

Winter backcountry preparation a necessity

By MARK MORICAL
The (Bend) Bulletin

VISTA BUTTE SNO-PARK — Some backcountry areas in Central Oregon are so accessible that it is hard to even consider them backcountry.

Vista Butte is certainly one of those places.

But backcountry is backcountry, and snow enthusiasts should always take the necessary safety precautions whenever they venture away from resorts and into the mountains, no matter how close to town or the highway they might be.

Just a few miles from Mount Bachelor, Vista Butte Sno-park is basically just some extra space for parking along the shoulder of Century Drive.

I arrived there last week to find the “Sno-park Parking Permits Required” sign protruding just a couple of feet above the enormous snowpack of this winter.

My plan was to snowshoe to the top of 6,619-foot Vista Butte and snowboard back down toward the sno-park.

From the sno-park, reaching the summit of the butte to the northeast is a 2.5-mile trek with a 700-foot elevation gain.

Tumalo Mountain, located just across Century Drive from Mount Bachelor, is the best-known Central Oregon destination for backcountry snowriders. But Vista Butte is a decent option when Bachelor and Tumalo Mountain are getting pounded with wind and snow.

The snowshoe up Vista Butte started out pretty challenging on a cold, gray day with little wind, as I slogged for about half a mile through deep, untracked snow before turning onto the well-packed Butte Trail.

After climbing steadily for nearly 2 miles, I linked up to the Vista Butte Trail for the final half mile. Mount Bachelor, Tumalo Mountain and the surrounding hills came into view above the tree line.

The trail grew steeper and steeper before I finally



In this 2014, file photo, Mark Morical carves through the heavy powder snow at the top of Vista Butte west of Bend. Some backcountry areas in Oregon are so accessible that it is hard to even consider them backcountry and Vista Butte is certainly one of those places.

Joe Kline/The Bulletin via AP File

reached the summit. From the top, I looked out on the vast, snow-covered high desert, buttes popping up here and there and the rocky cliffs of the Tumalo Falls area visible just to the northeast.

Several wind-carved cornices lined the summit of Vista Butte. I glanced down at possible lines through which to snowboard.

I had heard from a few Central Oregon backcountry experts that the southern portion of the butte offers the best options for skiing and snowboarding — and riding that direction can place you back near Vista Butte Sno-park.

Most of the snowriding on Vista Butte is among the trees, so skiers and snowboarders should watch out for tree wells, areas around the bases of trees where unconsolidated snow collects and creates potential hazards for an unsuspecting snowrider.

Backcountry skiers and

snowboarders should also be prepared for avalanche risk, especially after all the recent snowfall.

At Vista Butte, the numerous trees anchor the snow to make for reduced chance of avalanche, but snowriders should come equipped with all the necessary avalanche tools, including a shovel, a probe and a transceiver.

After replacing my snowshoes with my snowboard, I sank deep into the fresh snow and began to carve my way down the butte, finding open chutes of powder near the top but soon finding myself back among the trees.

Jon Tapper, vice president of the Central Oregon Avalanche Association, says backcountry enthusiasts cannot assume that they are free of avalanche danger at smaller, lower-angled areas such as Vista Butte and Tumalo Mountain.

“That’s a side of avalanche education that veers more

toward behavior science,” Tapper says. “Anything can slide.”

He added that during a big part of the storm cycle in early January, several small avalanches were reported in the Todd Lake area, another popular place for backcountry skiers and snowboarders.

“It wasn’t catastrophic, but there were signs of instability in the snow,” Tapper says. “That’s because there was so much new snow. You had storm upon storm, creating layer upon layer.”

The Central Oregon Avalanche Association (www.coavalanche.org) which runs on donations, relies on four backcountry experts who observe and report snow conditions on a regular basis. They offer a wide variety of locations for their reports.

While a deep snowpack this winter can lead to dangers, Tapper explains, avalanche risk depends

strictly on the composition of the snowpack and where the weak layers are located.

“It absolutely depends on how each of those storms came in, and whether there are weak layers buried in there, and then the evolution of the snowpack,” he says. “As you get more used to understanding the general patterns that go along with snow in the backcountry, and how the snowpack changes, you would recognize that we’re out of a period of instability, and moving toward more stability. Things aren’t changing as rapidly, overall.”

“But things change every day.”

Backcountry gear

A rundown of some handy equipment for snowriding in the backcountry:

- Transceivers, probes and shovels: Transceivers work in case of an avalanche only if both the person who is buried under the snow and those trying to find the victim have them. The device’s

SKI REPORT

Spout Springs
Tollgate, Ore.
CLOSED

Anthony Lakes
North Powder, Ore.
New snow: None
Base depth: 60”
Conditions: Warm and wet conditions earlier in the week

Ski Bluewood
Dayton, Wash.
New snow: none
Base depth: 53”
Conditions: Machine-groomed wet snow

Ski Fergi
Joseph, Ore.
New snow: None
Base depth: 25”
Conditions: Lions Club appreciation this weekend, Sweetheart Slalom and other special events

Mt. Hood Meadows
Government Camp, Ore.
New snow: Trace
Base depth: 95”
Conditions: Hardpack and carveable groom. Skier-packed powder, hardpack, and icy spots off piste.

signal becomes stronger as rescuers get closer to the victim. Probes are long sticks, broken down like tent poles, that are used to search the snow for an avalanche victim. A compact shovel can be used to dig the victim out.

- Climbing skins: Nylon material that sticks to the bottom of skis to provide traction on the way up the slope.

- Alpine touring skis: Skiers have their heels free while skinning up the hills, and then lock their heels in for coming down the mountain.

- Telemark skis: Skiers’ heels are always free, whether touring or skiing down the slopes.

