

Nuances of forest come alive in guided Tahoe trail hike

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – Someplace National Winter Trails Day lived up to its purpose – a free, guided snowshoe or cross country trek, with introductions to the sports for those who are unfamiliar with them.

In Tahoe, the North Shore event was canceled because of lack of snow and the South Shore event turned into a hike.

No snow didn't matter Saturday for those who bundled up to experience Van Sickle Bi-state Park – the only park in the country that crosses into two states.



Lindsay Gusses with the USFS, in green, leads an interpretive hike Jan. 3 through Van Sickle Bi-state Park. Photos/Kathryn Reed

The 120 people who preregistered and the nearly two dozen who

signed up at the event that launched from the parking lot at Harrah's Lake Tahoe were divided into seven groups before they headed uphill.

Holding up a three-pronged pine needle, Lindsay Gusses bends one needle down to make a Y as a way to get her group to remember the Jeffery pine is a yellow pine.

It was these little tidbits of information delivered in a fun way that kept the chilly two-mile trek entertaining.

The beauty, well, that needs no explanation. But sometimes it's nice to know what you are looking at or how something came to be.

Gusses works for the U.S. Forest Service. Her job on Jan. 7 during this Tahoe Rim Trail Association sponsored event is to tell her charges about various aspects of the forest.

"A good reminder as we are walking through the forest is to use all of your senses," Gusses says.

People are walking up to a Jeffery pine, putting their noses in the crooks. Butterscotch and vanilla fill their nostrils.

On a warmer day, with several of these trees near one another the aroma can permeate the air.

"Gentle Jeffery" is often the nickname for these conifers because their cones are gentle to the touch.

Some conifers – which are any cone-bearing tree – are prickly, even painful if grabbed tightly.

A short history lesson about the Comstock era explains why so many fir trees dot the landscape. They are drought resistant and shade tolerant, allowing them to propagate after the forest was clearcut to build the silver mines in Nevada.

White pines are more often found closer to Lake Tahoe, while

red fir are farther up ski slopes.

“One way to tell the difference is the spacing of the needles,” Gusses says. White fir needles curve a bit, while red look more like a hockey stick.

Part way up the trail a cluster of South Tahoe High School students is ready to educate each group that comes by about using avalanche beacons and how to find someone who may be trapped. Leave No Trace is a component of the hike, with Plan and Prepare being one of the seven principles.

These students are part of the Generation Green Club, a collaboration between the school and U.S. Forest Service.

Tyler Myers, a junior at STHS, uses his beacon to find a transmitter that has been stuffed in a football and hidden behind a tree. The beeping gets louder as he gets closer. How far he is from the “victim” shows up on the device – though 20 meters is the farthest it reads.

“It doesn’t give a depth, that’s why we bring a probe,” Myers explains.

Moving on, the group goes through part of the forest that was charred in summer 2002 during the Gondola Fire.

Gusses talks about the importance of fire when it comes to having a healthy forest. But she also imparts how it’s incumbent upon everyone to prevent wildfires. After all, it was a smoker who tossed a cigarette butt out the Heavenly gondola that started that fire. Heavenly has since made it impossible for that to happen again.

“It doesn’t take much to completely change the ecosystem,” Gusses says.

The Tahoe Rim Trail Association has free Trail Talks scheduled

through May. For more information, go online.

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