

As my skis slipped silently through the fresh powder snow deposited by last night's storm, I was suddenly aware of a gurgling. Then the hiss. The ground shook and a few strides to the left a column of churning, boiling steam gushed skyward. Fifty, seventy-five feet up and out over the Firehole River played Riverside Geysers.

Watching the magnificent display my mind drifted away.

"What were their thoughts — men like Colter, Bridger, and Washburn, — the first to see these displays? Men, who called this 'Burnt Hole' and were labeled crazy for reporting their discoveries."

Then reality overtook me: the place — Yellowstone National Park; the time — 1971-1972; the season — winter; the contrast — me and only me in the geyser basin versus a couple of thousand tourists during the summer season; the question — should I write of this fantastic winter wonderland thereby risking the influx of more noisy hordes of snowmobiles and the disapproval of my peers for publishing our sacred haunts?; the dream — to share with others magnificent experiences of a small part of the park accessible to the general public, hoping that lazy modern man will leave the rest of the back country alone for those of us hardy enough to venture into it.

Here at Old Faithful, we glided down the east side of the Firehole River awed by the roar of Lion expelling tons of super-heated water skyward. Buffalo patiently swept the snow from side to side with massive horned heads in their persistent search for a few blades of life-giving grass. Contrasting to the inferno of thermal activity were "ghost trees," lodgepole pines on which steam condensing from the hot pots and geysers has formed ice crystals. However this day, March 1, 1972 was more than the usual Yellowstone day. Historically it was the 100th anniversary of the first time in the history of the world that land had been set aside for the enjoyment and benefit of all.

In the early 1800's John Colter, the wandering explorer formerly of the Lewis and Clark expedition, was the first white man to see this wonderful world. During the 1830's Jim Bridger found ridicule in trying to tell of the area and hence spun some tall tales. Their stories and those of

# Touring

later explorers finally induced scientific expeditions into the park from 1869 to 1871. Then the foresight of President Grant and the Congress in 1872, three years before the Battle of the Little-Big Horn, preserved a unique world for millions to see but which only a few observe in the winter.

Knowing a bit of the history of the park let's share some winter experiences.

## December

"... my legs are cold — it's 27° below but my spirits are high. The night air is crystal clear purified by winter snows. The stars and full moon light the trail until it is like daytime. Roger and I move camp six miles in from the south entrance while trailing a coyote by moonlight . . ."

"... moving fast on the way out, we pass Lewis Canyon. What an impenetrable, beautiful barrier in the winter . . ."

"... Quiet, Roger, I want to get a picture, it's a ten-point elk. Look he's eating the pine needles. Food must be scarce . . ."

"... Jump! Here comes another snowmobile. It's nice to have a packed trail but they're sure a nuisance . . ."

"... pausing, we shot excellent photos of tracks, otter slides, and river otter playing on the banks of Yellowstone Lake . . ."

## January

"... It's blizzarding and we're moving past Lewis Lake in a snow coach. Karl rams the 12-man snow coach into the gigantic drifts and everything disappears from view — the drift is

# Yellowstone on Skis

By James Halfpenny

taller than we are. I climb out the roof hatch and stand up but still can't see over the drift. These drifts are the worst in the park and here visibility is only a couple of feet. Three hours later while cresting Craig Pass the coach lists dramatically and slides sideways. Movement stops. Jumping off the tread with a snow shovel, I sink ten feet into the powder snow and end up four feet below the machine . . ."

" . . . with a couple of friends I enjoy Old Faithful, which appears to play higher in the winter due to the crystal blue sky and the difference in the temperature of the air and the steam. The experience being heightened by the lack of thousand's of tourists elbowing for a picture . . ."

" . . . the speed with which snowballs melt after being thrown into superheated 200° F. (at this elevation water boils at 199° F.) Crested Pool leaves me with awed respect for the thermal powers of nature . . ."

## February

" . . . We observe different colored rings of algae in Beauty Pool, which serve as indication of different temperature zones. Those areas in the center of the pool lacking algae (blue color) are above 160° F. . . ."

" . . . close observation shows life in the thermal pools in the winter. We find ephydrid flies, which are limited to an approximate temperature range of 85 to 109° F., living on the algae and in the air which is heated by thermal runoff to about four inches above the algal mats . . ."

" . . . Well, Robin, we'll wait for Old Faithful to erupt. The star light on the steam cloud will show us the shortest way back . . ."

## Touring Season

The touring season in the park is approximately December 1st to May, however, toward the end of February the Park starts to plow the roads limiting access by both snow machine and car thereby increasing skiing distance. The National Park Service permits camping in established campgrounds along the roads and in all back country areas. Some trails are marked with orange markers for winter use. Ski trail maps may be obtained from the park. Besides the USGS topographic maps (highly recommended for extended tours) the National Park Service has information available: "Yellowstone — On Skis and Snowshoes" and "Winter Comes to Yellowstone" (35¢) obtainable through Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming 82190. All trips should be planned in consultation with the National Park Service.

Constant blizzard conditions may be found in January and February while March and April are normally sunny. Maximum snow depth is reached in March and April but snow is no longer powder, being usually consolidated and wet. Avalanche conditions can prevail in certain areas of the park, occasionally closing the roads. The Park Service can give information on avalanche danger for planned routes.

Information of touring services available may be obtained through Quiet Country Ski Tours, Box 1904, Jackson, Wyoming 83001.



*Old Faithful plays, but only to two observers who find travel easy by skis.*

*Buffalo in the geyser basin search endlessly for food by clearing the snow off last summer's grass.*





**Above:** Ghost trees formed by the ice coating the limbs of the trees as steam condenses from the hot pools. **Below:** The elk find grass a bit hard to find in the winter. Thermal areas have less snow accumulation and make grazing easier.