- Splitboard: This snowboard splits in two, allowing the boarder to apply skins for touring and then adjust the two sides into one board for riding.

Bend cannabis company gets into extreme-sports athlete sponsorship

(AP) — A Bend cannabis company has found an interesting way to market its product. It’s sponsoring athletes. The company, Oregrown, grows, processes and sells cannabis. Founder Aviv Hadar said he’s inked sponsorship deals with several snowboarders and skiers. As the *Bend Bulletin* first reported, the biggest name is John Spriggs, a freestyle and backcountry skier who’s competed in the X Games. “We’re helping him travel, and explore the backcountry and use cannabis instead of pharmaceutical medicines,” Hadar said.

“And he’s helping us tell that story and get that story across.” The company is paying Spriggs a monthly stipend in exchange for his promotion of the brand. Spriggs is now among at least three professional athletes nationwide who have formal marijuana sponsorship deals. Hadar said cannabis is pretty widely accepted recreationally and for pain relief by counterculture athletes like skiers, snowboarders and surfers. By contrast, major sports leagues like the NFL and the NBA drug test their athletes and ban marijuana.

Have an outdoors story you’d be willing to tell, or a trophy photo you’d like to show off?

Email editor Tim Trainor at ttrainor@eastoregonian.com or call him at 541-966-0835.

Utah tourism promotes Bears Ears despite state opposition

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — Utah tourism officials said Monday they are promoting the new Bears Ears National Monument on a state website despite a push by the governor and other leaders to have the designation rescinded.

Republican Gov. Gary Herbert signed a resolution earlier this month from the Legislature calling on President Donald Trump to repeal the designation by President Barack Obama during his final weeks in office.

Utah’s congressional delegation, led by U.S. Sen. Orrin Hatch, is also pressuring Trump on the matter.

Herbert and others say they want to ensure the lands in southeastern Utah are used for a mix of purposes, including development, drilling and mining.

The outdoors industry sees that as a threat to the state’s majestic outdoor areas and is pushing back.

The state had already been promoting some of the natural features of the area online, Utah Office of Tourism managing director Vicki Varela said. But Varela said the state can now be “more focused” because of the monument.

The tourism office has a full webpage dedicated to the 1.35-million-acre national monument, along with subpages highlighting its various features.

The website calls the monument’s landscape breathtaking while warning that it is rugged, wild and remote without the services or facilities found at national parks in the state.

Varela said officials aren’t sure yet how they’ll promote the area since it’s now more of a destination for serious outdoor enthusiasts.

Varela said later Monday afternoon that the tourism office is not promoting the monument on any social media accounts or launching any kind of paid marketing campaign for it. The office promoted Utah’s national parks with the Mighty 5 advertising campaign.

Varela and Herbert spoke to reporters Monday after the release of a new University of Utah report that shows tourism spending in Utah hit a record of \$8.17 billion in 2015.

That marked a 2 percent increase from the year before, putting tourism among the largest industries in the state, according to the report by the university’s Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute.

The governor didn’t know the state



In this Jan. 11 file photo, people attend the Outdoor Retailer show at the Salt Palace Convention Center in Salt Lake City.

AP Photo/Rick Bowmer, File

was promoting Bears Ears National Monument to tourists. Herbert said he and some Native Americans are concerned about attracting visitors who will trample on sacred lands.

“It’s not like they want to put a neon sign out there saying, ‘Come here and camp,’” Herbert said of the tribes.

The new tourism spending report comes amid heated debate over the state’s role in management of Utah’s iconic public lands.

The discussions escalated after the designation of the Bears Ears monument in December despite staunch opposition from Herbert, the state’s congressional delegation and other top leaders.

In protest over calls to rescind the designation, outdoor industry giant Patagonia and several other companies are vowing to boycott the semiannual Outdoor Retailer show, which brings \$45 million in annual spending to Utah.

Varela said the Outdoor Retailer show is “a big part of Utah’s brand,” and a longstanding, important part of the state’s economy that they would love to keep.

Herbert said he hopes a Thursday meeting with outdoor retailers will allow all sides to try to understand each other, reiterating his belief that Utah is the best place for the show.

Retailers ramp up threat to pull show from Utah

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — A coalition of major outdoor companies on Tuesday ramped up a threat to get a lucrative outdoor trade show to leave Utah unless the governor and elected officials back away from policies they say threaten public lands.

Leaders of Black Diamond Equipment, Osprey Packs and 28 other outdoor companies sent a letter to Republican Gov. Gary Herbert that says Utah leaders are threatening the outdoor industry by pushing back against federal land control and management.

“We see all of these actions as an existential threat to the vibrancy of Utah and America’s outdoor industry as well as Utah’s high quality of life,” the letter said.

The letter comes two days before Herbert is expected to meet with outdoor retailers to try to smooth the discord. It is the latest in a string of moves the outdoors industry has made to protest Utah’s stance.

Organizers of the lucrative, semiannual Outdoor Retailer trade show said this year that they’re considering moving the event

after two decades in Utah. Some companies said they’ll boycott the show as long as it remains in the state.

Tuesday’s letter was signed by CEOs of companies boycotting the show, like Patagonia and Arc’teryx.

In the letter, the outdoors CEOs call on Herbert and Utah officials to stop pushing for the recent declaration of the Bears Ears National Monument to be rescinded and to stop pushing for state control of public lands currently owned by the federal government, among other actions. “If that is something that you are unwilling to do, we are publicly and emphatically urging our trade group’s leadership to have our show depart,” the letter said.

Speaking about the dispute earlier this week, Herbert told reporters on Monday that both sides of the issue need to calm down and understand each other.

Herbert and Utah’s Legislature recently approved a resolution calling on President Donald Trump to repeal the monument. Utah’s congressional delegation is also pressing the Trump administration on the issue.