

# Breaking Trail in the Unbroken Snow Layers of Northwest Montana

By Ryan Alford



**S**tanding on the top of Desert Mountain - with snowshoes strapped to my feet - I felt a chill overwhelm my senses. It wasn't the subzero temperatures that triggered a watery-eyed reaction; it was a reacquaintance with the Montana I left a year ago.

The love affair continues.

I return to snowshoe among the unscathed snowy depths of the Big Sky Country. The rich blessings of an arctic front paved its wintry brilliance before I arrived. This was Montana's red carpet experience: Feet of snow and the thrill of extreme wind chill. The icy fingerprints of winter remain etched in the Glacier National Park surroundings long enough for my encounter. There are no coincidences.

If I've learned anything by snowshoeing in Montana, it is to understand that I know nothing. It is to understand that Glacier National Park is genuinely, and excitedly, unpredictable. I can only manage to know that I snowshoe here for the experience...and I will leave with a longing to return. I find grace the more I snowshoe among the spirit of Montana's frozen kingdom. That is its gift. I'm sure to not take it for granted. But I do take advantage.

And the love affair continues.

"I long to be in the places that I see in the pictures of my dreams. Where there's mountains full of trees, meadows carpeted in green, silent, snowfall, clear running streams." –LeGrande Harvey (Montana Melody)

### **Sweet Home, Great Northern Resort**

Part of Glacier National Park's charm is the surplus of independent businesses in West Glacier and nearby villages. You won't find an onslaught of commercialized brands dotting the roadways. There are brands to be appreciated, which are formed by the hard work of small business owners in the area: A lost art not wasted on West Glacier's Great Northern Resort. It's a restful getaway. A gem among treasures. For a city dweller (yours truly), the Great Northern was too much of a good thing. And that's not always bad.







During the summer, more than two million people visit the Park. Winter invites far fewer guests to Glacier, but that's to the advantage of the snowshoer seeking the stillness of the wilderness. Just off Highway 2 – near West Glacier – the Great Northern Resort is a wonderful place to call home while visiting the area. Just look for the resort's Red Caboose that rests near its headquarters.

Several log cabins and chalets, side by side, greet visitors with unique accommodations and the thrill of a true Montana lifestyle. The cabins are rugged, authentic, and honor Glacier National Park's heritage. The resort's off-season rates are completely affordable to the lone snowshoer (or group) on a mission to discover the essence of the Park and the Flathead National Forest.

After a short flight from Denver to Glacier International Airport, I was eager to rest and prepare for a day of snowshoeing. My two-story cabin at the Great Northern was considered a small chalet, complete with a full kitchen, full bathroom, two queen size beds, and a comfortable living area. The gas-powered fireplace provided enough ambient heat to warm the entire chalet. Very welcoming.

The Great Northern is a very unpretentious destination – ready to relieve the tensions of everyday life. I found that my cabin was fully prepared for my stay: Montana Coffee Traders coffee ready for brewing, yogurt, pumpkin seed granola mix, and fruit for my upcoming breakfasts. Treatment like this is why I consider Montana my second home.

Owned by Nic and Victoria Lee, the resort's breathtaking grounds can host large events, including weddings. During the peak season, visitors can enjoy an array of activities, including whitewater rafting, fly fishing, scenic float trips, Paddle & Saddle guided tours and much more. Aside from snowshoeing, winter invites guests to indulge in alpine skiing at Whitefish Mountain Resort at Big Mountain, dog sled tours, snowmobiling and sleigh rides.

No matter the season, the National Park is always open for business – the Great Northern Resort as well. The resort is a launching point for any great Glacier escape, romantic getaway, and general vacation for families.





Nic and Victoria are also the owners of the very unique Glacier Distilling Co. Located in Coram, the Craft Distillery produces an array of whiskeys made from local Montana grains and bottled in the heart of Glacier Country. Ask nicely and Nic will give you a tour (with a few sips of his latest creations).

### **In Montana Snowshoers Trust**

In March 2010, I visited Glacier National Park for the first time on the search for what I recall as an awakening. And it wasn't short of exhilarating: I snowshoed parts of West Glacier and the Park's southernmost areas.

I was awakened to some of the best backcountry snowshoeing in the world – nothing short of remote and untainted. I was also awakened to the Park's battles with climate change and some of the challenges that have crept into the Park's everyday vernacular. These problems unfortunately continue.

