360-degrees of awe from the top of Ralston Peak

By Kathryn Reed

TWIN BRIDGES – Mount Tallac from the South Shore is an impressive icon. But when it comes to looking at Tallac's backside from the top of Ralston Peak, the grandeur pales in comparison to the razzle-dazzle Mother Nature provides from this vantage point.

It's so much better than being at the top of Tallac, too, because the vistas are jaw dropping gorgeous. Civilization is nowhere on the horizon unless ski slopes count.

It's odd feeling like I was in the middle of nowhere and yet knowing exactly where I was. Familiar landmarks surrounded me as I took in the 360-degree view.



Looking down on Lake Aloha from the top of Ralston Peak. Photos/Kathryn Reed

Barren runs of Sierra-at-Tahoe; splotches of snow dotting Pyramid Peak – which at 9,983-feet is the highest mountain in the Crystal Range and Desolation Wilderness; the pools of Lake Aloha that resemble a moonscape; Price, Jack and Dick peaks looking manageable to climb from our perch at 9,235 feet; Lake Tahoe so vast it could be the ocean; Fallen Leaf so small it

could be Heather Lake.

With 50 mph winds forecast for our destination, we were dressed more like a winter hike than summer. Warmth was not what we found on this last Sunday of June, but that didn't matter – except that it meant we didn't linger long.

There are 12 women and two dogs making the trek to the top of Ralston. I was not alone in this being my first excursion up this landmark that can be seen from Highway 50 near Horsetail Falls. While there are several routes to get to the top, we start at Echo Lake.

We cut off two miles each way by taking the boat across. It fits all of us. It costs $12 one-way – each person. The boat shuttle is a racket. They have a captive audience and are clearly ripping people off. That's the only negative.

The ride is beautiful. Larkin delivers us to the dock on the far side where we begin our 8-mile roundtrip journey. (We start hiking at 8:40am and return to the dock at 3pm.)

It starts out rocky. The runners in the group sprint to the lead. Others fall to the back, taking in the scenery of Tamarack Lake that comes up on our left.

There are lupine, phlox, pussy paws, wallflower, Indian paintbrush, shooting star and sulphur buckwheat to photograph. Wildflowers, while not in abundance, dot the landscape in an array of colors.

At this elevation they are smaller than what is found at lake level – dwarf-like, Kim says.

Winter's sparse snowfall has turned western-facing manzanita black. Lack of water has killed some of these bushes in the backcountry.

While they are a species that burns hot in a fire, dead manzanita is more susceptible to fire than a live plant. Fire

is more of a concern for the manzanita trees because it becomes a ladder fuel, Lauri explains.

Trail signs pop up. So many choices for where to play in Desolation Wilderness. Some of the routes are along the Pacific Crest Trail.

We take the second left headed toward Lake of the Woods. We keep her to our right, never reaching her shore. Pyramid Peak – aptly named because it looks like pharaohs could call this mountain home – looms over this lake.

Pockets of snow crop up, but nothing substantial enough to hinder our progress.

We traipse through a soggy meadow before the last ascent to the tip-top.

Mountain hemlock and white bark pine are sprouting from the rugged terrain. They like it at this elevation.

Giddy with delight of making it to our destination and taking in the scenery, we are all smiles feeling like we are on top of the world.

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Quiet season so far for Yosemite rescue teams

By Patty Guerra, McClatchy Newspapers

YOSEMITE – A hiker who instinctively grabbed for a falling radio slid down Half Dome, stopping when a ledge broke his

fall. Fellow hikers on Yosemite's most iconic hike took apart the cables to rescue the man, a 56-year-old from San Jose, when he fell June 22.

It was a dramatic moment in what has been a fairly quiet year for the park's emergency teams.

"This year we have actually had very few search and rescue incidents and fatalities," said Kari Cobb, Yosemite spokeswoman. "Last year at this time we had quite a bit more than what we have now."

Last year, 15 people had died at the park by the middle of August, including a woman hiking Half Dome and three Central Valley residents swept over Vernal Fall during a day trip.

The thundering waterfalls that helped attract 4 million visitors last year have slowed significantly this year after a drier-than-usual winter.

