

Spooner Lake's beauty captivates on First Day Hike

By Kathryn Reed

LAKE TAHOE NEVADA STATE PARK – Tromping along the dirt under sunny skies, the only indication this is not a fall day in the Sierra is the fact the lake is nearly completely frozen.

What was supposed to be a snowshoe at Spooner Lake turned into a trail walk with a few patches of ice on the north side. The dozen people – a mix of locals and out-of-towners – who showed up at 10am New Year's Day didn't seem to mind.

Rocky and Shilpa Shah are on the walk with their son and daughter, and two friends. Lack of snow is keeping them from spending all their time on the slopes. While they've been to Tahoe several times to ski, this is their first time to venture to this part of the basin.



Spooner Lake, except for the ice, has the look and feel of fall Jan. 1.

Photos/Kathryn Reed

One of the things Rocky Shah likes is learning about the

terrain and history from the park supervisors who are leading the hike. For those who don't have a guide, plenty of interpretive signs dot the landscape as well as benches to take a rest to take it all in.

"Native Americans did a lot for us. They discovered medicinal uses in plants and food uses," Bill Champion, supervisor of Spooner-Cave Rock units of the state park, told the group along the 2.1-mile trek.

Stopped at one of the grinding rocks not far from the lake, Champion explains how the Washoe Indians would use the willows that grow along the shore to make baskets and for pain medication, much like people today take aspirin.

Shilpa Shah holds a large pine cone in her hand – though smaller than a sugar pine.

Jay Howard, supervisor of Lake Tahoe Nevada State Park, uses a catchy phrase to distinguish between the cones – "gentle Jeffery, prickly ponderosa".

This is the first year Nevada has taken part in First Day Hikes and it's the first year all 50 states have participated. It started 20 years ago in Massachusetts as way to get the year off on a healthy note. More information about First Day Hikes may be found online.

Spooner Lake – off Highway 28 near the junction of Highway 50 – got its name from Michel Spooner, a French-Canadian who with partner Simon Dubois acquired 640 acres for a ranch in the 1860s. During the Comstock the land included a hotel, blacksmith shop and way station.

Facts about U.S. state parks:

Source: America's State Parks

Total Park Visits:	More than 740 million per year
Number of state park units:	7,810
Total economic impact on communities:	More than \$20 billion
Percent of visitors with children:	64%
Miles of trails:	44,219
Number of campsites:	220,329
Number of cabins and lodges:	7,954

While the state of Nevada acquired the land in the 1960s, Spooner did not become part of the state park until 1981. About 12,500 acres are in the backcountry, while about 1,500 acres are what most people visit at Spooner, Cave Rock or Sand Harbor. All three of these locations are part of Lake Tahoe Nevada State Park.

Spooner Lake, which is mostly fed by natural springs and snowmelt, is nearly 20 feet at its deepest. With a Nevada fishing license, people try to hook rainbow trout and other fish the lake is stocked with.

Today, it's mountain bikers who dominate the trails. About 75 percent of trail users are on two-wheels, while hikers and equestrians are the other main users. In the winter, Spooner has cross country trails.

Spooner has a year-round concessionaire that ferries cyclists using the Flume Trail from the end back to the parking lot and cuts the ski trails. Three seasonal concessionaires operate at Sand Harbor – Shakespeare Festival, food, and boat rentals. The latter started this past summer and brought in \$30,000 to Nevada State Parks. In all, the four concessionaires added \$80,000 to the state coffers for 2011.

Champion said public-private partnerships are the way to go, especially as money becomes scarcer out of Carson City.

Still, more people are visiting the state park at Lake Tahoe – especially as the economy tanked.

“People can’t afford to travel,” Howard said. “Our visitors are up.”

Getting to Spooner Lake:

From South Lake Tahoe, take Highway 50 east. At the summit, turn left onto Highway 28. The entrance to the state park is quickly on the right. Parking is \$7 or \$8 depending on the season.

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