I return to Glacier National Park to find the snow conditions I didn't receive a year earlier. Coupled with sub-zero temperatures, the snow stood a consistent three feet in some locations. Polar opposites compared to last year's visit: The Park suffered from little snow over the 2009/2010 season, and a warming trend left a shallow ice-packed surface.

Last year, I gazed at the Middle Fork of the Flathead River's turquoise waters – fed by glacial silt and consistent snow melt. During my most recent visit, the river was frozen solid. I could hear the faint sounds of ice cracking and the water moving underneath. Winter's splendor encases the Park in silence – part of its gift to snowshoers.

I am fortunate to now have seen the Park in two different seasons, more or less. But none of this displaces the Park's continued struggle with climate change. Its named glaciers dropped to 23 from 25 shortly after I returned home in 2010. According to some predictions, by the year 2030 the Park's glaciers could be



nonexistent.

Climate change has ravaged the world's weather patterns. Glacier National Park has suffered. Before the arctic front moved in and froze northwest Montana, there were reports of rain and warm weather in previous weeks.

Of course, spring was creeping its way into the Park, but a long winter is beneficial to its eco-system. An early spring usually forces a longer, drier summer and it can be catastrophic – as it was in 2003 when more than 130,000 acres (10 percent) of the Park burned. Today, that area is now home to several lodgepole pine graveyards. As an act of typical National Park maintenance and environmental responsibility, the trees remain as they are: unmoved, some toppled, and eerily beautiful.

My first day of snowshoeing paid homage to some of that charred land, via the Apgar Lookout trail. I was reacquainted with Marc Evans, a snowshoe guide with the Glacier Outdoor Center. Also joining our snowshoe trek was K.J. Hascall, editor with Columbia Falls' Hungry Horse News.

Marc and I snowshoed the Scalplock Lookout trail last year, which is located more on the south end of the Park – towards Snow Slip Mountain and Goat Lick Overlook.

It's important to note that Marc also provides guided tours for fly fishing, hunting, cross-country skiing and other activities. While spending time with Marc, he mentioned a new guided tour idea: snowshoe fly fishing. Essentially, this type of snowshoe tour would be relegated to prime fly fishing spots around the Park. That idea is very intriguing – enough to invite me back again. If you want a guided tour with informational tidbits and history of the Park, connect with Marc Evans at the Glacier Outdoor Center.

To start, we snowshoed on the lower McDonald trailhead and worked our way down to McDonald Creek, which streams from the infamous McDonald Lake. We later crossed the creek on Quarter Circle Bridge – where McDonald Creek flows into the Middle Fork of the Flathead River. Continuing, we connected with the trailhead of Apgar Lookout and Rubidoux Basin. Apgar Lookout was then guarded by several trail switchbacks and stellar snow depths.

While it was a clear day, the temperatures hovered well below zero. But, I was prepared for these conditions: Wearing the ColdAvenger Balaclava to protect my airways; Columbia's Bugathermo Techlite Boots (battery-operated to warm my feet); Icebreaker base layers, socks and glove







liners; Mountain Hardwear Bazuka gloves; a Sherpa Adventure Gear mid-layer; Marmut outer-layers; and Heat Factory hand warmers. This gear combination worked beautifully in the sub-zeros. Interestingly enough, I didn't shed any layers while snowshoeing – the negative temperatures stayed with us for a majority of the day.

Before leaving the Glacier Outdoor Center, Marc provided Ortovox avalanche beacons to use during our hike. It was obvious that avalanche danger was high. While ascending certain areas on the trail, an icy layer of snow was revealed underneath a more powdery top layer. Marc's avalanche tidbits from the previous year were reinforced – most slides are caused by human influence.

“If you're in an avalanche, the best thing to do is to swim like hell and stay on top of it. And if you're buried, try to create an air pocket in front of your face and stay calm to conserve your oxygen,” Marc explained.

Sobering words. Thankfully, no avalanches to report during our snowshoe trek.

Conditions were epic. Plenty of snow to justify wearing an aggressive snowshoe: Easton Mountain Products Artica Hike (30-inch frames to provide optimal floatation). Temperatures held steady below zero and the sun was shining. Bluebird day.

While snowshoeing among the skeletons of the lodgepole pines that once flourished before the fire, a very distinct popping noise echoed in the forest. At first, I suspected various animals were making the sounds. But with each investigation, no such luck. What I had learned, thanks to Marc, was that the sun was slowly heating the dead trees and it was the sounds of expansion. The previous night was the area's reported coldest of the season. Wind chills were hitting -40F, according



to Weather.com.

