



Winter in the Park

The old is still faithful, but you may not
be able to recognize the other **Yellowstone**
denizens in their thick winter duds.

by Ken McAlpine

photographed by Norbert Wu



Ravens can count, as high as

four, according to people who study such things,

which in this instance is not nearly high enough. Not that the raven here at Fountain Paint Pots cares. He is currently occupied with untold largess, working diligently to unzip a backpack on one of the nearly 40 snowmobiles, parked, untended, and at his disposal. In Yellowstone in winter, food, not math, is the primary concern.

Not far away, the folks who drove in on these vehicles shuffle along a boardwalk buried under icy snow. Michelin masses of down and Gore-Tex, their legs swish together. They take mincey little steps and bow into a stinging wind. Now and again, someone straightens up abruptly and throws his arms out, as if suddenly overcome by the grandeur surrounding them.

It is peculiarly beautiful indeed. Close at hand, the mud-pool paint pots — clay and silica torched from below by superheated gases — spit and bubble like pasty beans left on the stove too long. Nearby, geysers hiss and belch billows of sulfur smoke that the wind rips away, thick ribbons of gray strafing low across the creamy snow, throwing shadows like fast-moving ripples. A half-mile away some 50 bison graze, their hummocked forms dark against a white world. More distant still, pine-draped mountains poke up against dark, swollen clouds. When the sun flares through the clouds, everything sparkles.

Dan Auber looks out across the snowfields. A burly wildlife photographer, Auber is an unabashed lover of Yellowstone's win-

ters. This does not mean he mistakes them for what they aren't.

"When the animals can't make it anymore, they come up right next to the geysers to die," says Auber. "There's not enough food next to the geysers to sustain them, but it's warm."

Their bones will be picked clean by scavengers, weather and insects will reduce bone to meal, and wildflowers will bloom.

If you are not a bison, there is beauty in this, too.

For those who enjoy wilderness, here are the encouraging statistics. In winter or summer, Yellowstone National Park, spilling into three states (Wyoming mostly, and parts of Montana and Idaho), is 2.2 million acres, only 1 percent of it blemished by roads,



buildings, and gift shops selling ceramic bears. Since the park was founded in 1872, the various entities that have managed it have, for the most part, left it alone, a vast sky-filled place with silent meadows, copper rivers, and more geysers and hot springs than any place on earth.

Explaining why, from May to October, roughly three million people visit Yellowstone, and, not coincidentally, most other living things in the park head for the high country. Visitors, of course, are the idea of a national park — "For the Benefit and Enjoyment of the People" proclaims the message engraved in the stone archway at Yellowstone's North Entrance.

But it has been my experience that a wilderness outing suffers when shared with a convoy of RVs. Which is why visiting Yellowstone in winter sounded appealing. First



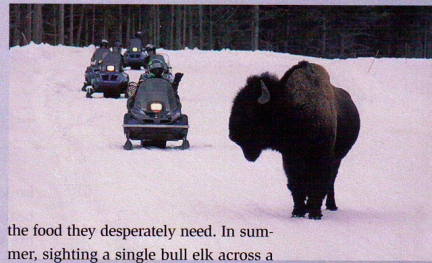


off, RVs can't get into the park. On the first Sunday in November the Park Service closes the park's roads, allowing snow to accumulate. When the roads, smoothed and groomed, reopen in mid-December, they can be traversed only by snowcoaches and snowmobiles until mid-March, when the roads are again shut down so the Park Service can plow them for spring.

Closing off the park to cars — America's preferred mode of wilderness exploration — effectively reduces the crowds. Weather winnows them further.

For a time Yellowstone held the record for the coldest recorded temperature in the United States (minus-66 Fahrenheit, recorded at a ranger station just inside the West Entrance to the park); and Yellowstone's winter norms are nothing to scoff at. Though a sunny winter's day might reach into the 30s, temperatures routinely drop well below zero, and wicked, unpredictable storms rake the place, dumping several feet of snow in some places.

