

Lack of snow not a total loss for outdoor enthusiasts in Tahoe

By Susan Voyles, Reno Gazette-Journal

Dave Murray, an avid skier and author of the best-selling book "Plan B," jokes that he has put his strategies to work in challenging the mountains at Squaw Valley USA, where only man-made snow exists.

He hits the few open slopes early in the morning at the Tahoe resort to take advantage of the best ski conditions. Then, on Thursday, he put on shorts, boots and a backpack to climb its landmark butte near the tram.



Frozen lakes in the Sierra are giving ice skaters a chance to get out. Photo/LTN

Murray and friend Sarah Lindquist made an odd pair as they stood near Squaw's ski loading stations to size up which side of the butte to climb.

"This is usually what I do in the summer," said Murray, an Olympic Valley resident of his rock-climbing venture.

A few minutes later, Mary McNally of Sacramento arrived at the same plaza with her three children and Tahoe Adventure Co. guide Kevin Hickey – all on bicycles.

“We were supposed to go on a snowshoeing tour,” McNally said, with a laugh.

With not enough natural snow to scrape together a snowman, people are finding new winter pastimes at Lake Tahoe. And that’s helping fill rooms and breakfast nooks.

Golfers can be seen at the Old Brockway Golf Course. Ice skating on small, frozen alpine lakes has become a new craze. And bicyclists and walkers tread along Lake Tahoe and Truckee River trails as they do in the summer. Paddle boaters and kayakers are even out.

But overall, there are deep worries that a continued dry spell could ruin the ski season.

The ski business over the holidays was down 45 percent to 50 percent, said Rob Roberts, California Ski Industry Association president, saying this has been the driest start since the winter of 1995-96.

But unlike the past, Roberts said, California resorts are in the snow-making business. And he said more than 450,000 season ski lift passes were sold this year to California resorts, and the people who bought them won’t let them go to waste.

California ski resorts drew 7.6 million visits to major resorts last season, the association reports. That’s \$700 million in direct visitor spending and a total economic impact estimated at \$3 billion.

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