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WEEKEND BREAK



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Robie Pruden
Phillip Thiessen cuts
a turn on the Tatoosh
Range at Mount Rainier
National Park.

CALMING COLD, BREATH-TAKING EXPERIENCES

Old Man Winter's Northwest musings

By RON BALDWIN

It is dead calm on the beach — the east wind subsided after sunset.

It's not common to walk on Clatsop beaches at night in the winter, but the calm beckons my companion and I to venture out on the sand in the crisp, clear night, the moon now showing about three quarters of its natural glory near the barely visible western horizon.

We stroll along, just shoreside from the damp sand. It's unusually quiet, the surf almost nonexistent. Ahead, a thin skim of fog hovers over the beach, slightly illuminated by the moon.

"What's that?" my companion whispers breathily. I turn my ear north and hear a faint, irregular thumping. Then, as we move farther along, the thumping is accompanied by splashing sounds.

Suddenly, an elk almost the size of a truck zooms past us into the surf. By now, the moon is showing us the silhouettes of perhaps 30 elk frolicking in the shallow seawater, running at each other and jumping from side to side, rolling and splashing around like a gaggle of elementary students at a public pool. We move up the beach to keep clear, but the show goes on for another 15 minutes until suddenly, unanimously, the animals turn to the east and thunder off the beach.

When we return to our vehicle, we stare at each other as if to say a silent "Did you see what I just saw?" along with "How are they not freezing to death?" If it were summer, it's unlikely those elk would venture onto the beach where they would encounter humans, but animal's habits change in winter, as do human's.

A time to recharge

Winter is the resting time in nature. It's a time when the forests quiet, the roads decongest and home by the fire-side is the best place to be.

Our North Coast winters feature relatively warm temperatures and little snow, but they make up for that mildness with fierce tempests that rock beaches and headlands throughout the cold months.

Old Man Winter is merciless.

He pounces on the unprepared, punishes the foolish. Life and limb are threatened. Earthly beings take heed or suffer the consequences. It is not surprising that the Corps of Discovery considered their stay at Ft. Clatsop as the coldest they'd ever been, even after the preceding winter in North Dakota's frozen landscape. They did as all north-



Backcountry skiers traverse Mazama Ridge at Mount Rainier National Park.

Robie Pruden

ern beings in winter at that time — they held up in a safe place and conserved their energy and resources for the coming dry season.

Crabby but brave

Technological changes in the last 200 years have made it possible for humans to challenge the power of Old Man Winter. A good example of this is Dungeness crab fishers on the coast of North America. Dungeness crab fishers are creatures of winter. They venture out from coastal harbors when conditions are most abominable. Commercial crabbing is the most lucrative of fisheries on the West Coast, and it happens mostly in the depths of winter. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that the Dungeness crab industry has 310 deaths per 100,000 full-time employees, a chilling statistic. The modern-day fleet is less endangered by the North Pacific than their predecessors due to unprecedented

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Ron Baldwin as Old Man Winter.

Nancy Tynkila



Backcountry skiers cross Commonwealth Creek near Kendall Katwalk at Snoqualmie Pass.

Robie Pruden