

TOP SPOTS for Skinny Skis

Skiing the state's best groomed cross-country trails. BY BECKY LOMAX

Cross-country skiing burns an average of 650 calories per hour—far more than downhill skiing, walking, or cycling. After an afternoon on skinny skis, you can eat a big, gooey caramel roll the next morning guilt free. Heck, have seconds.

That great cardio workout, along with the appeal of gliding across snow through silent, snowy forests, is luring more and more people into cross-country (also known as Nordic) skiing each year. Two decades ago, my fellow Nordic skiers and I could find only a few sites containing groomed trails; today we have more than a dozen to choose from.

Responding to Nordic skiing's growing popularity, many western Montana resorts, businesses, and communities have built or added trails, often "groomed" daily with special equipment that packs and tracks new snow and renovates old snow to create the best possible cross-country skiing conditions.

Most ski centers cater to both styles of Nordic skiing: traditional (also known as classic or diagonal stride) and skate skiing. You can enjoy traditional cross-country skiing in a pasture, on a U.S. Forest Service road or backcountry trail, or on a groomed two-lane track. These skis have a sticky "kick" zone on the underside of the mid-section and "glide" areas in the front and back. The kick zone gets its traction from either a fish-scale pattern carved into the ski bottom or special waxes rubbed in to create friction against the snow. Skiers push down on the ski with the ball of their foot to propel them forward into a glide.

Skate (or freestyle) skiing was first developed in the late 1970s by Europeans and caught on in the United States after Bill Koch used the technique to medal in the 1982 Nordic World Ski Championship. Skate skis, about two-thirds the length of traditional Nordic skis, have no grip. The skier propels forward by digging the sharp inside edge of each ski into the snow and pushing off like a speed skater, rocking side to side from one ski to the other, creating a V pattern in the snow. This technique also makes use of extra-long, lightweight poles for additional propulsion. Skate skiers can traverse frozen lakes and open areas of packed snow, but they generally need wide, groomed trails where the snow has been packed down and then raked to create a corduroy texture that provides some traction.

When you visit a Nordic ski center and see a trail of parallel grooves in the snow, that's for traditional skiers. The adjacent 8-foot-wide flat swath is for skaters, who are often clad in bright, tight-fitting spandex racing suits (even if they've never raced a day in their life, because it just feels good to exercise in skin-tight outfits).

FIT FAMILY Cross-country (Nordic) skiing is a fun and healthy way for kids and parents (and dogs) to spend time together outdoors in winter. Groomed trails make both classic and skate skiing easier.

CHUCK HANEY

Anyone of any age can learn either type of skiing, though the traditional style is easier and takes less balance and leg muscle. Athletes gravitate toward skate skiing and its massive cardio workout, while many families stick to the classic style.

“Raising our kids on the ski course helped them develop balance skills, strength, and an overall love of sliding on snow,” says Whitefish-area Stillwater Nordic Center co-owner Kirsten Sabin, whose youngest started at just one and a half years old. “Plus, skiing provides another outdoor activity for all of us to do together in winter.”

Just starting out? Consider taking a lesson or two. There’s a trick to cross-country skiing that few can figure out without at least some assistance. “It’s true that anyone who can walk can cross-country ski,” says Theresa Leland, program director at Bohart Ranch Nordic ski area near Bozeman. “But it’s much more enjoyable to develop good technique so you can take it to another level. By learning to increase your glide, you can travel farther and faster with less effort.”

Lessons, offered at many Montana ski centers, can also reduce frustration, flailing, and falling. “We teach you easy ways to maintain your balance so you can spend more time gliding across the snow and less falling onto the snow,” Leland says.

The Nordic ski areas listed here are the larger ones in Montana (with at least 15 kilometers of groomed trails). They offer a wide range of fun trails for all abilities, are open daily December through March, and groom for both traditional and skate skiing. Fees range from \$5 to \$20 per day, and rental gear, where offered, costs \$10 to \$30 per day.

A few of these areas allow dogs, but only on certain loops. Poop pickup is mandatory.

