Sierra’s Huck Cup a qualifier for Freeride Tour

Sierra-at-Tahoe will host the second annual Huck Cup, a 2-Star Freeride World Tour qualifying event, on March 3-4.

The Freeride World Tour is a worldwide circuit of freeride skiing and snowboarding events. The event will take place in Huckleberry Canyon, 320 acres of backcountry terrain accessed by five gates at the summit of Sierra-at-Tahoe.

Sierra is the only Lake Tahoe resort to host a 2-Star Freeride World Qualifying event this year.

Competitors will battle for a $3,000 cash purse.

Feds evaluate using drones at ski resorts



Sierra-at-Tahoe isn’t ready to stop having patrollers be in charge of avalanche control. Photo/Provided

By Susan Wood

The idea of having drones deliver avalanche charges at ski resorts may one day fly with regulators, but major roadblocks now hinder movement in that practice.

The U.S. Department of the Interior is looking into the initial concept as a way of keeping ski patrollers who conduct this duty even more safe.

The high-flying practice is illegal right now. But that hasn’t stopped some who monitor the nation’s ski resorts and accidents from looking into it.

The turn-about in the snow patrol world appears to raise more questions than answers – from resort chiefs and ski industry pros to forest officials and aviation regulators.

Currently, the Federal Aviation Administration’s drone

regulations ban them from being flown over crowds or dropping anything – much less explosives from the sky. A drone is deemed an aircraft under federal law as it is "capable of sustained flight in the atmosphere," according to FAA statute.

The U.S. Department of Defense uses drones for reconnaissance and air strikes over foreign land. U.S. airspace is not allowed.

"Anyone who wants to drop something from an aircraft must take steps to ensure that doing so won't endanger people or property on the ground," FAA Pacific Northwest spokesman Ian Gregor explained to *Lake Tahoe News.*

The ski industry is keeping a close eye on the suggestion.

"The federal government would need to allow the delivery of explosives from a drone first. The FAA prohibits it at this time, so that is a major obstacle. Until that changes, I don't see much movement in this area," National Ski Areas Association spokeswoman Geraldine Link said.

Lake Tahoe ski resorts may now use an unmanned aircraft system (UAS), aka drone, for advertising and snow monitoring purposes under special use permits, according to the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit. Dropping charges for avalanche control is yet another matter.

No ski resorts have sought a permit yet, LTBMU spokeswoman Heather Noel indicated. If the request meets the screening criteria, the Forest Service may allow for the flight under the discretion of its authorized officer.

"It can be an amazing technology or a detriment," Noel said.

And there lies the bane and the blessing of using drones.

The video footage coming out of these devices is amazing and often useful. Take the recording made during the last series of wet storms that produced major flooding in the Carson

Valley.

Hence, a picture – or in this case a track, is worth a thousand words.

However, drones have also come under fire for flying into areas where crews are fighting wildland blazes. In some circumstances, they have already hindered firefighting air operations.

Still, if managed well, drones may bring a whole new dimension to avalanche control safety as well as pilot programs to film skiers.

“This is certainly an idea worth considering, but there are so many things to think about,” California Ski Industry Association Executive Director Michael Reitzell said, listing a whole set of questions:

· How would the drone be programmed?

· Who would operate the drone?

· How will it deliver the explosives?

· How would the explosive be lit?

· In hard snow conditions, how will the drone make sure the explosive does not slide all the way down the hill?

Reitzell, who is an attorney, noted a major case would have to be made that this technology is safer than current methods. He pointed to the recent fatality of a Squaw Valley patroller, but defined the tragic incident as “extremely rare.” (Squaw officials declined to comment on the drone topic.)

Then, what happens when one malfunctions? After all, it is a computerized device.

“A resort would have to be pretty much 100 percent certain that it will always have control over the drones. They also

would need to withstand the significant weather as well," he told *LTN*. "

Moreover, should we take out the human factor in judging the safety of a slope?

"I would also imagine that many patrollers would say there is a bit of an art to avalanche hazard mitigation. It would probably be much more difficult for them to feel comfortable that a slope is stable if they were using drones," Reitzell added.

