

Survey: Calif. ski areas boost safety – barely

By Benjamin Spillman, Reno Gazette-Journal

California's winter resorts have more safety measures in place than they did five years ago, but just barely.

That's according to the California Mountain Resort 2016 Safety Survey.

The report, published by the SnowSport Safety Foundation, surveyed safety measures at 19 ski and snowboard resorts, including many in the Lake Tahoe area.

Although it shows slight improvements from a similar survey six years ago it also shows shortcomings in the way resorts manage impact protection, trail design and maintenance, boundaries and terrain parks.

Read the whole story

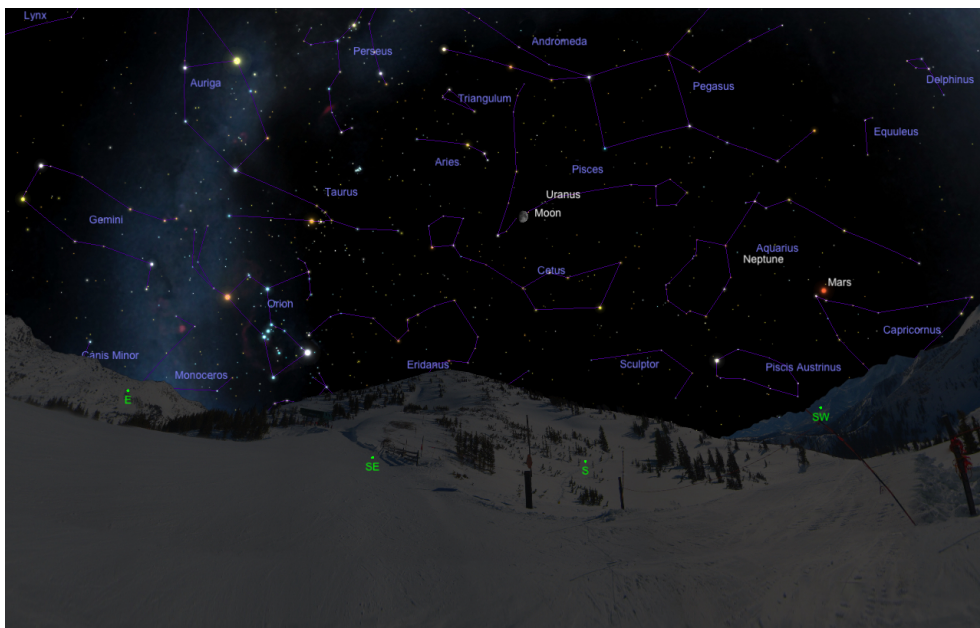
Star Guide: Tahoe, a winter cosmic theater

By Tony Berendsen

There are many wonderful places on the planet to visit where a person can step outside on a dark night to view the cosmos.

Lake Tahoe is one of the best of those places. It is an earthly pedestal adorned with the stars of our near space and the immensity of the winter Milky Way shimmering above.

During the winter at Lake Tahoe the stars are bright diamonds in the sky. The winter air is crisp and clear, and because we are looking away from the center of our galaxy this time of year, the near stars shine brighter since the winter Milky Way is just a subtle whisk of light passing through the constellation Cassiopeia.



Tahoe is one of the best places to star gaze.
Photo/Simulation Curriculum

So what's showing in the winter cosmic theater?

The constellation of Orion is rising in the southeast with the blazing red star Betelgeuse at the hunters' right shoulder; it is a giant star. If it were where the sun is, we would be inside of it. Luckily its 640 light years away.

Below the belt of Orion, the three stars in a row below Betelgeuse, there is a vertical row of dimmer stars; the sword of Orion. Within the sword lays a winter star gazers' treat, a cosmic nursery. Just visible to the naked eye the glow of a

nebula becomes easy to see in binoculars, and a few of the new born stars with in it at 1500 light years away.