Stillwater Nordic Center

Eight miles northwest of Whitefish in the Stillwater State Forest, the Stillwater Nordic Center was launched in 2006. The owners groom skating lanes daily and “reset” (re-pack) classic tracks as needed. Beginners and families can chug up broad Murray Mile Boulevard and cut across on Interlachen to

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reach Murray Lake for a giant loop around the frozen lake and its scattering of ice anglers. More daring skiers looking for steep climbs and drops can tackle Hellroaring Highway, added several years ago, which upped the center’s total trail length to 20 kilometers. The warming hut at the trailhead offers free rentals and skiing for kids younger than 12, and two free sleds are available for anyone who wants to pull youngsters too small to ski. “We want to make it easy to come out and ski here, and we realize how short parents are on time,” says co-owner Kirsten Sabin. A lodge for overnight stays is available at the trailhead. Several trails are dog friendly.

<http://stillwatermtlodge.com>
(888) 205-7786 • (406) 862-7004

Additional resources

► Jean Arthur’s *Montana Winter Trails* (Globe Pequot Press, 2001). This book describes a variety of trails, from those tracked in fresh snow by fellow skiers on golf courses to professionally groomed routes at the state’s big Nordic centers.

► Winter Montana, the official state website for winter sports, contains some information on Nordic ski areas.
wintermt.com/Cross-Country_Skiing

Izaak Walton Inn

Perched at the southern tip of Glacier National Park, Izaak Walton Inn’s 33 kilometers of trails wind through the hemlock, spruce, and fir of Flathead National Forest. Most of the trails, which are groomed regularly, run along Essex and Dickey Creeks. The 1-kilometer Starlight Loop is lit up each evening for night skiing. Easier trails follow wide, gentle summer roads, while more difficult routes offer climbs, turns, and fast roller-coaster drops. Much of the area’s unique ambiance comes from the whistles of trains passing on the tracks that bisect the property and run next to the historic inn, listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Izaak Walton offers rentals, lessons, ski tours in the national park, and dining, as well as lodging in the historic railroad inn, new cabins, or even a few cozy railroad cars.

izaakwaltoninn.com
(406) 888-5700

Seeley Creek

Sitting on Cottonwood Lakes Road 1 mile from downtown Seeley Lake, Seeley Creek Nordic Trails consists of 18 kilometers of both skate and classic routes. The Seeley Lake Nordic Ski Club, under a special management agreement with Lolo National Forest, is responsible for regularly grooming the trails. The routes loop through the national forest at the southern tip of the Swan Mountains, rolling between larch and fir stands and open logged zones. No user fees are charged, though visitors are urged to make a donation of a few dollars in the “metal ranger” at the trailhead to help cover grooming costs.

The backcountry Montour Cabin can be rented from Lolo National Forest. Skiers can also access 100-plus miles of forest roads for skijoring (where the skier is pulled by a dog).

Two major races are held in the scenic area each year: the Seeley Lake Challenge Biathlon and the legendary OSCR (Over Seeley’s Creeks and Ridges) 50k race.

seeleylakenordic.org

Mount Haggin

On Mount Haggin Wildlife Management Area near Anaconda, the Mile High Nordic Ski Education Foundation maintains more than 20 kilometers of trails, as well as a warming hut on Mill Creek Road. Half the trail distance consists of routes groomed for skate and classic, while the other half is a single trail groomed solely for classic skiing. That route offers views of the Pintler Range and a twisting downhill section known as Death Dip. It’s definitely not for beginners. The ungroomed Spire Loop contains tracks “set,” or produced, by skiers after a snowfall.

“We have a super-dedicated staff of volunteers who groom the trails to commercial standards,” says Dave Williams, president of the foundation. “Grooming usually happens Thursdays or Fridays in preparation for the weekend, but we may touch up the trails whenever we get new snowfall.” The non-profit organization relies on club fees and donations at the trailhead to buy gas and maintain the vehicles. The trails, which run through historic logging camps, are operated in coordination with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks.

milehighnordic.org



LEARNING CIRCLE At Bohart Ranch near Bozeman, instructors show kids the basics of Nordic skiing. Both traditional and skate skiing are growing more popular across western Montana.

Homestake Lodge

Three miles south of Homestake Pass on I-90 between Butte and Whitehall, Homestake Lodge is Montana’s newest cross-country ski center. It was launched by Chris Axelson, former director of the New England Nordic Ski Association and a previous member of the U.S. Ski Team. The lodge’s Nordic trails weave through 37 kilometers of riparian meadows, aspen groves, and mixed forest dotted by massive granite boulders that Axelson and his wife and lodge co-owner, Mandy, have dubbed with names like Double Bubble.

