

Seven of us are crammed into an old Dodge van, sharing space with cross-country skating skis, poles, boots, and overnight packs laden with food, clothes, and survival gear as we approach tiny Yampa, Colorado.

I think back to the passage in the guide book that only partly illuminates my soon-to-be adventure. "Since the terrain is virtually devoid of readily identifiable landmarks, it is easy to get lost or confused. . . . If you ever considered hiring a guide or an outfitter, this is the place for one."

It described the Flat Tops Wilderness Area, a 10,000-foot plateau between Steamboat Springs and Glenwood Springs, Colorado. Once a molten lava bed, its surrounding edges eventually eroded, leaving a high maze of plateaus reaching out like the legs of a spider. A popular summer playground, the Flat Tops lie dormant under the harsh winter cover of wind and snow . . . at least that was the popular belief of everyone I knew—everyone except my friend Chris Landry.

Our conviction to ski skate across the Flat Tops came only a few hours ago, and, yes, it was Chris who hatched the plan. That morning a group of us had finished a mid-May skate around Lost Man Loop near Independence Pass just outside of Aspen. We had begun at 7 A.M. to take advantage of the frozen spring snow conditions, enabling us to skate the flat sections and climb when the snow was firm and fast. By the time we were ready for the descent, the sun had softened the top layer of snow, allowing us to turn our metal edge-less skis more easily in the steeper terrain. Three hours later we were packing up our gear when Chris, who had also been skiing the loop that day, walked up. He motioned toward the cloudless sky, then smiled.

"This clear weather is supposed to hold," he said. "I think we should leave tonight."

We knew immediately what he had in mind. Chris had made many mosquito-infested summer trips to the Flat Tops

FLAT TOPS ADVENTURE: SPRING HOPES ETERNAL

BY MARK PEARSON

Wilderness Area on reconnaissance missions for a spring traverse. He had scouted an approach, possible routes, and escapes from the plateau, all of which required only a two-wheel drive automobile on either end. His enthusiasm for the plan was infectious.

The trip, however, was not without risk. Although the 32-mile route started and finished in "civilization," there was nothing in between. If it stormed, if ski equipment broke, or if the spring heat was too intense to keep the snow firm, we would have to spend the night in this 10,000-foot wilderness. "But at least," Chris reassured us, "there won't be any mosquitoes."

We left Aspen by 3:30 P.M. to begin our long shuttle. Logistics required that we drop two cars outside Dotsero at Sweetwater Reservoir, then pile into the Dodge for the two-hour drive to Yampa. From there, it would be another 30 minutes to our departure point above Stillwater Reservoir, where we would camp for the night and be well on our way before sunrise.

At Yampa our growling stomachs direct us to the Antlers Bar. The place is deserted except for a collection of deer, elk, antelope, and buffalo mounts on water-stained walls. We stand in front of the antique bar, staring at a mounted Yeti head—complete with life-like nostril hairs—when a thin, gray-haired man appears in the side door.



A SKATE SKIER FINDS ROOM TO MOVE AT 10,000 FEET.

Trying to be polite, I meekly ask if he's still open. Without hesitation he replies, "No, I'm not. What'd you do, come in through the back door?"

As it turns out, he *is* open for business but has no cook—she'd left early with an arthritis flair-up. While we wait for Chris and Jeanie to return with microwave burritos and chips from the corner Conoco, our bartender dispenses beer and entertains us with remarks like, "I'll charge you extra if you turn on that light above your table."

As we depart Yampa, the dirt road is wet and an occasional snowflake dissolves into the steady downpour of rain that smacks into our windshield. Well, so much for our leader's forecast.

For our wake-up call the next morning, Chris rustles our tents at 3:30 A.M.

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EXCEPT FOR SMALL HILLS, SOME RIDGES, AND A HANDFUL OF 2,000-FOOT "PEAKS," THE FLAT TOPS LANDSCAPE IS A SKI SKATER'S DREAM.

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Considering the wet conditions in which we set up camp a few hours ago, we're relieved to see stars in the night sky. Hastily packing our camping gear to store in the van, I can't help thinking about the recent squall. Rain does not promote the best spring skiing conditions, but the enthusiasm and confidence of the group propel us along. We can always abort if the snow's too soft, and since the Flat Tops are 2,000 feet higher than camp, we may find perfect spring conditions with a fresh dusting of white.

With the snow just a short walk away, we quickly begin skiing by braille. The trail is uneven with suncups, caused when the sun's rays melt small pockets of snow, leaving little ridges in between. Combined with the dark and the awkwardness of carrying my 25-pound pack, the uneven surface makes me feel as if I'm skating blindfolded through a revolving tunnel at a carnival fun house.