"Last year, we received 199 percent of normal snowpack," Cobb said. "This year, we barely received 50 percent. There's a vast difference in amount of water flowing through, particularly in Yosemite Valley."

Falls that haven't stopped since August 2010 are now little more than a steady drip.

"Yosemite Falls still has a little stream of water coming down," Cobb said Friday. "But it will definitely be dry in the next couple of weeks. Last year, it didn't go dry at all."

Read the whole story

Fire restrictions take effect in Lake Tahoe Basin

Fire restrictions start in the Lake Tahoe Basin on July 9, said the U.S. Forest Service. A Forest Order has been issued to provide for public safety through the end of the official 2012 fire season.

Campfires, including charcoal barbecues, are prohibited except in exempted recreation sites. Campfires are prohibited in all other semi-developed sites such as Luther Pass, Blackwood Canyon, and Watson Lake, as well as in all dispersed recreation areas.

Smoking on National Forest land is prohibited, except within an enclosed vehicle or building, or within an exempted recreation site.

For a complete list of regulations and exempted recreation sites, visit go to the USFS site online.

For additional information regarding fire restrictions, call the Forest Supervisor's office at (530) 543.2694, Monday through Friday from 8am-4:30pm.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Cooking tips for car campers and backpackers

By Sarah Kagan and Megan O. Steintrager, Epicurious

In the eyes of some hard-core backpackers, car camping is “camping lite.” But to car campers, that so-called wimp factor lies at the heart of what we love about our hobby. Because you don’t have to worry about dragging all your equipment to the site on your back, you can afford to bring along luxuries that make life a lot more pleasant. Think ice, a skillet, beer, and the makings of much better meals.

But even with a car to transport gear, you’ll still want to pack efficiently to keep your campsite uncluttered and your time free for enjoying the great outdoors. Here are some tips to help you cook up tasty and hassle-free camp meals.

Read the whole story

New sunscreen guide creates controversy

By Karen Ravn, Special to the Los Angeles Times

It’s a conundrum. You want to have fun in the sun, but you don’t want skin cancer or – heaven forbid! – wrinkles. Maybe you think you have it made in the shade with sunscreen. But while most sun and skin experts would advise you to slather the stuff on like crazy, many also would warn you not to rely on it too, too much.

In May, the Environmental Working Group, or EWG, a nonprofit organization in Washington, D.C., concerned with health and the environment, released its annual Sunscreen Safety Guide. It comes down in favor of using sunscreens, but it also raises concerns, which, in turn have raised some controversy.

“It’s frustrating,” says Dr. Darrell Rigel, a professor of dermatology at New York University, who believes the EWG may weigh environmental concerns too heavily in its work. “People don’t wear sunscreen because it’s environmentally friendly. They wear it to protect themselves from cancer. … The danger is that people will be confused and not use any.”

A look at some of the EWG claims may shed a little light.

Read the whole story

Fireworks fly over ‘Lights on the Lake’

KRNV and MyNews4.com

Tahoe South’s famed “Lights on the Lake” Fourth of July continues to generate international buzz, with the latest accolades coming from The Discovery Channel and Bing.com/MSN.



Bing.com’s new travel section powered by MSN, recognized Tahoe’s synchronized music and light firework display as No. 9 in the world, along with Paris, Sydney and Hong Kong.

The Discovery Channel’s Top 6 places in the U.S. to watch July 4 fireworks displays, include “Lights on the Lake.” The latest plaudits add to a growing list that also includes notables from NBC’s Today Show, USA Today, Travel & Leisure and ForbesTraveler.com.

With the Sierra Nevada and Lake Tahoe as backdrop, the 24-minute display is set to digitized streamed music by radio

stations KRLT 93.9 and KOWL 1490. The pyrotechnic extravaganza is celebrated annually by more than 100,000 on the shore of South Tahoe, and tens of thousands who watch from all points on the lake by boat and across the shores to the west, east and north.

The show begins at 9:45 p.m. with best viewing spots around South Shore's sandy beaches, including the new Lakeview Commons area, Nevada Beach, Timber Cove Marina, Bijou Community Park, Edgewood Tahoe or on the lake a board M.S. Dixie II and Tahoe Queen Paddlewheelers.