“Most of our trails are generally rolling and over nice flat terrain in the bottom of drainages, with long climbs taking only several minutes,” Chris says. Many of the trails are groomed as needed by a large double-track groomer, while narrower trails require more intricate maneuvering by a smaller groomer pulled by a snowmobile. “We have those trails for a more remote and intimate feeling,” adds Axelson. Twice each week, 2 kilometers of trail are lit for night skiing. Lessons, rentals, weekend and holiday lunches, and overnight accommodations are available. Twelve kilometers of trail are open to skiers with dogs.

homestakelodge.com • (406) 585-8052

Rendezvous Ski Trails

On the edge of Yellowstone National Park in West Yellowstone, Rendezvous Ski Trails provides 35 kilometers of paths groomed for skate and classic skiing through broad

meadows and lodgepole pines. Visitors accustomed to skiing lowlands will definitely feel the area’s 6,800-foot elevation. The Gallatin National Forest, West Yellowstone Chamber of Commerce, and West Yellowstone Ski Education Foundation cooperate in managing the trails. Doug Edgerton, owner of a company that makes ski-grooming equipment and head of Nordic course preparation for the 2002 winter Olympics, oversees grooming.

Because it’s so high, Rendezvous Trails enjoys a lengthy season, beginning with the Yellowstone Ski Festival in late November and ending with a 50k ski marathon in March. Lessons and rentals are available from Freeheel and Wheel, a funky coffee-ski-cycling shop in town, and the trailhead is within walking distance of lodging and restaurants.

rendezvouskitrails.com • (406) 599-4465
freeheelandwheel.com • (406) 646-7744

Bohart Ranch

Tucked 17 miles up Bridger Canyon north of Bozeman, Bohart Ranch is in the ski education business. In addition to offering daily lessons open to anyone, Bohart runs a program that each year teaches 1,600 Montana school kids how to ski and appreciate the winter environment. The ranch features 25 kilometers of interconnected, well-signed, daily-groomed loops, and a picnic shelter with a wood stove. The trails run through open meadows, with views of the Bridger Mountains, and deep forests. Kids particularly enjoy the I Spy Trail, which hides 30

treasures such as trolls, ornaments, and even a toothbrush in the trees at eye level. Looking for the treasures creates a good body posture for skiing, with the head up rather than tilted down to look at the skis, a common error. Rentals are available.

bohartranchxcski.com • (406) 586-9070

Lone Mountain Ranch

On Lone Mountain Ranch Road in Big Sky, Lone Mountain Ranch grooms the biggest Nordic center in Montana. The 90 kilometers of nightly groomed trails roll across a golf course and ascend broad, open meadows and forests. Difficult trails climb steeper pitches with sweeping descents. Some trails lead to viewpoints of 11,166-foot Lone Peak, while others take skiers along trails where they might see deer, elk, or moose. A yurt in the middle of the trail system provides a spot for lunch and ski re-waxing. The ranch hosts a week-long Nordic ski festival every March, with clinics, races, and family events. Rentals, lessons, dining, lodging, and ski tours in neighboring Yellowstone National Park are available. A 13-kilometer route is open for skiers with dogs.

(800) 514-4644 • (406) 995-4644
lonemountainranch.com

Red Lodge Nordic Center

Just 1 mile west of Red Lodge, Red Lodge Nordic Center is the closest groomed area for Billings-area skiers. The center, operated by Beartooth Recreational Trails Association since 2002, features 15 kilometers looping through open fields and aspen groves on the Aspen Ridge Equestrian Ranch. Some trails offer views of Beartooth Mountain. Classic skiers can set their own tracks on several short, ungroomed trails. Sometimes the gale-force winds and yo-yoing temperatures common to this area pose a challenge to skiers, especially those using wax, but grooming reports are filed online several days a week to inform visitors of trail conditions. Volunteers groom the trails using donations and trail fees to pay for gas, oil, and maintenance.

The ski center offers senior and family perks: Adults 65 and older and kids 12 years and younger ski free. Ski rentals are available at Sylvan Peak (406-446-1770) in Red Lodge.

beartoothtrails.org/nordic-center
(406) 425-1070 • (406) 425-0698