A balmy Club Med it isn't. But the same inclement weather that scares visitors off to the Bahamas drives Yellowstone's abundant wildlife down to the valley floors, where superheated geothermal features in various forms — geysers, mud pots, fumaroles — provide some warmth and, more importantly, thin the blanket of snow, allowing Yellowstone's grazers to forage for



the food they desperately need. In summer, sighting a single bull elk across a meadow is cause for celebration. In winter, I would discover, you can gaze upon four majestic bull elk rumps, all of them less than 10 yards away. ("It's funny," explained a guide, "but they often won't look at you.")

Not that Yellowstone is empty in winter. Some winters draw more than others (Yellowstone's peak — 143,000 visitors in the winter of '93-94), but the number of winter visitors hovers around 124,000. And when I arrived in the town of West Yellowstone in the beginning of March, it seemed as if every one of them was riding a snow-

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mobile. "Welcome Snowmobilers!" proclaimed numerous banners, which seemed the best way to communicate since hearing was out of the question. Imagine Pleasantville if everyone decided to cut their grass at once.

Fact is, winter use has created numerous dilemmas the Park Service is currently trying to resolve — from strained sewage and trash capacity to safety — and snowmobiles are right at the forefront. The snowmobile issue is a complicated one, but it boils down to this: With their two-stroke engines, snowmobiles are highly polluting and noisy as heck. They are also, for most visitors, the preferred way to get around the park, and so life's blood to businesses inside and outside of the park. ("West Yellowstone wouldn't make a dime in winter if it weren't for snowmobiles," one local told me.)

Which is why, on my first day in the park, I wasn't surprised by the 40-some-odd snowmobiles parked in the turnout at Fountain Paint Pots, about 20 miles from West Yellowstone and the park's West Entrance. Nor could I afford to be snotty about their presence, having ridden one there myself. Yep, they buzzed along like angry wasps. But they were fun, too, and there was no denying they provided access for folks who might not otherwise see the park. From underneath the dark-visored Darth Vader helmets emerged smiling grandmothers and young children, who had come to gawk at burbling paint pots, ogle buffalo, and toss snowballs at each other.

And, it had been too breathtaking a day to blemish it with sour thoughts. Though it was only noon, already we had seen hatfulls of bison and elk, a few coyotes, and a bald eagle. We had dipped our fingers into the surprisingly warm (heated by boiling water runoff from various geysers) Madison River, and stood beside Firehole Falls

as it cascaded down a steep drop-off, sending up a mist that froze to the nearby trees, coating them ice-white. The weather had cooperated, too, with intermittent sunshine and temperatures in the 20s, plenty comfortable in the natty snowmobile suits that came with our snowmobile rental.

But my favorite moment that first day would come later in the afternoon. Leaving Fountain Paint Pots, Auber, fellow photographer Norbert Wu, and I buzzed a few miles up the road to Midway Geyser Basin. Weather can change quickly in Yellowstone, and it did. By the time I walked across the wooden footbridge spanning the Firehole River, snow was whipping horizontally in stinging blasts. Everything swirled white. The sun, the misty river, Norb and Dan on the opposite bank — it all disappeared, as if the world had pulled shut behind me. Then a thin section of curtain parted, and I was afforded a private glimpse of Excelsior Geyser. Four thousand gallons of boiling water pour from the mouth of this geyser every minute, but the water I saw hanging from the small section of rim was frozen into perfectly formed organ pipes of iridescent blue.

No doubt, Yellowstone's winters are harsh. In 1887, after the Haynes-Schwatka expedition made a grueling winter traverse of the park (F. Jay Haynes took the first winter photographs of the area), park superintendent Moses A. Harris proclaimed that park outings were "not to be recommended as a winter diversion."

Here is what members of that expedition couldn't do: repair to high-ceilinged dining rooms where they might dine on pan-roasted shrimp or Rocky Mountain trout while admiring the snowfall through floor-to-ceiling windows. Or stand in the warm glow

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of their hotel room, tracing the iccube chill of the windowpane with their fingertips, and watching the snow turn blue in the falling darkness.