Read the whole story

Turning climate change data into policy not an easy task

By Capital Public Radio

Data suggest climate change is bringing an increased risk of more severe forest fires, but warming temperatures may cause other complex ecosystem changes. Local agencies are already planning ways to mitigate and adapt, but making policy based on models that show global trends over the next century is not an easy task.

On a recent brisk sunny morning at Lake Tahoe, the waters sparkling their iconic blue. Scientists from UC Davis's Tahoe Environmental Research Center take the boat out to Tahoe Buoy Three, a floating concrete island about 10-feet in diameter with scientific instruments bolted to its tripod structure.

"When you have a long-term record, especially going back more

than 40 years , you can start to see these long-term trends," said Geoff Schladow, the director of the Tahoe Environmental Research Center. "So now springtime defined by the peak of the spring runoff, is occurring two weeks sooner than it did 40 years ago."



Lake Tahoe is an outdoor labratory that could help predict the future. Photo/LTN file

Data from these buoys show that the lake has warmed about 1 degree Fahrenheit on average over the last four decades.

But it's not the average that's worrisome. The concern is that the surface has warmed much more than the depths. So that makes the surface water much lighter.

"We're finding on average that density difference is getting larger, meaning more energy is needed to mix that water," Schladow said.

Historically Lake Tahoe mixes all the way from top to bottom about once every three or four years. The mixing helps move oxygen throughout the lake's water.

"What the model suggests is that in the coming decades, it's going mix to that depth less often," Schladow said. "And possibly in the second half of the century, that mixing may cease altogether."

Less water mixing could bring a cascade of changes to the ecosystem. There have already been some periodic increases in surface algae. This could reduce zooplankton, which are a critical food source for fish. And reduced mixing could cloud Tahoe's famous water clarity.

That's the tricky thing about climate change. Science can point to some concrete trends – water and air temperature warming; or more precipitation falling as rain, not snow – but scientific models can't tell what will happen next year. Or exactly how climate changes might affect the ecosystem.

Andy Wirth, CEO of Squaw Valley, says they can't base their business plan on suggestions that snowpack might be reduced by half in the next 50 years.

"Those are horizons that are very difficult to manage to. And I would really make effort to have everyone understand how seriously we take this," Wirth said.

Read the whole story

Hot August Nights revving up for return to Tahoe

Hot August Nights will be on the South Shore Aug. 3-5.

There will be daily show-n-shines with cash and trophy awards, poker walks with cash awards to the winners, a cool car showroom, a classic car auction, automotive exhibits, special night time cruising, vendors, a sock hop and free '50s and '60s style live entertainment daily on all of the outdoor stages.

Car registration is open to all 1972 and older American and European cars and trucks.

For more information, go online.

Preliminary work begins on river restoration near old Sunset Stables

The U.S. Forest Service Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit's has begun constructing the staging area for the Upper Truckee River restoration project that will begin in 2013 at the former Sunset Stables site.

The work, which will continue for approximately two weeks, includes the installation of an approximately2 acre aggregate base pad, which is designed to prevent the spread of noxious weeds into the project area.

In addition, the path of the new channel will be irrigated this season. Irrigation will promote vegetation growth for sod and other riparian vegetation that will be harvested and used in the new channel. Stakes marking the new channel and irrigation equipment will be installed in the meadow adjacent to the airport on the south side of the river. Irrigation likely will occur one to two times per week during July, August and September.

For additional information, contact Theresa Cody at tlcody@fs.fed.us or Sue Norman at (530) 543-2662 or email snorman@fs.fed.us.

Mountain bike lesson proves the sport is more than pedaling

By Kathryn Reed

TRUCKEE – “Don’t be nervous. If anything, you should feel more secure with all the gear. You can roll down the mountain with all this gear and you won’t get hurt.”

Then David Fox asked me to sign a liability waiver. The irony would have been amusing if it weren’t me and Sue in the get-up that had us resembling the gnarly biker chicks we don’t even aspire to be.

Wearing what looks like flak jackets, except for the fact the arms – especially the elbows – are super padded, we then put on the kneepads. But they also protect the shins, so we look like we could be doing battle. We are just hoping it’s not a fight with terra firma, because we’re afraid she may win.



