Snowshoe to Fallen Leaf Lake – a wonderous trek

By Kathryn Reed

FALLEN LEAF LAKE – Snow glistens as though ice crystals are diamonds in the wild. Wind gusts send clouds of snow off the top of Mount Tallac. Fallen Leaf Lake is still, beckoning the dogs to swim in the icy water.

It's one of those postcard days in Lake Tahoe. Everywhere you look it's a Kodak moment.

We have the trail to ourselves – the eight of us, plus four dogs.



Dormant aspens line part of the trail near Fallen Leaf Lake. Photos/Kathryn Reed

Strapping on our snowshoes in the Cathedral Road parking lot off Highway 89 we begin our journey into the wild. At least it seems that way as the quiet envelops us.

The snow-covered road is wide enough to stride along in pairs and not be knocked over by one of our four-legged friends.

At times the trail closes in from the thick conifers, then suddenly it’s as though there is a meadow of snow.

Not far in we veer to the left to take the trail to get off the road even though no motor vehicles can drive on it this time of year.

It becomes single track. One by one we saunter forward. At times water crosses our path and we do a bit of improvising. With it being one of the wettest Decembers on record, water seems to be everywhere.

Taylor Creek is heading toward Lake Tahoe at what looks like capacity. Though it’s not rushing, the level seems high – especially for late December.

Onward we go, deciding to head to Fallen Leaf Lake to the left instead of going right which would have us loop back to the parking lot. Good choice.

Up and over the dam with snowshoes on takes a bit of dexterity and concentration. No problem.

Contrails line the blue sky, crossing through the wispy clouds to create a one-of-a-kind canvas. The still water reflects the mountains of Desolation Wilderness until the canines send ripples across the alpine lake.

Break time means peeling off clothes as the sun beats down on us. Most of the dogs venture into Fallen Leaf Lake to retrieve sticks, unfazed by the ice floating nearby.

Back we go, though not exactly as we came. We end up making a loop to our left through what during late summer is one of the most incredible patches of lupine. This day it’s the stark white bark of this grove of aspen that captures our attention.

The whole time it’s just the 12 of us. What a Christmas Eve to remember.

Getting there:

Head north on Highway 89 from the Y in South Lake Tahoe.

Go past Camp Richardson. Pass the turn for Fallen Leaf Lake.

Cathedral Road is on the left. A Sno-Park permit is required or take the chance of being fined. The permits may be bought at various locations or online. They are $5 for the day or $25 for the season.

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