

Iodine Gulch - skiing

Mt Loop Highway, FSRD 4020 Bear/Pinnacle Lake Trail

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Sunrise 7:04, sunset 17:36, moonrise 22:48, moonset 8:11

Weather – sun, changing to snow then low clouds, wind...

Looking at beautiful hand drawn sketches from Dave Fish and some hints from John Roper, we'd tromped up to Herman peak and viewed sights and peaks to get back to in that area. A nice couloir we wanted to ski and some other ridge explorations awaited. A narrow weather window that may or may not give opportunity for more exploration, at least we would have a good opportunity for skiing that gulch (Iodine Gulch).

Getting there

Three of us set off in the Westie, our plan was an approach either up Lake Twenty-two or FSRD 4020 to Bear Lake with a road skin. The new snow fell to a low level. Some on the trail at Lake Twenty-two TH, but not enough to skin up. We motored to FSRD 4020 about 2.75 miles further east. Chains on all four tires we headed up the road for little under two miles to a switchback (c1965') Our previous trip a few weeks ago found less than enjoyable driving further up the road and with the much deeper snow decided we were good skinning the rest of the way. Also not knowing how soon the new snow would come or how much. Later we'd find the ½" expected was way off the mark.

Up the road?

We started skiing on the wheel tracked road 3.75 miles to bear Creek TH (8:11a). In ¼ mile a right up the (Schweitzer Creek?) road. Two miles from the van the wheel it looked like a mess of vehicles in the ditch. Several obvious turn arounds before this. Perhaps this was the spot where [Hulksmash pulled the kids from the ditch?](#) Where was he now to give us a ride to the TH? :) Another quarter mile the tire tracks stopped just before the Black Creek bridge. Snowshoe tracks continued on from here to within an eighth of a mile from the Bear Lake trailhead. Along the way sunshine and some impressive formations of hoar frost.

Finally at the TH

A lonely sign welcomed us around a corner to the trailhead (10:00a, 3.7m, c2686') Virgin snow up the trail, turning left to head to Pinnacle Lake. At the steep section the trail was less inviting so we zigzagged up the steep through the woods gaining flatter terrain and more open forest (10:55, 4.4m, c3306'). It started snowing, hopefully the cloud level would stay higher. A pleasant trek in the woods we ventured to check out a route direct through the inviting slope to Bear Lake (on our right). Past the memorial plaque (c3708) and soon the forest opened near the tarns and a little down we were once again at the outlet of Pinnacle Lake (11:55a, 5.3m, c3754').

Up the ridge and BT lakes

We booted up the steep ridge from the outlet we'd been up before. Did look different not having Iron's boot steps to follow. After a short steep and deep rise we stepped back in the skis and skinned up over the ridge. A little dicey spot heading down toward the Bathtub lakes (2:00p, 6.1m, c4670'). The cloud layer was lowering and snow still falling.

We headed west slightly traversing upward across the Bathtub lakes. Wind increased and visibility decreased. A stop (2:35p, 6.6m, c4990') in the white it was obvious views were going to be non-existent, the weather was degrading and moral wasn't there for a peak for just peaks sake. Even skiing would be difficult with everything looking white. Some consulting to determine where we were and how to exit. Best was to turn and follow or track back. We were less than .2 miles and downhill to drop into the basin above Heather lake and less than 1000' from our objective. Who knows how long it'd take to go that distance, and we had no idea what to expect in Heather Lake's upper basin. Not that we ever planned to go there. Seemed so close when not really thinking about it. We got our bearings, stripped skins and headed back traversing to the top of Iodine Gulch.

Iodine Gulch

At the top of the gulch we sheltered in a tree clump for food and adding layers. I wallowed into the gulch to a steeper section that seemed to represent what we hoped of the route down. I dug a 6-7 feet deep pit for a little snow study. 11-12" fresh light powder over consolidated (2 finger push) layer down to around 3'. At three feet a ½" thick soft ice layer and below to 4' non-layered consolidated snow (pencil push hard).

Winds from the West, pressure falling, moderate compression test (CT16) of only the upper powder (11") layer. Beyond that did not fracture (CTN). Some more food and snowpack and route option discussion before we repacked and began a route down the gulch (3:45, 7m, c4746). The main top was soft, veering skiers right hard where the snow had sloughed. Further right the snow deepened in a gentle slope (25+ degrees). Bottoming out we moved a right traverse to exit the gulch over a ridge to avoid the narrow trap of the lower gulch and creek. From the ridge to the lake was premium skiing. Winds blocked, smiles back on faces. Vicki had a few release checks for no real reason of her old Silverettes. I remember those pre-releases well.

Are there cliffs before Bear Lake?

At Pinnacle Lake we skinned back our route, new snow covering the track quickly. Past the tarns at 4:30 (8m, c3730) we de-skinned and dropped skiers left toward Bear Lake. Knee to thigh deep light powder in widely spaced trees. Taking turns and keeping an eye on each other we stopped at c3410 to find a route without a cliff drop. Left was the creek gully, very steep and cliffy. To the right a doable drop, nice terrain, but then what. We skinned 50 feet up and east over a cliffy area to a gentle terrain that gave up its stash of fluffy goodness to three sets of curving tracks. Another notch east for more turns and views direct to Bear Lake. Easy weaving slide alder, then no more down. Skinned to the lake's SE end with a quick four minute crossing near shore to the NE end past the outlet stream (5:35p, 8.9m, c2750'). The nastiest bushwhacking of the trip got us 80' to the obvious trail to follow back to the TH. The cutoff to Pinnacle Lake was only 400' (+/-) and TH at 5:52p (9.2m, c2675'). It was starting to get dark with the heavy skies and obvious blizzard. Well at what time was it not obvious? Spirits were much higher knowing the easy route following to the van.

On the road again

Less than a half mile very slight up. Ripped the skins and a gentle gliding. The snowflakes stinging the eyes made goggles a necessity and the dark a headlamp. Yeah, goggle made a big difference (hint, take clear goggles or shop glasses). Another slight up and down and up section after Black creek bridge (almost a mile). Then all downhill (with a left turn to FS4020) to the Westie. The new 3+" layer of snow made for more pleasant than expected road trip.

The after story

Hot chia and a more pleasant drive down FSRD 4020 than we expected brought us to an unmarked white covered Mt Loop Highway. At Verlot a lone snow covered tire track on the highway. After Robe the road cleared a bit. Looking up the long shallow hill we watched as an approaching vehicle vanished (!). Near the top of the pitch a Subaru sat on the side of the road headlamps aiming at the hillside. Looked like an easy just backup. Another half mile a set of tail lights at an odd angle... another Subaru. The road was in good condition, not too slippery and no other issues back to Granite Falls.

The weather was tiring. Wind, cold, trail breaking. Peaceful in the quiet of the fresh falling snow and invigorating in the skiing and seeing new areas in different conditions. Great ski partners, maybe next time we'll take Vicki on a more "known" trip. ;) We'd wanted since glissading down Iodine Gulch to ski it. Now thinking of a trip with a higher downhill ski to miles trekked ration.

Happy turns and trails!

fwb

stats: 12.9m, 3429ascent, 10h50min.

gear: probe, shovel, transceiver, ice ax, skis, skins, chains for all four tires and hot chia.