At least one Lake Tahoe ski resort head expressed cautious optimism in terms of considering new technology as an alternative to snow safety patrol.

Sierra-at-Tahoe General Manager John Rice told *LTN* he believes drone technology "would be worth looking at" if crucial factors are considered.

"I feel that drone technology is still in development stages, as we have seen they can sometimes drop out of the sky or be affected by other signals," he said. "The placement of hand charges in avalanche control work is very precise to achieve desired results. If the GPS accuracy could be dialed in to the degree of military use, and drones could be operated in high wind and storm events, then it might be an alternative. But I don't believe the current drones can operate successfully in such conditions as they currently exist."

Heavenly and Kirkwood mountain resorts' spokesman Kevin Cooper declined to comment for this story.

Mountain lion hunter tracks big cats in Nev.

By John M. Glionna, Las Vegas Review-Journal

The men arrived at Letha Roberson’s house early, with crackers and beef jerky for the job of skinning and harvesting the downed mountain lion. But the one with the knife and the know-how provided a profound twist to this gritty ritual of the hunt: A woman was showing them how it was done.

The day before, Roberson had guided 27-year-old Glen Stoner to a spot where he’d felled the big cat from its tree perch 300 yards away with a powerful shot from a high-powered rifle.

Later, Stoner, his father and his grandfather joined Roberson to celebrate at a nearby bar as the regular drinkers marveled at the snarling carcass of a predator so stealthy many people here have yet to see one, let alone kill it.

In Western states such as Nevada, Utah, Idaho and Arizona, where mountain lion hunting is legal, many hunters go years without bagging a big cat. So the occasion called for countless shots of whiskey and gin.

Read the whole story

Eldorado to reduce fuel cutting permit fee

Starting March 1, Eldorado National Forest will begin selling personal use fuelwood permits for $5 per cord.

Today permits are $15.

The minimum charge for a permit is $20, which will permittees four cords.

“The reduction in price will allow the public to obtain fuelwood for heating their homes at a lower cost,” Forest Supervisor Laurence Crabtree said in a statement, “and has the added benefit of reducing fuels in the forest. “

Massive snow means lots of work for ski patrollers

By Julie Brown, Powder

The morning after a February storm had shut down the ski resort for two days, the Sun Valley ski patrol started yet another day of work to open the mountain to the public.

The meeting started with announcements: race schedules, grooming reports, mountain closures, fallen trees from the storm. Then came the weather and avalanche mitigation report: Eight days, 60 inches of snow, quite a bit of wind, and one hell of a storm cycle.

This winter has already set records for Sun Valley, currently standing at the fourth largest snowpack since 1968. The ski area is currently 181 percent of average for snowfall in the month of February, which means ski patrol has been logging a lot of overtime.

Sun Valley is not alone. California dominated headlines all of January with an incessant pounding, leaving Mammoth Mountain

with 430 inches of snowfall so far.

Most, or virtually all, ski patrol teams in the country have decades of combined experience, if not more, and the work routines and safety protocols are well reinforced. But their job is still one of risk. Last month, a Squaw Valley ski patroller died while conducting avalanche control at the top of a ridge inbounds.

Read the whole story

Star Guide: Perceptions of the Cosmos

By Tony Berendsen

As the star guide for Tahoe Star Tours, I spend countless hours under the stars. My passion for helping people understand what they see while looking up on a starry evening is my purpose, and this mission statement sums up my intention, “One day everyone will walk out under a starry sky they understand.”

I tell people when they hear the mission statement, “I know it’s a tall order, but you have to set your sights high. The understanding of the starry sky begins with one little bit of knowledge: the sun is a star.” We all know that it’s a star, but when we take a minute to think about it, while looking at other stars in the night at distances so great they are just points of light, we start to gain a sense of the immensity of

the Cosmos.

It is at that moment, looking at the stars in the distance, we begin to ask questions about our place in the Cosmos. In the last Star Guide, I asked the question: “How do you define your Cosmos?” Here are some of the answers:

· “So, do you think there is life up there?”

