

# Right outside

A pledge to honor the Wilderness Act  
sends the author on three winter excursions  
within a snowball's throw of Missoula

by Greg M. Peters





photo by Chad Harber

**M**issoula is a wilderness town. Travel south down Highway 93 and the sprawling Bitterroot-Selway Wilderness stretches to the west. Head north and the Scapegoat, Bob Marshall, Great Bear, Cabinet Mountains and Mission Mountains wilderness areas offer a lifetime of solitude and escape. The Anaconda-Pintler and Welcome Creek wilderness areas can be found southeast of town. You can literally take a bus from the Hip Strip to within a few miles of the Rattlesnake Wilderness. If you like exploring big open spaces on foot or horseback, Missoula is your town.

Congress passed the Wilderness Act in 1964, which made 2014 the golden anniversary of the landmark conservation law. I wanted to find a way to celebrate and an excuse to explore, so on a blustery late November day in 2013, while exploring the Bear Trap Canyon Wilderness Area north of Ennis, I set a goal to get into a wilderness area once a month for the entirety of 2014.

I experienced some incredible places: six days hiking and packrafting through the Bob Marshall, Labor Day weekend in Idaho's stunning Sawtooth Mountains, an April visit to a barrier island off the southern coast of Georgia. I walked through miles of beargrass and meadows of rainbow wildflowers, climbed past alpine lakes shimmering beneath craggy mountain peaks and watched wild horses and armadillos wander beneath canopies of ancient live oak trees dripping with Spanish moss.

But of all these, the quiet moments beneath the chalky winter sky in Missoula's backyard

wildernesses proved the most memorable. In the thrum of a busy life, I couldn't simply blast off for a full weekend of exploration or take a life-list vacation each month. So I took full advantage of Missoula's geography. These winter adventures started an hour or so from town. Backcountry skis and skins were the only technical pieces of gear I used. Basic winter travel skills, a smidge of creativity and a commitment to try are all the other tools you'd need to explore Missoula's nearby wilderness areas for yourself this winter.

### January: A day at the lake

Gray clouds covered the sky in a thick smear of moisture. A three-week-long high-pressure system had finally moved on. Low clouds lazily spit snowflakes as I stopped to catch my breath in the silent expanse.

Nothing moved except my dog trotting ahead on the frozen surface of Lindbergh Lake. The snow-covered ice stretched 5 miles into the distance, flat and static. Hoar-laden cottonwoods, ponderosas and larch rose from the banks, ghostly against the dark flanks of the Mission Mountains rising into the sky. I pulled at the zipper on my jacket and resumed gliding across the lake.

Cross-country skiing across a frozen lake is remarkably easy. There are no flatter places to schuss in the entire state; heck, there're no flatter places to ski in the entire world. But when you leave that frozen ease and head into the woods, skinny skis become liabilities.

The Mission Mountains Wilderness begins at the southern edge of Lindbergh Lake. My goal

was Crystal Lake, another couple of miles up through the trees. Icy, hard-packed snow and dense forest made "skiing" impossible, but I herringboned, poled and clawed my way a mile and a half through the thick forest toward Crystal Lake. After an hour or so of regretting that I didn't pack snowshoes, I paused for some lunch and decided to turn back around.

For the return, I slipped out of the woods and gingerly shuffled, jumped and scooted along and on top of the Swan River. The Swan is most famous for its whitewater, but here it was a shallow, meandering stream. All the same, I had no desire to get wet, so I moved cautiously, scooting from pillow to pillow, hoping that none would collapse under my weight and send me into the frigid water. It was exhilarating and a touch frightening. A wet foot wasn't the end of the world, but I still had miles to ski before hitting the car.

The small knot of anxiety disappeared as I glided back onto the lake. Pausing one last time, I absorbed the stillness. Most of Montana's lakes are crazy busy in the summer as wake boarders and jet skiers zip past fishermen and families on pontoon boats. Country music and classic rock blast from shore to shore. Six months from that late January Sunday, Lindbergh would be no different. But for the moment, it was precisely the opposite—silent, empty and mine alone to enjoy.

### February: A thousand vertical feet of powder

We rolled into the familiar parking lot at the base of the Rattlesnake National Recreation Area at 7 a.m. The early dawn light provided

enough visibility for Ted, Adam and me to pack our gear and click into our skis. We skinned up the main corridor as the shadows lifted. Four miles later, we turned off the trail up the Pilcher Creek drainage, headed for the southeastern ridge of the Stuart Peak massif and the burnt forest that beckoned with a thousand vertical feet of powder.

In 20 minutes, we found ourselves in a narrow drainage, stuck in place. Skis off, we clamored up the small cliff to our right, anxious to gain the slope above and continue climbing. Forty minutes later, we kicked back into our skis and started climbing in earnest. It was going to be a long day.