It was a treat to snowshoe and hear such an unnerving sound. Occasionally overpowering the crunching of our snowshoes, a loud “pop” from the forest would compel a slight pause in my step. It was as though I could hear the Park begin to stir from a cold night’s sleep. It was sporadic and deserved moments of complete silence to fully appreciate.

The day’s snowshoeing was just right: Cold and physically challenging. We shared the trail with four other snowshoers that day. To see Glacier from its western edge is to be tempted into an experience not many choose to realize in sub-zero temperatures. Snowshoers are the few to oblige.

About five miles in, we stopped for a late lunch (prepared by the Glacier Grill) and a chance to bask in a 360-degree view of surrounding landscapes. Truly remarkable scenery. Our temporary photo camp was among the charred lodgepole pines that now resembled shrines to the forest’s flourishing past and undoubtedly thriving future. Each treed monument – different in stature – flaunted a shiny silver gleam that was accentuated in the sunlight. Peculiar and mesmeric all the same.

Before escaping the setting sun and dropping temperatures, I took a moment to thank Marc for another short Glacier expedition. Any time in the Park is time I hold sacred. Each moment is a memory that invigorates a return to Glacier’s Eden-like lands. Our total snowshoeing for the day was about nine miles. A decent trek.

The day concluded with a visit to the Snow Slip Motel Bar & Café. This off-the-beaten-path eatery was opened in 1945 – a popular local hangout, serving the great tasting Kettlehouse Cold Smoke Scotch





Ale (made in Missoula, Mont.).

The Snow Slip features stellar home cooking and unrivaled guest hospitality. Plus, the café serves an amazing Jalapeño Bacon Burger, which hits the spot after a day of snowshoeing. If you're a fan of beef and local Montana beer, you'll be a fan of the Snow Slip Inn.

To get there, take Highway 2 east to Essex. The Snow Slip is on the north side of the highway, near Marias Pass (and just west of Browning). Be ready for some amazing views of Glacier National Park. And if you're lucky, your meal will be rewarded by some interesting conversation with the Snow Slip's owner, Bill Caron. Ask about the Goat Lick Overlook.



## **Snowshoe the Desert**

Desert Mountain sits to the east of Coram village. Because of its terrain, it was rumored that the mountain would become a ski resort – according to West Glacier locals. Those rumors have since disappeared, but Desert Mountain still offers some of the best snowshoeing in the state. While Glacier National Park collects all the attention, Desert is somewhat ignored by snowshoers and Nordic sports enthusiasts. It seems that's beginning to change.



My second day of snowshoeing around northwest Montana was for the purposes of research and development. I was part of a group – led by Swan Mountain Outfitters – scouting snowshoeing trails among the densely-wooded Desert Mountain. Desert's summit (6,368 feet) can be accessed via a series of National Forest roads.

During the winter, the mountain is best explored with the help of a guide. Enter Swan Mountain Outfitters. To cover Desert's vast acreage, we used snowmobiles to maneuver our way through the deep snow that caked the mountain's roads. My guide for the day was Erik Lorona, general manager with Swan Mountain Outfitters' Glacier Division. Marc Evans attended as well to provide additional support with his knowledge of the area (considering he has explored Desert during all seasons of the year).





The goal for the day was to identify roads and trails that would be ideal for snowshoers. Snowmachines are not allowed to deviate from the roads and “boondock” or “trailblaze” in Montana. They are strictly for touring purposes and to access remote areas of the backcountry.

Swan Mountain has positioned itself to lead groups of snowshoers into the backcountry via snowmachines – thanks to a highly sought-after permit that was awarded to the Outfitter earlier in 2011. The launching point for our excursion was just south of Desert’s summit. It’s also uniquely located near the Foley family-owned and operated Abbott Valley Homestead (a network of cabins and guest houses resting on 250 acres). In 2010, Abbott Valley celebrated its 100th birthday.



To my surprise, the area wasn’t heavily trafficked. Aside from a few sledders about to head out on their machines, we didn’t see a soul on the trail all day. What I learned was that Desert Mountain was an intact snowshoeing Mecca. Because the snowmachines are relegated to the main forest roads, the trails could pose an endless amount of possibilities.

At the time, the mountain had plenty of snow – at least a three-foot base in most areas. Most of these areas boasted miles of trails that webbed-off into the Flathead National Forest. Even better, there were no signs of tracks. Each trail was undisturbed and illustrated a major opportunity for Swan Mountain Outfitters.