Male, United States

· “You know who made the moon. Yes, you do”

Female, Italy

· “I don’t need to ask questions about the Cosmos, the creator tells me what I need to know.”

Female, Korea

· My venue is the dome of the night,

The master works I have trained myself to know are nothing less than the star patterns that populate our lives, all lives, everywhere the world over,

And not only these here in the sky above my head,

But in the books and stories and buildings and fields and wishes and ceremonies and sciences of ages.

It is good work.

It is human being at the center work,

It is truth.”

Mary Stewart Adams, director Headlands, International Dark Sky Park

· “Thinking about the cosmos, and my place in it, expands my vision beyond my life on earth. I feel a part of a

vast continuum beyond my comprehension that is somehow reassuring.”

Sally Jacob, Reno

· “My Cosmos is a bucket that I fill with love, peace and forgiveness. When it’s full I pour it all over the Galaxy”

Linda Kovalcheck, San Diego

· “Why am I me?”

Kathleen Berendsen, Reno

· “The Cosmos is such a large collection of stars I can’t imagine the size. They are beautiful to look at!”

Chad Carvin, Reno

We are all so different in our interpretation of the Cosmos. The questions we ask, and thoughts we share, will help us understand the starry sky above and our place in the Cosmos.



NASA Hubble Space Telescope –

Pillars of Creation.

A poem I wrote several years ago after giving a talk at Great Basin National Park describes how I feel:

The Milky Way

Above as we walk hand in hand in the darkness

She has wrapped her silver band upon us

A motion so gentle we hardly notice

As a nest sways in an earthly breeze

Caressing the beginnings of an endless cycle

We see from inside and beyond

To the realm of other kindred souls

She wonders about us so

Our existence in such a small space

Thinking of ourselves as masters

Holding on to each other till

We accept the inevitability of it all

And her arms release us to roam this place.

Next Star Guide: What is a molecular gas cloud, and where can I see one?

Tony Berendsen runs Tahoe Star Tours. He may be reached at 775.232.0844 or tony@tahoestartours.com.

Sun Valley ski resort – a mountain of history

By Kathryn Reed

SUN VALLEY, Idaho – In this era of corporate consolidation in the ski industry, Sun Valley ski resort stands out as being independent. But the area also stands out as being a company town.

The Holding family owns Sun Valley in Idaho and Snowbasin in Utah through their company Sinclair Oil. So, while their ski portfolio is not large, the family and affiliates know quite a bit about the corporate world.

The 220-room Sun Valley Lodge, Sun Valley Inn, restaurants, stores, three golf courses – and ski resort – are all under the same ownership. It's diversification and control in a limited space. It seems to be working.

Like Lake Tahoe, Sun Valley is boasting about its incredible snowfall. Skier visits have hit record numbers on some days.



Sun Valley has 3,400 vertical feet of skiing. Photo/Pamala

Ward

In early January they were getting pummeled by snow, no rain. One day the fog was so heavy Pam and I had no idea where we were. Oh, but, the smiles we had on our faces when we met the rest of the gang for lunch. The powder was simply glorious – thigh deep at times, light and bountiful.

The groomers seemed to go on forever. Bald Mountain tops out at 9,150 feet, with the base being 5,750 feet.

The mountain has two distinct sides – River Run and Warm Springs. The latter is where things started, the former is where most now begin their ski day.



The hot tub at Sun Valley Lodge is larger than some hotel pools. Photo/Pamala Ward

It was in 1936 that Sun Valley first opened. One claim to fame is that it had the country's first ski lift.

Notable Olympians from the area are Kaitlyn Farrington who in 2014 won gold in halfpipe. Kaitlyn's Bowl is named after her. Picabo's Street is named after Picabo Street, who won multiple Olympic medals for ski racing. Gretchen's Gold is for Gretchen Fraser who in 1948 became the first American to win an Olympic gold in skiing.

The mountain has plenty of terrain for those who will never even make the Olympic team, let alone medal.



Sun Valley has produced multiple Olympic athletes. Photo/Kathryn Reed

On our third day of skiing the sun finally came out – making me understand why it's called Sun Valley. It really is a valley of sun.