By 6:30 A.M. we approach the rim of the Flat Tops and snowflakes suddenly begin whirling around us. With one last steep embankment to go, we take off our skis in silence and begin climbing, kicking steps and jamming fingers into the snow to steady ourselves.

As we reach the top, the clouds suddenly move off, like a curtain giving way to a play. The stage is set with a mile-wide snowfield sloping gently to the north. To the south are small but steep ridges covered with snow. Most impressive is what

lies in front of us: a river of white that flows as far as we can see. Except for small hills or ridges that crop up intermittently in our path and a handful of 2,000 foot "peaks" to circumnavigate, it's a ski skater's dream.

Our group moves as if on a mission. I had planned on an easy pace with time here and there to retrieve a camera from my pack and capture a few scenic shots. But soon after each stop, someone in the group, eager to go, asks where our route continues. Chris points out a distant rock, ledge, or depression, and the inquirer takes off. Most often it's Jeanie. A strong skater, she's a speck in the distance before I have time to shoulder my pack.

The next few hours are like a roller-coaster ride. We descend below one ridge, climb another, pass through another snow flurry, then drop down across a snow-covered lake. In our wake, a coyote runs out to sniff our tracks, calling out as if he wants us to come back and play.

By 9:30 A.M. the spring sun is out in full force. Because of the previous night's cloud cover and light snow, the snowpack has not thoroughly frozen. I'm the first to fall through. As I follow the same path as the others, one ski suddenly disappears under the firm crust into a pool of sloppy wet mush. At first I can pull right out onto hard surface but as the minutes progress my sink holes expand, forcing me to crawl on hands and knees to distribute my weight until I reach firmer ground.



PHOTOS BY MARK PEARSON

AT TIMES, TRAFFIC SLOWED TO A CRAWL, AS DEMONSTRATED BY CHRIS LANDRY.

For the next hour, I'm learning where not to ski. For instance, I discover that bushes, with their heat-absorbing branches and air pockets around the base, warm the snow that surrounds them. They are like little mouse traps waiting to draw in the unaware. Then the snow begins devouring even the lighter members of our convoy. The final descent toward the drainage where we'll hike out becomes a matter of avoiding each others' craters. Our most successful strategy is speed, which allows us to float above the snow between craters and rocks, like a hydrofoil skimming through the Everglades. Our frustrations are momentarily quieted as we come across the path of a lone elk, whose belly hairs are etched upon the surface of the snow.

After spending the last half-hour bushwhacking our way through snow peppered with pine needles and sending a small herd of elk crashing through the trees, we're relieved to finally reach the soggy red earth of a hiking trail at 1 P.M. Trading our skating boots for hiking shoes and ski clothes for shorts, we begin the slow, three-hour descent from snow to the heat of south-facing hill-sides in the eerie silence of a march with no end in sight.

Having skied and hiked 32 miles in 11 1/2 hours, the glimmer of Sweetwater Reservoir is a welcome sight. We collapse at a friendly cafe for a real meal, drawing straws to determine who "gets to" drive Chris back to pick up his van. As luck

would have it, I get to see the Antlers Bar for the second time in 24 hours. When I drive by, I swear the Yeti head above the bar is laughing.

EPILOGUE

Chris later told me that he had returned to the Flat Tops with a few friends for a repeat adventure just two weeks after ours. I could see from the gleam in his eyes that this time, luck was on his side. On a perfect spring day they floated across frozen lakes and beneath scattered peaks and dark blue skies. He beamed as he described a new route that went from snow to dry land without the muck in between, and chortled at the conditions, like a child who got away with eating all the cookies. I began to envy his trip and asked him to give me a call to do it again . . . in a couple of years. ♦

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Spring into the Skate Mode

Skating on spring snow is not widely practiced. It's difficult to think of skiing in May as warm weather opens up tennis courts and mountain bike trails. But for those who want to extend the ski season a month or so, spring skating is the answer.

HOW: As the snow melts and freezes in the spring it gains a hard consistency throughout. Open meadows become skating rinks, and wide mountain trails become your playground. In more adventurous terrain, stiffer skating skis and boots provide great control for turning in corn snow. The new mid-length and short skate skis are ideal for this type of adventure skating. As with most mountain trails it's hard to avoid a route that doesn't involve some climbing. Shorter skis are lighter and easier for climbing. They're also easier to turn but a little more "squirrely" on steep slopes than conventional-length skating skis. Whatever you use

at the touring center will work, in the right conditions, in the backcountry.

WHEN: Late March through May. The key is to start by 7 A.M., while the snow is still firm. If the previous night was clear and cold, the snow will stay hard until about noon. If the night was cloudy or warm, you can sink down to the ground by 9 A.M.

WHERE: Wherever there is snow. Try the high mountain passes as soon as the roads open.

WHY: It's great exercise, and it's FUN! ♦ —Mark Pearson

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