

Truckee men complete historic PCT winter trek

By Associated Press

CAMPO – Moments after finishing a historic wintertime trek of the Pacific Crest Trail, Justin Lichter reassured bystanders the pale, desquamated look of his rain-soaked hands was “totally normal.”

The difference between what looks like a serious problem to the average backpacker and what Lichter and hiking partner Shawn Forry were able to laugh off as an afterthought demonstrates the significance of their most recent accomplishment – a 2,650-mile trek from Canada to the Mexican border.

By completing what’s thought to be the first wintertime through-hike of the iconic trail Lichter and Forry broke a huge American hiking barrier and raised the bar for what’s possible when it comes to adventure.

Lichter is a professional ski patroller at Sugar Bowl Resort and Forry is an Outward Bound instructor based in Truckee.

“It is like anything else, if you watch a champion ice skater they make it look easy,” said Pea “Girl Scout” Hicks, who was among the hiking fanatics who waited in the rain to meet Lichter and Forry at the southern terminus of the trail. “These guys make it look easy. It is not.”

Among the many reasons the accomplishment is impressive is the fact Lichter, who has the trail name “Trauma” and Forry, whose trail name is “Pepper,” broke a barrier so many have thought about and discussed but very few have even attempted. While the Pacific Crest Trail runs within a relatively easy drive of several major cities, has been the subject of an Oscar-

nominated film as recently as last year, and sees several hundred through-hikers annually, completing the trail in winter has long been considered a near impossibility.

“Before they did this doing the PCT in winter was kind of the great unknown,” said Elizabeth “Snorkel” Thomas, who in 2011 set a women’s, unsupported speed record for through-hiking the Appalachian Trail. “It was one of the last things on the hiking frontier.”

The barrier remained in place for so long in part because of the notoriety of winter conditions in the regions through which the trail passes. From north-to-south, the direction Lichter and Forry hiked, the trail passes through the Cascade and Sierra Nevada ranges before descending into the Mojave desert then heading back up into the San Gabriel, San Bernardino and San Jacinto ranges. The most treacherous stretches for winter travel are the Cascade and Sierra sections because those ranges are known for having remote terrain that’s subjected to harsh winter conditions with massive snowstorms.

Not only would whoever broke the winter barrier need to be a proficient hiker, they would need to be able to travel on snowshoes and skis if they were going to get through the imposing ranges.

Forry’s dad, Randy Forry, summed up the thoughts of many who have pondered and dismissed the notion of completing the trail during winter.

“When he told me it has never been done before I kind of said ‘you know there is probably a reason’,” he said.

The risk associated with the winter trek was such that before Lichter and Forry decided to attempt it, many within the hiking community would have considered it foolhardy. The credentials Lichter and Forry brought to the trek, however, made people take notice of their attempt. Lichter has hiked

more than 35,000 miles, done an unsupported swim around Lake Tahoe and developed a hiking route between Durango, Colorado and Las Vegas. Forry has hiked more than 20,000 miles in seven countries, including New Zealand where he and Lichter completed a precursor route to the Te Araroa trail.

“In most cases if someone said they were going to through-hike the PCT during winter you would try to talk them down from the cliff,” Hicks said. “But these guys got a lot of encouragement.”

During the summer, a hiker in trouble on or near the trail could expect dozens of people to be in the vicinity, improving the likelihood of finding help, but that’s not the case in winter. Lichter and Forry traveled 1,700 miles from Snoqualmie Pass in Washington to Walker Pass in California without seeing anyone along the trail. Their only human contact was when they left the trail for resupply or went through towns.

“Once you are in the High Sierra it is not an easy out,” Forry said. “There is always that looming cloud of anything could happen at any moment.”

They were almost derailed before Christmas when they both suffered frostbite on their feet near Bend, Ore. At another point they forced to swim across swollen Grider Creek in the Klamath National Forest early one morning in December after discovering a bridge they had planned to use was washed out.

The intellectual challenge began long before the duo set foot on the trail. They had discussed the idea for about five years, Lichter said, but it took more than talk to make it a reality. A tuneup trip on skis through the Sierra Nevada a couple seasons ago helped to jump start the process of deciding what gear they would need and how it might perform on the trek. They also spent a lot of time studying resupply options because many of the standard summertime access points are closed in the winter.

The biggest deviation from plan came shortly before the trip started. That's when they decided to scrap the original idea of going south-to-north and instead go north-to-south.

"This seemed like a smart thing to do so we could get through Washington before they built up a lot of snowpack and higher avalanche risk and then get into the Sierras, an area that we are most familiar with, in the heart of the winter," Lichter said.

Lichter and Forry needed more than their outdoors skills to complete the trek. They also needed to stay sane. It was a challenge because the harsh environment meant any given day could be an emotional roller coaster for either or both of the men, meaning each had to not only manage his own emotions but be attentive to how the other was feeling. Communication got to the point each hiker could anticipate what the other was about to say or do, they said.

"You know when to back off and when to pry," Forry said. "Trauma knows if he sees me snapping trekking poles over my knees not to ask any questions."

The mental aspect, according to Thomas, might have been the most difficult part of the accomplishment.

"There is sort of a mental stamina that I think is what really makes what they did impressive," she said. "If you don't have the mental stamina you are just going to quit."

Lichter confirmed as much during an interview with the Pacific Crest Trail Association when responding to a question about the skills needed for a winter through-hike. In addition to knowing about winter camping and avalanche safety he added one more item to the list, "Short term memory failure."