I did both at the Mammoth Hot Springs Hotel and the Old Faithful Snow Lodge. In winter, the park keeps these two hotels open (and there are plenty of places to stay in the towns on Yellowstone's boundaries). Mammoth Hot Springs Hotel, at the Park's North Entrance, is a grand old dame of a place with hissing radiators, high ceilings, and a grand piano for guests' use. The Old Faithful Snow Lodge, a stone's throw from Old Faithful, is a posher place replete with heavy wood beams and subdued light, where guests sip wine or doze in oversized chairs before a crackling fire.

Not all of Yellowstone's winter visitors wish to follow in the footsteps of the mountain men and Indians who

once roamed the place. At breakfast one morning, I overheard a couple planning their day.

Husband: Would you like to go outside and see what 20 below feels like?

Wife: I opened the window.

Husband: Well, what are you going to do now?

Wife: I've got to finish my book.

Husband: I'm going to sit in the lobby and make sure the fire doesn't go out.

Tempting, certainly. But the intrepid adventurer discovers little while motionless, and besides, by the time I checked, all the fireside chairs were taken.

Anyhow, I wanted to see more of the park. There are other ways to explore Yellowstone in winter besides snowmobiling — snowshoeing and cross-country skiing, to name two. But if you're looking to cover a lot

of ground and learn something about that ground in the process, hopping on a snowcoach (vehicles mounted on skis and caterpillar tread) is a great way to go.

Our guide and driver for the four-hour snowcoach tour-cum-drive from Mammoth Hot Springs to Old Faithful was Mike Yochim. A lean fellow with a dry disposition, Mike had spent 11 summers and six winters in Yellowstone, part of that stint as a ranger.

Like most guides I've met, Mike had an ardent interest in everything. As we ground over the groomed road gaping out the window at the sun-spangled day, Mike unveiled all manner of things. We learned that the hardy lodgepole pine, able to tolerate poor soil and year-round frosts, accounted for two-thirds of the trees in the park. We learned why Yellowstone's large animals stand stone-still

for hours on end (to conserve energy) and where to look for bald eagles (atop trees at the edge of rivers). Mike explained why the coyotes we saw yanking at an elk carcass remained alert, even during their feeding frenzy. ("They can be eaten, too. The coyote population has dropped 50 percent in the Lamar Valley since wolves were reintroduced.") He explained how, in yet another example of nature's wondrous weave, March and April were the months when the most animals died, making it happy coincidence that the Park Service closed Yellowstone's roads in March for plowing.

"Late March is when the grizzlies start coming out of hibernation, and

when they emerge they're hungry and cranky," said Mike. "When those carcasses are out, you don't want to be anywhere near them."

As we drove, occasionally Mike would have to slow or stop for bison in the road. We'd had to do that a lot the day we were on snowmobiles, an uneasy proceeding for me since the buffalo were often nearly close enough to touch, and a snowmobile offers little buffer against a horned animal that can weigh 2,000 pounds. Granted, your average buffalo is, for the most part, docile, and in winter intent primarily on survival. But they can be irked. I'd seen a Park Service flier ("Warning: Many Visitors Have Been Gored By Buffalo") stating that bison can sprint 30 miles an hour, a speed I was fairly certain no snowmobile could attain in the few seconds it would take a miffed buffalo to cover 10 yards of open ground.

Though they produced some jangling of nerves, the bison were fascinating to watch. Like most of Yellowstone's wildlife, bison have evolved so that they have the best possible chance to survive winter. Using their thick, powerful necks, they bury their heads in the deep snow, then swing them to and fro like a beachcomber sweeping a metal detector, clearing away snow to expose sedges and dry grass.