Kathryn Reed and Sue Wood ready to tackle Northstar's mountain bike park. Photo/Luke Sheppard

Our cycling helmets won’t do. Nope. Here at Northstar it’s the full headgear that covers our face and chin.

Not even our gloves are acceptable. No fingertips are showing once we are fully outfitted.

Sue looks at me in bewilderment or maybe it was disgust. This was my idea and she came along reluctantly. Before we arrived at the resort I had joked it wouldn’t be so bad; it’s not like we’d be wearing all those pads the expert riders wear.

Next time I’ll do more research about the activity before opening my mouth.

I say all this because it was getting the gear on that was the most nerve wracking part of the adventure. Riding under the direction of Luke Sheppard, while not always easy or comfortable (which had nothing to do with him), was an experience I would highly recommend. He is the manager of the 4-year-old bike academy at Northstar.

Northstar knows what it is doing. Not everyone wants a paved bike path. And not everyone is willing to go it alone at a bike park.

After all, a recent report from the Outdoor Industry Association says Americans spend almost $650 billion on outdoor recreation each year. The bulk of those billions is spent on guides, hotels and restaurants. Less than 20 percent is spent on goods like backpacks and bikes. The same study revealed that between 2006 and 2011, the outdoor recreation industry grew by an average of 6 percent a year.

Northstar’s bike academy has been growing as well – a testament that those who like to play outdoors will do so even in a recession.

This Truckee-area resort has a variety of classes available for anyone who can operate a bike with hand brakes.

We take the gondola out of the village to mid-mountain. Every third car is a bike rack. We walk past the lodge to the mountain bike center to get fitted for our bikes. Giant sponsors this park; so all the bikes are that brand.

With hydraulic brakes, Sheppard says to use one finger to operate them. This also allows for a better grip while riding.

“Brake early, gently and confidently,” he advises.

We then take the Zephyr chairlift up. (Vista is open to cyclists on weekends.)

Live Wire – a trail with 50 jumps on it – is being irrigated to keep the dust down.

“It’s very similar to a BMX track,” Sheppard says as we pass above some of the trail.

We spend our morning on TryUmph. It starts out like a fire road, so I’m thinking this will be easy. But Sheppard wants us to stand. This is completely foreign to us. Stand tall – not just our butts off the seat. This is so the bike is absorbing the terrain and not our bodies.

We are supposed to trust our bikes.

Riding over the rocks that are clearly embedded in the ground gets us used to the bounce. We dodge the loose rocks.

Stopping to the side Sheppard is almost giddy talking about the tread on the tires. It’s important stuff – especially when it’s time to brake or turn.

We practice turns on a straightaway to get the feel for leaning the bike into the turn while keeping our bodies upright. This helps keep the tread on the dirt so the tires don’t slide and the rider doesn’t tumble. Something feels weird. Sheppard says it’s because I’m leaning and the bike is straight.

Here comes a real turn. I want to lean into it, but only the bike is supposed to be tilted. I'm thinking too much. I'm going so slow I should be able to do this. Making the turn was no big deal, but I'm sure a video replay would show it was not executed well.

We get onto the Easy Rider trail beyond the mid-mountain lodge. This is where we put our skills to the test. While not a true single track, the route is much narrower. Rollers are fun, reminding us of a trail near Lake Tahoe Airport. Sharper corners don't allow time for thinking – lean, stand – and breathe. Platforms are on the trail to get us used to the transition from dirt to manmade structures – just in case one day we are out doing jumps.

If we ever take the Bumps and Bends class, we would be taught how to corner faster, jump and ride rocky terrain.

While more lifts are not likely to open to cyclists, resort officials are talking about expanding the trail system. There are more than 30 trails now.

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Notes:

• The website has prices, hours and full explanation of what the bike park offers.

• Helmets are required for all riders.

• The park will be closed Sept. 22-23 for Tough Mudder.

If competition is what you want, Northstar has it:

• Tahoe Trail 100 (Leadville 100 Qualifier) – July 22.

• Pro Gravity Tour – Aug. 3-5.

• Tara Llanes Classic – Sept. 28-30.

• Downhill Mountain Bike Race Series will kick off July 8.

• Thursday night Cross-Country Race Series begins July 12.

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