“If you think about it, a group could very easily take a multiple day snowshoe trek around Desert Mountain,” explained Marc. “Somebody with knowledge of the area and snow camping experience could lead a group into this wilderness. It would be a great trip.”

Furthermore, a snowshoe/snowmobile group could park their machines at the trailhead, record their location by GPS, and start snowshoeing across miles of Desert Mountain trails. The possibilities are endless, especially with views of Glacier and Hungry Horse Reservoir waiting.



Before summiting, it took a while to adjust to my machine's erratic power and the cold that permeated even the tiniest areas of exposed skin. This is what happens when taking a snowmachine out in sub-zero temperatures. I wore three layers, loaded up on hand warmers and I was still feeling instances of extreme cold.

By the time we neared the summit of Desert, it was worth it. I had my Easton Artica Hike snowshoes strapped to my Osprey Kode 30 pack – easy access for quick on-and-off situations. I snowshoed the rest of the way to the top. What I saw was unparalleled and purely Montana.

The view from the summit was overpowering; I could taste the purity of the Flathead National Forest backcountry; the smell of winter was in the distance; the snow depths acted as silencers (absorbing every tiny reverberation); the cold continued to saturate. Spectacular. Although the clouds moved through the area and provided a low-hanging canopy, the panoramic views were still incredible.



Watch a video of my Desert Mountain summit experience: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZWrAY0M4s78>.

For more Desert Mountain views, with an introduction by Erik, watch this video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aNhBniBAIEw>.

It couldn't have been a better choice than to attend dinner at the Belton Chalet – now a traditional spot each year I visit. The historic Belton – located in West Glacier – offers a selection of local flavors and popular cuisine. On occasion, the Belton's bar area hosts live music and general merriment. The dining area is always full and ready for patrons, no matter the season.

## Land of the Shining Mountains

“This must be the place.” –The Talking Heads

When I left Montana a year ago, my visit was brief - as was the most recent. But the haunting whisper of the “crown jewel” has grown louder. It subtly reminds me of why I visit and why I crave to snowshoe the undisturbed waves of Glacier National Park snow.





I feel like a kid again when I visit my favorite corner of Montana. I feel I'm meant to snowshoe the hallowed grounds of Glacier – as though the snow drifts were unfurled for my benefit. Indeed, they are. For all snowshoers.

I leave only tracks...and they melt. I leave no trace. But I leave knowing I'll visit again, armed with a new plan for breaking the unbroken snow layers of northwestern Montana.

And the love affair will continue.

**Resources:**

Abbott Valley Homestead – <http://www.abbottvalley.com>

Belton Chalet – <http://www.beltonchalet.com>

Flathead National Forest – <http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/flathead>

First Best Place – <http://www.firstbestplace.org>

Glacier Distilling Company – <http://www.glacierdistilling.com>

Glacier National Park – <http://www.nps.gov/glac>

Glacier National Park webcams – <http://www.nps.gov/glac/photosmultimedia/webcams.htm>

Glacier Outdoor Center – <http://www.glacierraftco.com>

Great Northern Resort – <http://www.greatnorthernresort.com>

Hungry Horse News – <http://www.hungryhorsenews.com>

Outside Media – <http://www.outsidemedia.com>

Snow Slip Inn – <http://snowslipinn.com>

Swan Mountain Outfitters – <http://swanmountainoutfitters.com/glacier>



Read about my first Glacier National Park experience: <http://www.snowshoemag.com/pdfmag/GlacierNP1.pdf>

### **Gear Mentions:**

Brooks-Range – <http://brooks-range.com>

Columbia Sportswear – <http://www.columbia.com>

Darn Tough Socks – <http://darntough.com>

Easton Mountain Products – <http://eastonmountainproducts.com>

GoLite – <http://www.golite.com>

GU Energy – <http://www.guenergy.com>

Heat Factory – <http://www.heatfactory.com>

Icebreaker – <http://www.icebreaker.com>

Mountain Hardwear – <http://www.mountainhardwear.com>

Nannini Goggles – <http://www.nanninigoggles.com>

Oboz Footwear – <http://www.obozfootwear.com>

Ortovox – <http://www.ortovox.com>

Osprey Packs – <http://www.ospreypacks.com>

Outdoor Research – <http://www.outdoorresearch.com>

Sherpa Adventure Gear – <http://www.sherpaadventuregear.com>

SportHill – <http://www.sporthill.com>





Talus Outdoor Technologies – <http://www.talusoutdoor.com>

Wilderness Athlete – <http://www.wildernessathlete.com>

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