Next, above Orion to the south is another giant red star, not as big and bright, but still a stellar gem. The star is called Aldebaran and is the brightest star in the constellation Taurus marking the eye in the mighty bull. Look to the right of the star for a V shape of stars and you have found one of the closest galactic star clusters to the Earth; the Hyades. Aim your binoculars at the V shape to see some of the hundreds of stars bound in a giant gravitational web about 150 light years away.

Here are some tips for winter star gazing:

- Dress warm, layer, and wear warm shoes, gloves, and a knitted cap to cover the ears.
- Step away from lights and let your eyes adjust to the darkness for 15 to 20 minutes (bright moon nights are great, but its light overshadows the stars and the subtle winter Milky Way).
- Bring your smart phone loaded with the **SkyPortal app**, set on night mode, to help you find your way around.
- Bring binoculars if you have them. There are some amazing star clusters and nebulae to view through them.

If you are interested in a guided tour of the cosmic theater at Lake Tahoe, join us for a **snowshoe star tour at Northstar**. We take groups out at night on a snowshoe star gazing trek on Dec. 21, 28, Jan. 14 and Feb. 11 starting at the Northstar Nordic Center and ending at the Ritz-Carlton, Lake Tahoe for telescopic viewing and some hot chocolate and cider.

I hope you get a chance to enjoy the stellar show from Lake Tahoe.

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Early rain builds hope for outdoor recreation in '17

By Tom Stienstra, San Francisco Chronicle

The start of rainy season and its effects on the outdoors next year already are showing promise.

The little-seen numbers from water agencies show there is a good chance of a great 2017 for camping at lakes and streams, and boating, rafting, fishing and water sports.

Over the weekend, I reviewed reports made by about 25 water districts to the state Department of Water Resources and federal Bureau of Reclamation.

Read the whole story

Best start in 30 years to NorCal wet season

By Dale Kasler and Ryan Sabalow, Sacramento Bee

It's only a beginning. But it's a strong beginning, and it offers at least a rain gauge's worth of hope to a state enduring its fifth year of drought.

The National Weather Service said Monday that the rainy season in the northern Sierra Nevada is off to its wettest start in 30 years. Mountain conditions are critically important to monitoring the drought because a major share of the state's water supply is stored for months as snow.

Citing state data from a string of eight gauges scattered around the northern Sierra, the service said precipitation has come in at about twice the average for this time of year, making for the wettest kickoff to the water year in 30 years. The water year, as defined by climatologists and others, begins Oct. 1.

Read the whole story

Christmas is in the air at El Dorado tree farms

By Kathryn Reed

CAMINO – One aroma above all says Christmas – the scent of a freshly cut evergreen.

It's everywhere in the foothills of El Dorado County this time of year.

It didn't matter that the temperature was dropping and snow was beginning to fall, it just added to the magic of the countless families eager to get their tree on Thanksgiving weekend.

Friends Sandy Baker and Kellie Kijanka used to live next door

to each other. Their tradition was to get their trees together at Indian Rock Tree Farm in Camino each year. Now they live 120 miles apart – one in Davis, one in Foresthill – but they still meet at the tree farm. They've been doing so for 20 years.



One tree isn't always enough. Photo/Kathryn Reed

That's one of the special things about Indian Rock, the people who return each year.

Larry and Geri Hyder bought the 33 acres – of which 15 acres are the tree farm – in 1961. They started selling trees in 1976. They have about 15 varieties.

"What we have here is magical. A lot of people all they are able to have is a flat lot. You are able to walk up the hill here. We call it the Sherwood Forest," Geri Hyder said in reference to Robin Hood. "The main thing is we want to give people service."



Larry and Geri Hyder have been in the tree farm business for 40 years. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Multiple generations work at the tree lot – from parking, to sales, to helping cut trees, to selling hot cocoa.

Customers are likely family, too. They seek out the Hyderys to say hi, shake hands and give a hug.

