

# Cross-country skiing can smooth a bumpy winter's ups and downs

BY ERIN E. WILLIAMS  
Special To The Washington Post

Winter arrived early this year in Bend, bringing a 3-foot base to the Cascades by late November — as well as antsy Nordic skiers who pounced on the snow when the first flakes fell.

Awaiting them was Sunnyside Sports. Concerned with keeping its customers and staff safe yet wanting to help the community get outside, in October the local bicycle and cross-country ski shop decided to forgo daily ski rentals and instead offer season-long leases. Its rental stock was cleaned out by the following day.

As the pandemic grinds on and restrictions and winter worsens cabin fever, traversing our nearby trails brings essential mental and physical health benefits; cross-country skiing allows us to discover outdoor areas, enjoy nature and exercise while maintaining distance. And it's remarkably accessible since you can ski nearly anywhere there's snow.

I also jumped on the season, taking advantage of this winter's storms to explore cross-country ski areas along part of the Cascade Lakes National Scenic Byway, which snakes into the mountains near my house in Bend. Several winter recreation areas flank the route, providing easy access to miles of skiing and snowshoeing trails in the Deschutes National Forest — as well as dazzling panoramas of surrounding peaks and volcanic landscapes.

Only 15 miles from town, nonprofit Meissner Nordic Ski Club partners with the U.S. Forest Service to operate about 25 miles of community trails at Virginia Meissner Sno-Park. Here, I found my snow legs on less-traveled routes that curved white ribbons through the conifers, then shared wide, perfectly groomed main tracks with other skiers. A few miles farther up the highway, my tracks intersected with wild critters' footprints at Swampy Lakes Sno-Park, where the Central Oregon Nordic Club maintains trails with the Forest Service. And I swooped down gentle hills on an approximately 9,000-foot mountain; Mt. Bachelor, the United States' sixth-largest ski resort, boasts approximately 35 miles of groomed Nordic trails and a season that can stretch into June.

Like other resorts, Mt. Bachelor is navigating an unprecedented winter in accordance with state and local health guidelines. Its "back to basics" approach includes online parking reservations and a requirement that visitors purchase passes, rentals and lessons before arrival. Food is grab-and-go at the lodge and food carts. Lodge and Nordic Center capacity is limited, with masking, one-way flow and distancing measures. For downhill skiers and snowboarders, lift access is distanced, with no requirement to ride with strangers; as usual, Nordic skiers don't use the lifts.

According to Mt. Bachelor, this year's season pass sales and parking reservations reflect a pent-up need for outdoor activities that lend themselves to distancing. The Professional Ski Instructors of America and the American Association of Snowboard Instructors, or PSIA-AASI, also forecast an uptick in cross-country skiing this winter.



Erin Williams/For The Washington Post.

Under a partnership with the U.S. Forest Service, the nonprofit Meissner Nordic Ski Club grooms approximately 25 miles of community trails for all levels of skiers at Virginia Meissner Sno-Park.



## Gear up and get informed

Since the sport is endurance focused, attire is lighter than alpine outerwear: usually a sweat-wicking base and mid-layers and a breathable, wind-resistant jacket. Bottom options include thermals and running tights, or fleece or soft-shell pants.

Questions? Call your nearby shop, which can help customers select, size and maintain gear. Whether by phone, online or in person when it's safe, these businesses offer expert advice about local terrain and connection with the ski community. Ski associations are also resources for getting people outside, teaching skills and managing trails; American Cross Country Skiers has an online list of these groups.

This season, participants should avoid pre- and post-ski gatherings. Distancing and masks are important anywhere people might have closer contact, including warming huts that haven't already shuttered to reduce risk. Anderson advised that even outdoors, skiers should distance, maintain proper hygiene and exercise caution skiing for an extended time near anyone outside their household.

Wherever you adventure, be considerate of other people and private land, heed trail signs and follow Leave No Trace practices.

"There's definitely been a noticeable increase in demand," said former Nordic skier Jeff Neagle. He has worked in the ski industry for 15 years, including the last five at Pinnacle Ski and Sports in Stowe, Vt. At this family-owned shop and its online storefront Ski-Essentials.com, year-over-year cross-country ski sales skyrocketed more than 700% in November, Neagle said.

