

Intermediate Outdoor Skills Backcountry Snow Camping Trip to Bear Valley Area

Dates: March 6-8, 2008

Location: Bear Valley Area

Maps: Spicer Meadow Res. & Tamarack, California Quads.

Meeting Location and Departure Time: Winter closure gate on SR-4. Park on the *north* side of highway between Sno-Park signs. You will need a Sno-Park permit, available from ski and outdoor shops in the Santa Clara Valley, the Sport Shop in Bear Valley and at gas stations along the way. Be ready to hit the trail by 10:30 sharp. All groups should get to the trailhead at least 30 minutes early to finish packing and change clothes. My assistants and I and I will be there early to assist with any packing problems and spot-check your gear.

Directions to Trailhead: Here is the route I will follow: I-680 to I-580, I-580 to I-205, I-205 to SR-120 (towards Manteca), to SR-99. North on SR-99. East on SR-4 to Bear Valley. There is a winter closure of SR-4 just past Bear Valley. This is where you park. I will most likely be driving a full-sized white colored Dodge Ram pickup with a white colored shell. Please carpool.

Basic Background: This field trip will put you in an environment where you can apply basic skills and specific winter/cold weather skills. These skills include: safe winter travel and route selection, learning about winter weather, building and finding snow shelters, avalanche risk assessment and evaluation, winter search strategy (*time permitting*), winter camping techniques, procuring water, staying dry and natural history.

The rough itinerary is to leave the cars and snowshoe down a closed summer road (a ski/snowshoe/snow machine trail in winter). We will leave this route, travel through the forest for a ways and establish camp. You will learn how to prepare a site for your tent, construct a cook area, and learn basic winter 'housekeeping' skills. Day two, weather and snow conditions permitting you will learn how to construct snow shelters, sharpen your avalanche risk assessment skills, and learn more about basic snow travel, safety, and hazards (including locating emergency shelters). The third day will be spent acquiring a few additional skills, breaking camp and snowshoeing back to the cars. There will be virtually no risk of avalanche on the backcountry portion of this trip. Our route avoids all of the classical avalanche risk zones.

The weather can be hot making shade a commodity and the snow slushy or it can be extremely cold with persistent snowfall, icy or deep snowdrift conditions, and little sunshine. We have had 20 feet of base or 3 foot of marginal snow. We have experienced the entire spectrum of weather in past years. Ragging blizzards are uncommon but heavy snowfall accompanied with stiff winds and dropping temperatures is possible and should be anticipated. It is too early to get an accurate weather forecast. You should be checking the forecasted weather starting the previous Sunday through Wednesday.

There are differences between winter ski trips and summer backpacks. Almost everything takes a more work, more time and certainly more attention to detail. We must be ever vigilant to staying dry and warm as they are essential for safety and survival. Being in decent physical condition is not only import but could save your life. We will almost certainly not find surface water so we will melt snow. A large pot with a lid in addition to the one designated for cooking is necessary as is extra stove fuel. We will burn more calories to stay warm and dry. Cold weather and altitude can require more than 5000 calories per day. Keep your food simple and easy to prepare, but with lots of calories. Hot drinks make melted snow taste better. Avoid caffeinated beverages. Keep your body hydrated to avoid hypothermia, headaches, muscle cramps, frostbite and other maladies. We will have several discussions and presentations in class about this.

Equipment: We have already discussed this topic several times. Three important points to remember are *no cotton clothing*, you must have a *full set of storm gear* and don't bring unnecessary 'stuff'. Pack a neat pack so when you fall down you won't lose or drop any gear. Get into the habit of not setting small or lightweight items down, ever. These items get buried or blow away. Learn early what is meant by the "Aufhäuser Wind Test".

Winter Driving: Have your car winterized with antifreeze. Be sure that your windshield wipers are in good shape and that your windshield wiper fluid is not 100% water. It will freeze. There is special wiper fluid that will both clean the windows and prevent freezing. California law for all vehicles (even 4-WD) requires tire chains and tighteners that fit when traveling in chain control areas. We all will be. *You must have decent tread on all 4 tires.*

If there is snow or ice on the road give yourself adequate distance between you and the other guy and slow down. Avoid any sudden driving maneuvers including swerving or sudden hard breaking. Allow yourself extra breaking distance between you and the other vehicles. Travel time from San Jose is approximately 4 hours if there is no snow on the pavement between Arnold and Bear Valley. Give yourself plenty of time. I usually gas up at Angels Camp on the way up to avoid hassles on the return (i.e. midnight departures). Sections of our route is 2-lane

highway making passing dangerous. Please drive carefully and defensively!

Road and Weather Conditions: Being prepared means checking conditions *before* departure. Caltrans maintains a 24-hour toll-free road conditions and closure number (800.427.7623). The Bear Valley Ski Resort snow, weather and road conditions number is 209.753.2301. You will need a touch-tone phone for both numbers.

Additional Information: There are no toilets or drinking water at the trailhead. The last are at Bear Valley. Park in the proper location (north side of road) and store everything of value out of sight. I would not store extra food in your car. This is a bear precaution. Please review the field trip guidelines and special considerations on the syllabus I provided you the first day of class.

Changes and Updates: The only predictable reasons for canceling this field trip would be: forecast of severe storm or if one is occurring, road closures; unusually hazardous road conditions, or lack of snow. If I cancel this class field trip I will change my office voice mail message by 1:00 p.m. on Wednesday. I will do this *only* if there is something significant to report. This message might include trip cancellation and the reason or an advisory if the conditions might be changing within the next 8-12 hours. If conditions appear variable then call my office phone after 1:00 p.m. on Wednesday to check (408.741.2403). My voicemail is on 24-hours a day. Please hang up as soon hear what you need to hear. If you hang-up after the beep the machine accepts that as a call. This fills my mailbox and prevents other folks from leaving real messages. I will not be checking my voice mail messages until I get back to school the following Monday. Be sure to connect with your group partners if you are not making trip or have travel changes. This way we won't wait at the trailhead for someone who is not coming.