A few years ago Indian Rock earned the state award for best tree farm.

On Saturday the lot was bustling with people. This was true of most of the tree farms in the area. Thanksgiving is their busiest weekend, with the next few weeks when they make all of their money for the year.



Binding a large tree for transport takes some effort.
Photo/Kathryn Reed

It's a different kind of frenzy at Rapetti Farms. This is the second year they have sold trees via a membership formula. This means the general public cannot buy from them.

Owner Randall Rapetti told *Lake Tahoe News* they went this route to avoid the parking hassle, arguments, fights and people leaving without paying.

"We have formed almost like a membership base. They get postcards in the mail and they don't have to compete for trees," Rapetti said.

They have mostly Nordmann fir, with some noble fir. The whole farm will eventually be Nordmann, Rapetti said. They come from the Republic of Georgia.



Christmas trees dot a large swath of the landscape in El Dorado County. Photo/Kathryn Reed

At the Hillside Tree Farm customers have 10 varieties to choose from, with Swift silver being the best seller.

"It's a real family event. We may sell three or four trees at a time," Peg Perron at Hillside told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Customers come from all over – the Bay Area, Reno, Redding – even people from Los Angeles headed south with an El Dorado County tree on board.

"I don't think the economy has ever affected us," Phyllis McGee told *Lake Tahoe News*. With her husband, Michael, they have been running the McGee Tree Farm in Placerville for 32 years. "Sometimes people like to do the simple things."

People will sacrifice other things to ensure they have a Christmas tree.

And with trees from the northwest – where many stores get their trees – being more expensive this year, cutting a tree locally might be a lot more economical. Many of these farms will also cut the tree you select, so you don't need to be experienced with a saw.

Canoes – the quintessential vehicle for escape

By Mark Neuzil

A canoe is like a banjo—it makes everyone happy. Propelled with paddles, sleek, long, narrow, lightweight—mostly open—and fast: Every canoe I've owned makes me smile at its memory. I remember my oldest daughter, at age 10, mimicking the cry of a loon, and the loon crying back, while on a Boundary Waters trip. Or that one big fish that one time in that one hole whose location I'm never going to disclose because then it won't be my memory alone.

Originally, canoes were made from trees nearby the rivers, lakes, and seas they traveled on. My personal canoe convoy mirrored the development of synthetic materials—fiberglass, aluminum, Royalex and multiple boats of Kevlar—that have been used in the construction of the ubiquitous craft since World War II. The canoe design—perfectly adapted to its place—predates the arrival of Europeans on American shores, but also includes the most modern materials through the space age and beyond. Improbably, the more the canoe's materials change the more it seems to echo a simpler time.

Native Americans used two main canoe designs for water transportation. In the northeast and upper Midwest, the birch-bark canoe was the primary craft. A bark canoe was built right-side up—a wooden skeleton surrounded by bark, lashed together with roots, planked, ribbed, and sealed with pitch. In the south from the Gulf of Mexico and west to the Pacific Ocean, the dugout canoe served. A dugout was just that—a log partially hollowed with tools and fire, expanded with hot water and sharpened at the ends. Both were born of ecological necessity; the paper birch forests supplied the raw material in the northeast, while in the south and west that job went to cypress, redwood, cedar and other species.

Both types, but especially the bark canoes, could be tweaked to local tastes, whether practical, spiritual or artistic. Prior to European settlement, the basic canoe shape was so successful and well-engineered that the French, English, and Dutch explorers who showed up on these shores could not improve upon it; the most successful of them, the fur-trading voyageurs, co-opted the vehicle as their own freight-hauler. Both canoes ruled the waves for hundreds of years through the resettlement of the continent, before steam power in boats and trains shoved them aside.