But bison evolution didn't take groomed roads into consideration. Finding it easier to traverse packed roads than five-foot drifts, Yellowstone's bison have taken to hoofing along the roads and out of the park, in droves, where many of them are then shot to prevent the possible transmission of brucellosis, a disease that causes stillbirths, to domestic cattle (one particularly bleak winter, 1,100 bison were killed). The Park Service is currently trying to sort this out. Discussed

options include leaving things as they are, raising money (through public donation) to buy up some 7,000 acres of private land ringing the park, and shutting down the park entirely to motorized vehicles in winter.

Though a decision had yet to be reached, Mike was certain of one thing.

"They're not going to close the park down," he said, as we sat in the road watching a mother and calf hoof slowly past. "That's impossible. The bottom line is the public will still have the opportunity to see this spectacular place in winter. And it won't be just on skis and snowshoes."

While man nitpicks public-use issues, a bison's life is simpler. Mother and calf plodded past, shaggy coats crusted with ice and snow, wet-black eyes unblinking. The calf looked to be hobbling.

"I don't think that one is going to make it," Mike said.

In the end, the best way to see Yellowstone is on your own. And that's what I did on my last full day in the park, renting cross-country skis at the Bear Den ski shop to explore the area around Old Faithful.

Yellowstone's signature attraction when the weather is warm, Old Faithful (so named because of the regularity of its spoutings) routinely draws bigger crowds than Madonna. At 9 on that Saturday morning, I shared a silent Old Faithful with an elk whose steps could be heard in the cracking ice from 75 yards away.

That solitude continued. As I schussed about the geyser field, it was shot to be 30 minutes before I saw anyone. Not that I was looking. I squinted at rivers sparkling in the sun, watched snow crystals drift and flicker in midair like glittering confetti. I saw tiny tracks emerge from a hole and



"Earl, you're just the man we've been looking for."

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trace like a zipper across the snow. I watched geysers erupt, belching towers of hot water that fell away in smoking meteor streaks. Mostly I stuck to the main paths, but for a time I skied off trail, enjoying the whispering of my skis and the sound of trees creaking in the breeze.

Two hours passed, maybe three. I'm not sure; I'd stuffed my watch in my backpack. In a place where events are measured in epochs, time didn't seem as important. But when I returned to Old Faithful, it was time for the geyser to blow, and 300-plus

people jammed the boardwalk. Shoulder to shoulder, two and three deep, they chuffed steam and held cameras aloft as the geyser belched preliminary cannon thumps. Behind them the parking lot was a Woodstock sea of snowmobiles and snowcoaches.

Resenting this seemed petty and pointless. With a final whump, Old Faithful exploded into the sky. Everyone was quiet. It was a riveting spectacle.

Ken McAlpine's sports and fitness articles have appeared in *Sports Illustrated*, *Outside*, and *Men's Journal*.

GETTING THERE

During Yellowstone's winter season (mid-December to mid-March), only the North Entrance at Gardiner, Montana, and West Entrance at West Yellowstone, Montana, are open, but the South and East entrances are open only to snowmobiles.

To get to the North or West Entrance in winter, fly to Salt Lake City, then hop a short flight to Bozeman, Montana (West Yellowstone's airport is only open in summer). From Bozeman, there is daily bus service to West Yellowstone (90 miles; 4 X 4 Stages; 406-388-7938). Or you can rent a car for the scenic (they call it Big Sky Country for a reason) 90-mile drive to Gardiner and the North Entrance (there is no bus service from Bozeman airport to the North Entrance).

You can also get to the West Entrance by flying into Boise, Idaho, then taking a short flight to Idaho Falls. The 110-mile drive north from Idaho Falls to West Yellowstone can be spectacular (rent a car, or Greyhound offers year-round bus service), taking you through the Targhee National Forest.

For Yellowstone information, to make reservations, check the weather, for historical background, and driving directions, visit www.yellowstone.net. You'll even find an online video tour. For information on winter packages call (800) 221-1151. For National Park Service general visitor information, call (307) 344-7381 or visit www.nps.gov/yell.

—K.M.

