

# Tahoe trees are more than scenery on a hike



TRTA leader Jim Mrazek, in blue, pauses on the dam at Echo Lake to talk about the area. Photos/Kathryn Reed

## By Kathryn Reed

ECHO SUMMIT – It was a bit like a scavenger hunt, with everyone looking for pine cones, insects and animal tracks.

Pine cones were in abundance, especially because the snow was lacking. Insects were hiding, which is a good thing because that's what they should be doing in winter. The tracks were limited to squirrels, but this, too, could have had something to do with the scarcity of snow.

Four leaders (one in training) with the Tahoe Rim Trail Association led a group of 13 on a trek to Echo Lake on Jan. 31.

It was supposed to be a snowshoe, but Mother Nature did not

cooperate. Instead, many put Yaktrax on their hiking boots to combat the icy portions of the trail.

It was part hike, part educational experience, part environmental stewardship.



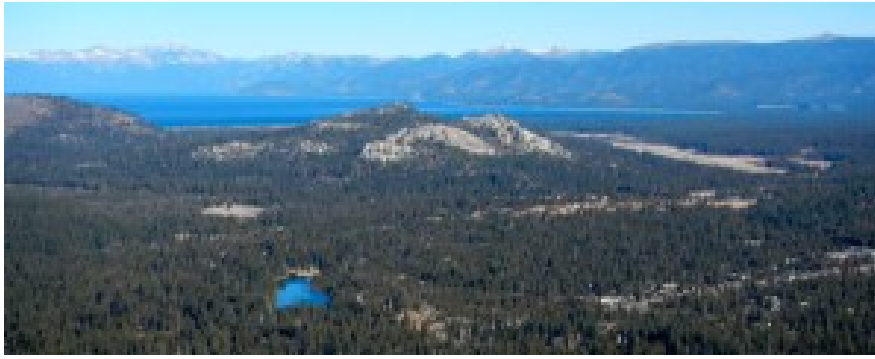
Maria Mircheva with the Sugar Pine Foundation explains the different pine cones.

“When you walk in the forest it just looks like trees, but there is so much than trees,” Maria Mircheva, executive director of the Sugar Pine Foundation, says. “Sometimes when you look at a tree you can see its life story.”

Big gaps between branches can signal a big water year because of the growth spurt. Sometimes when there are no branches on one side it could mean another tree had been standing next to it and prevented the limbs from growing.

On this excursion there are Western white pine, red fir, Jeffery pine (the most popular tree in Lake Tahoe), lodgepole and white bark.

Blister rust is decimating the white pines and could one day wipe out this species of trees.

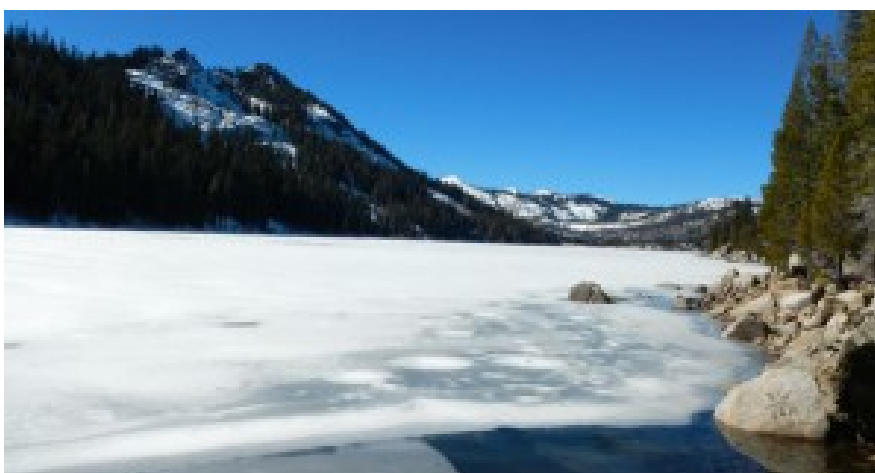


Views along the ridgeline look out to Lake Tahoe.

The group comes across a huge fir that has been uprooted. Mircheva shares how different diseases are taking hold of pines and firs. This tree was probably weakened by disease and came down in the Dec. 11 storm.

The foundation focuses its efforts on saving the sugar pine. This is done through education as well as plantings. Each year volunteers climb the tall trees, harvest the cones so the seeds may be extracted and then seedlings are planted in the forest. To date, about 10,000 have been planted since 2008. But the survival rate is only 20 to 25 percent.

Mircheva explains how the pitch coming out of trees is their healing mechanism. The difference between pitch and sap is sap is harvested and turned into syrup – and it comes from a different type of tree.



Lower Echo Lake is partially frozen.

Pointing to the moss on the trees, Mircheva says it doesn't go to the ground because snow should be covering the lower part of the trees. With that not happening this winter, it's possible the moss will start growing on the lower portion.

The TRTA leaders – Jim Mrazek, Sue Henson, Renee Gorevin and Alan Catron – impart information about poles – safety and stability issues; about the need to make loud noise when a bear is on the trail; how this area of the Tahoe Rim Trail intersects with the Pacific Crest Trail and the role of trail angels.

This particular three-mile hike was free and open to the general public. Other excursions the TRTA does are open only to members. For information about future treks, go online.