Shortly after the Civil War, the canoe was repurposed not as a workboat, but as a way to escape from work. Increased leisure time and the professionalization of recreational hunting and fishing gave the canoe new duties. Magazines popped up describing the best ways and places to chase fish and game, or to simply get away from modern, industrial cities. There was an element of nostalgia, perhaps, in some of the best canoe literature, even as all the writers remarked on the solitude, the restfulness, the back-to-nature soul fulfillment of quiet days on the water.

But these new “sports”—as they were called—didn’t always paddle traditional canoes in their pursuit of happiness: Manufacturing advances and a scarcity of right-sized birch

trees drove the development of new canoes built upside-down from strips of wood over molds, rather than right-side-up from bark.

Upstate New York and Maine, with their miles of navigable streams, became centers of American innovation using the new methods. In New York, builders such as J. Henry Rushton and authors such as George Washington Sears, under the pen name Nessmuk, popularized the longitudinal-wood strip crafts among hunters, anglers, and adventurers. The design originated in Canada and spread with the help of social organizations such as the American Canoe Association, which held events that included popular races. The idea of the canoe began to expand: Some had decks and looked a lot like today's kayaks; others featured sails.

Though sold as a way to escape the pressures of the city, the canoe's construction managed to mirror American manufacturing pretty closely. After the economic collapse of 1893, a cheaper building technique—wood overlaid with canvas and coated with a special waterproof sauce—gained popularity. Prices fell dramatically. While the Rushton Canoe Company charged \$170 for a fully outfitted sailing canoe at the turn of the century, wood-and-canvas canoes made in Maine by the Old Town Canoe Company went for \$30 to \$40.

Canoes were not just about getting away from it all; they were also an escape from scolds. At the turn of the century there was a fad of young men and women paddling together on rivers such as the Charles, Detroit, Schuylkill, Potomac, and urban areas such as the Chain of Lakes in Minneapolis. Courting canoes, in which the bow paddler faced the stern—the better for the couple to gaze into each other's eyes—kicked off a craze called canoedling in which the opportunities for intimacy were taken full advantage of, much to the chagrin of dry land preachers. Legislation and arrests inevitably followed, with one young man fined \$20 for kissing his sweetie in a canoe on the Charles River in 1903. At that price,

millions of dollars' worth of smooches were exchanged on weekend evenings across the urban rivers of the nation.

The graceful forms of the wood-and-canvas canoes began to fade from the marketplace after the Second World War. Compared to the postwar synthetics, wood-and-canvas boats were expensive, heavy and needed fairly regular attention. The material that shoved them into dry dock was aluminum and the Grumman Aircraft Engineering Corporation of Long Island, N.Y., led the way. Aluminum boats, stamped out and riveted or welded, flooded the post-war market. Purists said there was no romance in a clanky metal boat, but Grumman paced the industry in sales from 1951 to 1976.

By the mid-1970s, fiberglass, various laminated plastics and Kevlar did to aluminum boats what aluminum did to wood-and-canvas—beat them by price, practicality, and performance. Even newer space-age material such as carbon fiber or coated nylon, which does not compete on price, creates boats that weigh less than a roller suitcase. By 2005, a manufacturing association estimated that 90,000 to 110,000 canoes were sold annually; soon cheap plastic kayaks surged in popularity, based on lower prices and ease of use.

Over the years my fleet has contained canoes made from almost all the synthetics. But in 2010, I started over, building a “stripper”—a 1927-era design of cedar strips, coated with lightweight fiberglass that, for me, combines the best of the old lines with a splash of modern technology. An Ojibwe from hundreds of years ago, somehow reborn in the present, would instantly recognize the shape of my boat and know what to do with it. As the writer Sigurd Olson noted, “When a man is part of his canoe, he is part of all that canoes have ever known.”

Mark Neuzil is professor of communication and journalism at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minn.. He is the co-author, along with Norman Sims, of “Canoes: A Natural History in North America” (University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

National park status always eluded Lake Tahoe



Lake Tahoe was considered for national park status multiple times. Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

One of the perks of being director of the National Park Service is being able to check in on the land you manage. So it should be no surprise Stephen Mather was in Lake Tahoe on Friday giving a talk about his agency.

