

Celebrating 2014 atop Elephants Back



Elephants Back looms ahead of the snowshoers. Photos/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

Starting the New Year surrounded by the beauty of nature in the company of friends should become a tradition.

Craig and his six women – me, Sue, Donna, Suzy, Carolyn and Trish – started 2014 with a snowshoe to the top of Elephants Back in the Mokelumne Wilderness.

It was one of those incredibly perfect Lake Tahoe days: the sun beaming down, the sky a deep blue with streaks of white clouds, not even a wisp of wind at the top.

If only those moments could be bottled.

We took our time last Wednesday. Donna's gadget recorded us being in the wilderness for about four hours, but only two of which actually involved walking. We did put in 4.61 miles, gained 1,168 feet in elevation and went to 9,584 feet.

Photo stops were a necessity, as was a leisurely lunch at the top.

One reason for choosing this excursion was thinking there would be more snow compared to lake level, which is rather barren. Plus, much of the trail is exposed so there was less likelihood of ice being an issue.

The trail starts off narrow, so we are in a line. The snow is hard in this section, so the claws on the snowshoes are welcome. So are the poles for a better sense of balance. Sun filters in between the tall pines.

It doesn't take long for Elephants Back and Round Top Peak to show themselves.

Plenty of people have been here before us. While it's nice to not be breaking trail, there are too many trails at times. We know the direction we should be headed and have plenty of daylight, so it's no big deal. But I would imagine it would be a bit disconcerting for those who are unfamiliar with the area.

At one point Frog Lake was on our left and Woods Lake to our right in the distance. I never saw them. But in the summer I always see Frog Lake on my way to Winnemucca Lake. Part of this trail is also a segment of the Pacific Crest Trail. We never saw that trail indicator either.

Pausing we turn around and in the not too far distance is Caples Lake. From this perspective it looks large and completely covered in ice. I can only imagine the fishermen are out there enjoying their sport.

At the base of Elephants Back the snow is like sugar. While it's ideal for our purposes, it will pose an avalanche danger once more snow arrives. This consistency does not make for a good base.

It's not until we are part way up Elephants Back that we are able to see a frozen Winnemucca Lake at the base of Round Top. Earlier we had passed a couple who had spent the night there. That would have been one heck of a way to ring in the New Year.

On our way out we saw people headed to Round Top with the intention of skiing down. I shook my head thinking I hope those are rock skis they have on.

We took our snowshoes off to make it up the loose volcanic rock of Elephants Back. There was no way to snowshoe to the top. But that didn't matter.

The views at the top of Elephants Back are some of the best to be had in such a short distance – especially since the expanse of beauty spills forth in every direction.

—

Getting there:

From South Lake Tahoe, go west on Highway 50. Turn left on Highway 89. At Pickett's Junction, go right on Highway 88. At the top of Carson Pass, park on the left. The trailhead is by the building.

A sno-park permit is required between Nov. 1-May 30. The closest place to the trailhead to buy one is at Sorensen's Resort. Or they may be purchased online. The cost is \$25 for the season or \$5 per day. It's a \$94.50 fine if caught parking without a permit.

ngg_shortcode_0_placeholder (Click on photos to enlarge.)