Finally, I see the Sawtooth range – so craggily it's understandable how it got its name. In a more populous area I'm sure those other mountains would be developed.

What helps this resort in the middle of Idaho survive despite being so remote is in part its location. People have to want to go there. There is no drive-up market to tap into like Tahoe does. It was built by railroad tycoon Averell Harriman as the country's first destination ski resort and remains a destination today.



A full moon shines upon the historic Sun Valley Lodge. Photo/Pamala Ward

“I think one of the things about Sun Valley is that we are very iconic,” resort spokesman Mike Fitzgerald told *Lake Tahoe News*. “It is more of a year-round resort. We are a busy in summertime as we are in winter.”

People return year after year.

“Of our guests, about 76 percent are return visitors. We have incredible loyalty,” Fitzgerald said.

I’m one of those returnees, only it had been 35 years since I was last at Sun Valley. I don’t remember much about the mountain. What stands out from that trip with my parents, and my best friend and her parents was the sleigh ride to dinner. It’s still offered.

The free bus system through Sun Valley-Ketchum operates efficiently. We used it to get to and from the slopes each day. Stops are clearly marked and times given when the next

bus will arrive. It was refreshing coming from a city that doesn’t even have a bus as a symbol at its stops.



Tom Ward pedals on the multi-use trails at the Nordic center. Photo/Pamala Ward

In 2007 three bus systems were consolidated into what is known today as Mountain Rides. “Mountain Rides operates as a public agency under a joint powers Agreement partnership that includes the cities of Bellevue, Hailey, Ketchum, Sun Valley and Blaine County. Mountain Rides’ funding comes from local option sales tax and general funds from its local funding partners, as well as from the Federal Transit Administration and revenue from fares,” the bus system’s website says.

In casually speaking with a variety of Sun Valley employees they raved about working for the company. Full-time workers

get health and retirement benefits. Dorm style lodging is available for many employees.

One man used to live in Truckee. He’s happier in Idaho. It’s not as expensive to live. He boasts about the trail network being right in town and not needing to drive anywhere.

Still, others spoke of how it is expensive to live in this mountain area. Some drive more than hour to get go work.

Nonetheless, if the workers’ jovialness was an act, they’ve been trained well. Customer service is reminiscent of Deer Valley, only more authentic in the sense there wasn’t anything pretentious about Sun Valley.

The lodge was renovated a year ago, and the inn will be in the coming year.

I was there for a week in January with eight others. Three of us were in the same condo owned by Sun Valley. While it was adequate, it clearly was not on the most recent renovation schedule. We were under the impression going in that it was going to be a little higher end than it was.

We had access to the hot tub which is pool-size. It was an easy walk. But one of the best things about the lodge is the shuttle service. Perfect for getting a ride back to the condo after soaking. Drivers took us into town, to the Nordic center where Pam, Tom and I tried fat bike tires for the first time. (Fun, but no need to add another sport to my repertoire.) The center, though, would be worth exploring further because of the myriad snowshoe and cross country trails. In summer this is where golfers flock.

While the Sun Valley-Ketchum area has a bit of a rugged feel, it is also modern. The restaurants offer a variety of fare — from local trout to wild game to plenty of potatoes. Being a vegetarian was not a problem.

Technology slow to help predict avalanches

By Ethan Baron, Bay Area News Group

It’s a bountiful winter in the snowy Sierra Nevada, with the biggest snowpack in 22 years. That’s great news for skiers and snowboarders, but all that snow can transform in an instant from a beautiful blanket to a deadly shroud when an avalanche hits.

In December, Aptos doctor Tom Barker, 64, was swept more than 200 yards in an avalanche that left him buried under 9 feet of snow, after he and a friend skied into a closed area at the Mt. Rose ski resort without their avalanche-safety gear. Barker did not survive.

Slides kill one or two winter-wilderness travelers every couple of years in the Sierra around Lake Tahoe. For every death, avalanche experts say, about 10 people are caught in a cascade of snow and ice and barely escape with their lives.