But Lake Tahoe isn't a national park and Mather died in 1930.

Steve Hale – aka Mather – regaled hikers at Van Sickle Bi-State Park about the multiple unsuccessful quests to make this area part of the park system. Mather was the first director of the park service after it was established in 1916.



Steve Hale as Stephen Mather, the first director of the National Park Service. Photo/Kathryn Reed

On a visit to the area in 1919 Mather came across hundreds of people inside and outside a Fallen Leaf Lake lodge listening to a talk about birds. He was taken aback that people would be so enthralled by such a thing.

Watching the spectacle gave him an idea. That one incident is what led to what is now the ranger talks at national parks in the United States.

Mather wanted to start by introducing the American public to the animals in the parks, while he also realized there could be so many more educational talks.

It was in 1920 that Yosemite National Park launched the ranger programs.



The waterfall at Van Sickle Bi-state Park on Nov. 25.
Photo/Kathryn Reed

This hike on Nov. 25 was part of the Tahoe Rim Trail Association's quest to get people outdoors instead of shopping on Black Friday. Eighteen people partook in the jaunt through the South Shore park to the new bridge at the waterfall.

Hale (as Mather) stopped along the route a few times to transport people back to the last century. When he wasn't giving a history lesson it was one of the four TRT guides – usually trail leader Jim Mrazek – talking about the state park the group was hiking in.

Development at Lake Tahoe is primarily what kept derailing the various attempts to make it a national park. The shoreline was deteriorating in the late 1800s as loggers denuded the forest in order to build silver mines in Virginia City.

The California Assembly wanted the feds to take over Lake Tahoe in 1883, but that proposal failed.

In 1899 the basin was on the congressional radar. According to Hale/Mather, the deal unraveled after an article came out in the *San Francisco Chronicle* on Feb. 27, 1900, detailing how the land swap would benefit the Bliss family and the railroad interests more than the public.



Jim Mrazek, TRT guide, talks about the bridge that was built this year. Photo/Kathryn Reed

William Stewart, a senator from Nevada was a leader of this particular charge to make Tahoe a national park. The newspaper article, though, exposed how Stewart wanted to build a 12-foot-high dam in Tahoe City to benefit agriculture interests in his state.

The park idea for Tahoe died.

Five years later the area became a national forest.

But the idea of Tahoe as a national park flourished one more time – this time in 1913, the same year Hetch Hetchy was approved. To this day damming this pristine area to provide water for San Francisco still rankles many people.

Agricultural and commercial interests eventually outweighed all conservation efforts to make Lake Tahoe a national park.

Don't get fleeced spending time on slopes

By Beth J. Harpaz, AP

Want to bust your winter vacation budget? Buy a one-day lift ticket at a ski resort on a holiday weekend.

That's "the most expensive way to go skiing. And that's what people hear about – the \$140 lift tickets," said Mary Jo Tarallo, executive director of Learn to Ski and Snowboard Month.

Don't get fleeced wearing your fleece. Here are six ways to score deals and discounts on ski trips.

- Online deals – Buy tickets online, not at the window. Check out ticket prices and deals at GetSkiTickets.com, Liftopia.com and Ski.com. Consider renting gear and clothing from GetOutfitted.com.

- Programs with benefits – January is Learn to Ski and Snowboard Month, when many resorts offer deals that typically include a lesson, gear rental and a lift ticket to the

beginner slopes. Another program, Bring A Friend, offers incentives to pass-holders and other frequent skiers for introducing newcomers to the sport. Together, Learn to Ski and Bring A Friend programs have more than 200 resort partners in 34 states, according to Tarallo.

Some states also have “ski passport” programs that offer bargains at participating ski areas for kids in fourth, fifth and sixth grades.

