No one should go anywhere near the Mount Jefferson wilderness in the winter without plenty of water, warm clothes, food, flashlight, map, compass and other essentials.

The B and B Fire along the crest of the Cascades is a spot you'll want to come back to every year, to check in with a forest born in fire.

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