As we climbed, the weather deteriorated. Patchy sun gave way to blustery clouds and the thick gray sky that dominates western Montana's winter days. Minutes turned to hours. We kept climbing as the snow flurries began. Finally, seven hours after we started, we reached the ridge. The wilderness boundary lay just a half-mile farther up the winding ridge; Stuart Peak loomed farther still. We paused behind a rock to grab a bite in the whipping wind.

Despite our proximity to the boundary separating the "wilderness" from the "forest," I knew my plan was foiled. We were tired and



running out of time. Paper boundaries mean nothing to the physical realities of the land. My personal challenge of actually reaching the wilderness meant little to Ted and Adam, so we pulled the skins off our skis and dropped into the burnt forest that fell from the ridge. Disappointment turned immediately to the simple joys of powder turns.

It was raining when we hit the main trail

two hours later. We still had a 4-mile slog back to the car. More importantly, even after eight hours of movement, I'd come up a half-mile short. Failure. I'd either have to find another opportunity to check February off my list or my little project would be over in the second month.

But I smiled and whooped with Ted and Adam anyway. I felt content and proud. As we

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shuffled our heavy backcountry gear down the trail, drawing curious looks from the few cross-country-skiers braving the wet, soggy weather, the old aphorism about the journey being more important than the destination echoed through my mind. Never had I found it more true.

### March: Casting through graupel

Melting snow cleaved the brown gravel road. The ruts looked too tall for my Subaru Impreza, so I parked and started jogging with my dog up Rock Creek Road toward the suspension bridge crossing Rock Creek and leading into the Welcome Creek Wilderness. Two miles later, we scurried across the bridge and into wilderness. The trail wound through the dense forest, past Douglas fir trees and snowberry bushes, their plump white berries still clinging. Bright bursts of orange lichen popped on the cold gray rocks that flanked the trail. The jangle of the dog's collar and my footsteps broke the stillness.

Soon, the patchy snow lining the trail coalesced into progress-preventing depths. Cold chunks of rotten snow slipped past my tuffs

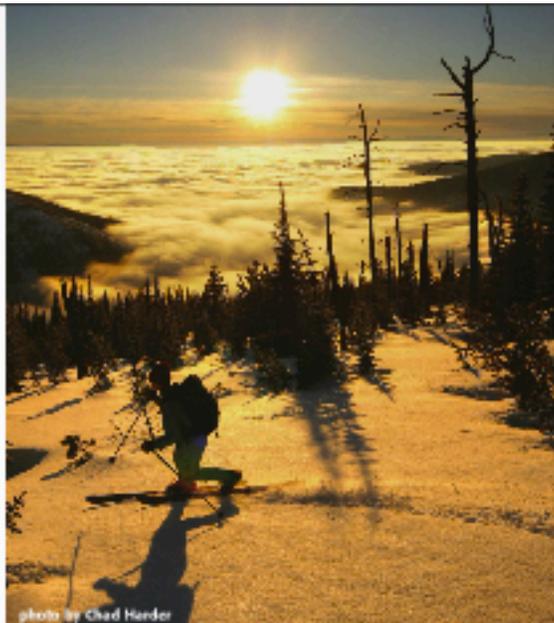


photo by Chad Hender

and into my boots. The hushed forest seemed eerie, too quiet. I started looking up the scree fields for the dusky brown outline of a mountain lion, aware that my fears were completely unfounded, but seduced by them regardless. I post-holed another half hour through the deepening late-spring snowpack.

I had bought my fishing license and some streamers prior to heading out of town, so having successfully ticked off my March goal, I

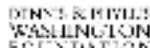
headed back to the car and the cold clear waters of Rock Creek. I spent a couple of hours working Rock Creek in a futile effort to catch trout. The sky spat graupel and the wind frustrated my already limited casting ability. I'd never fished in March before, and despite the wind, the precipitation and the lack of fish, I found myself grinning as I peeled out of my waders and slid into the car.

In truth, my winter wilderness attempts weren't that impressive. The cadre of hardcore adventurers who live in Missoula could have easily accomplished much cooler objectives. I barely even made it into two of the wilderness areas I had set out to explore and failed to reach the third. But that wasn't really the point. My objectives were more fluid and open than simply crossing boundaries or summiting peaks. I've backcountry skied in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness plenty of times before, but I'd never been to Lindbergh Lake, never backcountry-skied in the Rattlesnake, never fished for trout in March snowstorm. My wilderness project gave me a reason to explore somewhere new, to try something different. But more importantly, it gave me an excuse to get out every month, and sometimes an excuse is all we really need. X

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