- Coupons and discounts – Many regional ski areas distribute coupons through grocery stores, sporting goods stores, chains such as Costco.

And don’t forget the usual discounts offered at many resorts for AAA, kids, students, members of the military and seniors.

- Passes – If you have a favorite resort, season passes save a bundle. But they’re cheapest when purchased in spring.

If you like to vary your ski destinations, consider passes that offer access to different resorts. The MaxPass can be used at 39 mountains in North America. The Epic Pass can be used at 44 ski resorts around the world, from Colorado and Utah to the European Alps.

- Destination strategies – Drive-to regional ski areas are usually cheaper than big-name resorts. And if you can drive or take a bus to the slopes, you’ll save on food by packing lunch and snacks. At Caberfae Peaks in Michigan, skiers bring slow-cookers and let their meals cook indoors while they’re on the slopes.

If you’re flying to major ski regions like the Rockies, be flexible on destinations and timing for best deals, according to Ski.com. Flights to small mountain airports fill quickly, especially at peak times such as holiday weekends. Consider flying into big airports such as Denver and driving from there. But be sure to check car rental rates, which can be

steep, and weigh the potential downside of snowy roads if your drive is far.

Among the most affordable ski destinations in the Western U.S., according to Ski.com, are:

- Winter Park, Colo., with January lodging under \$100 a night.
- Salt Lake City, where the Salt Lake Super Pass offers a choice of skiing at Alta, Brighton, Snowbird, and Solitude.
- Heavenly, (fly into Reno and stay in a casino-hotel off-hill for under \$100 a night).
- Banff and Lake Louise, Alberta, Canada, where the U.S. dollar is worth \$1.35 Canadian.
- Schweitzer Mountain in Idaho, which offers free skiing on arrival day if you show a boarding pass from flights into nearby Spokane.

Ski.com also advises comparing ski rental fees with airline baggage fees for transporting your equipment. Some package deals include equipment rentals.

- Timing is everything – Midweek is cheaper than weekend skiing. Holidays are expensive and crowded.

Ski.com analyzed weather data, costs and arrivals using 25,000 reservations, and came up with Jan. 9-14, as the best week for a ski or snowboard trip. Crowds are down, snow conditions are likely good and costs are 45 percent cheaper at top resorts compared to Christmas week, spring break or Presidents Day week, Ski.com found.

Calendar celebrates strong mountain women



Female patrollers at Squaw Valley are featured in a 2017 calendar. Photo/Keoki Flagg

By Benjamin Spillman, Reno Gazette-Journal

The ski and snowboard industry has had more than its fair share of face plants when it comes to depicting women.

Whether it is ads with women as worse skiers than men or apparel and gear makers who push inferior products on female customers just about anyone with open eyes and a functioning brain can come up with their own example.

The good news is that in recent years there are signs the pushback against sexist depictions of women in the mountains is gaining steam.

And if a newly released calendar featuring female ski patrollers is any indication the momentum will continue in

2017.

Read the whole story

Creating the perfect outdoor workplace

By David Ferry, Outside

The latest trend in office design is to get as far away from the cubical as possible. Human beings, after all, labored for tens of thousands of years outdoors until relatively recently, so cultivating a natural work environment makes sense. Right?

That's the concept guiding cutting-edge companies like Google, which has recently embraced "biophilic design"—that is, creating indoor spaces that feel like the great outdoors. Living trees and natural light are just the tip of the iceberg. Amazon's new downtown Seattle headquarters, for example, will include an enormous rainforest inside a geodome. Employees can host meetings there or take impromptu walks during the workday.

But why pretend to work outside when the real outdoors beckons right through the windows? Spending time in nature, according to Harvard physician Eva Selhub's book "Your Brain on Nature", is associated with positive emotions and increased mental and physical energy. Whether you spend time backpacking through Yellowstone or jogging in Central Park, the aim is the same: to improve yourself.

Read the whole story