The popularity, and the risk, are driving companies to develop new avalanche-safety products based on bleeding-edge technology better known in the fast-evolving realms of self-driving cars, the Internet of Things, and big-data computing. The technology holds promise for preventing fatalities, according to experts, but it’s in its infancy.

Read the whole story

Feeding wildlife is not a good idea

By Aaron Meier

For those who keep tabs on Nevada's wildlife, a frequently asked question during periods of heavy snowfall is "should we feed wildlife when winter limits their food availability?"

Idaho, Colorado and Utah have recently initiated limited amounts of winter feeding and "baiting" of mule deer and elk. These efforts are intended to prevent agricultural damage and provide for human safety on highways and interstates as animals are lured away from conflict areas. Although snowfall has been plentiful in many parts of Nevada this winter, rainfall and warmer daytime temperatures have minimized snow accumulations at lower elevations. Most mule deer, elk and pronghorn continue to have access to lower elevation winter ranges that assist in avoiding deep snows and locating suitable forage. Yet, even when winter conditions are most severe, winter feeding may not be a good idea.

"Feeding wildlife often feels like the right thing to do," said Cody Schroeder, mule deer biologist for the Nevada Department of Wildlife. "Yet in practice, it generally creates more problems than it solves."

Schroeder is part of the Mule Deer Working Group, a subcommittee of the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. The group has been reviewing scientific literature on a number of issues facing deer in the West and prepared a fact sheet on the challenges of winter feeding. **Those challenges include:**

Diet: Mule deer and pronghorn are highly selective foragers. They tend to eat plant parts with the highest nutrient content. These animals are also ruminants, meaning they have a

four-compartment stomach and get nutrients from plant-based food by fermenting it in a specialized stomach prior to digestion. Rapid changes in their diet may result in the inability to digest their food. Some past efforts at supplemental feeding have failed when these animals died with full stomachs due to this rapid change.

Behavior: Many ungulates (deer, elk, antelope) are migratory in nature and respond to heavy winter conditions by moving to areas with less snow accumulation. Feeding may entice migratory animals to stay in one place when the best solution may be for them to move on.

Disease: Winter feeding concentrates wildlife and can lead to disease transmission among individuals. Sometimes the feed the animals consume may actually cause certain diseases, such as grain toxicosis.

Predation: Concentrating animals in a single location can also concentrate the animals that prey on them as well. While reducing herd size under severe conditions may limit the numbers of animals dependent on a limited food source, concentrated numbers can result in greater predation than what they would normally sustain.

Competition: When wildlife is concentrated, competition for food resources may be severe and young animals may be excluded from foraging. Young animals are among the least capable of surviving difficult conditions, and concentrated numbers can increase competition to the point that fawn survival may decrease beyond what may be experienced without the winter feeding. These concentrations may also result in increased damage to native rangelands beyond what would normally occur if animals were spread out.

Finances and logistics: To feed wildlife effectively, specific foods should be prepared that address the specialized needs of ruminant animals. Formulation and production takes time and

this formulated feed is relatively expensive. Delivering the feed to the best locations can be challenging because creating concentrations near easily accessed roads can create traffic hazards or lead to increased poaching events.

NDOW also wants the public to be aware that heavy snow may sometimes lead to wildlife coming into urban areas in search of food, but that it is never a good idea for the public to feed wildlife.

“We understand that when you see an animal that looks hungry, a person’s first instinct is to feed that animal. We just want the public to understand that feeding a wild animal is often unhealthy for the animal and it takes away their fear of people,” said Schroeder.

Aaron Meier is with the Nevada Department of Wildlife.

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4 Tahoe bear cubs returned to nature

Four bear cubs were returned to the wild on Feb. 15.

In April 2016, an 18-year-old female bear with four cubs (two males and two females) died of unknown causes on the South Shore. The cubs weighed 7 to 10 pounds, and are now closer to 70 pounds.

They were taken to Animal Ark in Reno because they were found in Nevada.

They were placed into hibernation in late autumn. On Wednesday they were placed in artificial dens in the Lake Tahoe backcountry. They are expected to emerge from their winter

slumber in mid-March or April. They were flown to the denning sites in pairs.