That's heartening news for snow-sport businesses — and for people who are discovering their nearby trails, since the activity can help initiate and maintain longevity-boosting behaviors.

"Cross-country skiing is low impact and weight-bearing, and its cardiovascular benefits are significant because you're using so many muscle groups," said Paul Anderson, a Nordic skier and occupational medicine physician at Minnesota-based

HealthPartners. He researches cross-country skiers' relationship with healthy practices. Participants tend to be interested in movement, eating well and avoiding unhealthy habits — and they support other community members' exercise, Anderson found.

"It also gets people into nature, which can help address anxiety and depression," he added. "Nature and outdoor therapy are becoming more widely understood as important components of mental health care."

The sport has a lower entry barrier than its downhill cousin, which has steeper slopes and learning curves. Cross-country, a type of Nordic skiing, has its own variations, including classic: the most popular and beginner-friendly method, which involves kicking and gliding forward with parallel skis, mimicking a walking rhythm.

According to the Cross Country Ski Areas Association, which maintains an online directory, there are more than 350 cross-country ski areas in the United States and Canada. Many are within an hour's drive of cities. Some are resorts like Mt. Bachelor that offer Nordic and downhill skiing, and others are Nordic-specific centers. Other locations include stand-alone trail systems, parks and golf courses. Some groom their trails, and light touring on un-groomed terrain is sometimes available. Many locations have trail maps online; beginner trails are marked green.

Staying local this season can keep skiers safer and avoid possible closures, shutdown restrictions, nonessential travel advisories and travel quarantines (even for weekend skiers).

Part of cross-country skiing's appeal is that cost won't necessarily freeze out participants. With many free or low-cost local ski areas, access can be affordable. Gear rental is typically inexpensive, and some ski shops offer local delivery. In Bend, Mt. Bachelor offers one-day packages for \$35 as well as seasonal leases. Sunnyside Sports priced its rental packages for a rock-bottom \$50 to \$75 for the winter.

"When push comes to shove, we're here to serve," said Sunnyside Sports co-owner Susan Conner, who wanted to open the door for those who might have missed outdoor experiences this winter. "We've tried to continue to operate weighing how we can keep people safe while getting them outside."

Some local shops and online retailers also sell complete packages that eliminate guesswork for novice enthusiasts. Each package usually bundles skis, bindings, boots and poles; size charts are simple, with ski length based on body weight. Beginner- and intermediate-friendly recreational packages start at around \$300 to \$500.

"Anything in that price range will be designed to do a little bit of everything, whether you're skiing at a Nordic touring center or making your own tracks," Neagle said. "And it allows you to go out your front door and have a little adventure."

## TOP PICKS WHERE TO EXPLORE



Bulletin file photo

A mountain biker rounds a corner while riding the Maston Area Trails.

### Top picks north of Bend

#### Maston Complex —

Thanks to recent snow storms, the trails at Maston are reporting rideable snow. So grab your fatbikes (or regular bike) and check out the complex's many interconnected trails. Located off Cline Falls Road southwest of Redmond, the area also typically stays clear of snow during the winter — this past week excluded — making it a great place to hit the singletrack during the colder months.

#### Rimrock Springs Natural Area —

The small wetland south of Madras on U.S. Highway 26 features a 1.9 mile loop (part paved, part dirt) with interpretive signs explaining some of the flora and fauna that can be seen as well as geologic and human history of the area. The loop includes a few seating options including two wildlife viewing platforms overlooking the marshy area and benches at the top of the rimrock hill that overlooks the Cascades and Gray Butte to the west.

#### Smith Rock State Park —

There is a reason this is one of the most popular hiking areas in Central Oregon. While parking — which costs \$5 — is at a premium on good days, you may be able to score a coveted spot and check out the stunning rock formations just outside of Terrebonne with a bit of snow this weekend. Be careful on certain trails as they may become muddy or icy with thawing.

—Makenzie Whittle, The Bulletin



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