

# The other Kirkwood ski area going strong



Kirkwood cross country is expanding programs.  
Photos/Susan Wood

**By Susan Wood**

KIRKWOOD – Based on the reaction of skiers and snowshoers venturing this year to the land of deep snow and simple needs, it's almost as if the one trail not open at the start of season at the Nordic center should have been.

Ecstasy, one of four black-diamond trails, is the operative word to describe how those who love the human-powered winter sports feel about the crisp, soft and plentiful snow conditions at the Kirkwood Cross Country and Snowshoe Center after the last few years of drought.

The 2,000-plus acre ski area, which started inconsistently in 1972 and full time about five years later, looks a lot different this year compared to the last three winters. The snow completely covers the 24 trails and beyond, and the cats and groomers are out in full force – working eight to 10 hours on most days and 18 to 20 after snowstorms.



The Upper Kirkwood Outpost trail has magnificent views.

But even inside, one may gather it's a new year just from going into the lodge to buy lift tickets and merchandise. The holidays were bustling with visitors and locals wanting an escape from downhill skiing and a look into nature's back door. The Nordic center averages 20 guests a day and peaks at three times that when the place is hopping. Still, it's easy to escape here.

With only the wind in the trees and the occasional bird chirping, it's hard to imagine another world across Highway 88 where party music and riders whooping it up over the snow conditions represent the norm.

Albeit satisfied with recent conditions, Debbi Waldear – the Nordic center's director and a champion racer – remained

cautiously optimistic about the booming start of the winter season.

“Everybody’s pretty cautious how winter’s going to go,” she told *Lake Tahoe News* last month.



Laura Cabral makes skate skiing look effortless.

Most of the trails were set right at Christmas.

In her 35 years of working there (her tenure as old as today’s lodge), Waldear has seen it all. She recalled how in the prior year snow came early, then completely dried up. She referred to staying open last year as “miraculous,” with the meadow (one of two trails allowing canines) and one upper trail to offer her guests. In winter 2013-14 Kirkwood was only open between January and April.

And this is why the owner, Vail Resorts, diversifies the locations of its ski areas.

“When they have bad years, they have other resorts to rely on,” she said of the Colorado-based ski giant.

This season California is king.

And there are a few new features this year to make Nordic enthusiasts of all ages feel like a queen.

A “Kiddie Kilometer” is groomed for the youngsters.

“It’s pretty popular. We get a lot of people renting sleds and pulling their kids,” she said.



Debbie Waldear has been the face of Kirkwood’s Nordic center for years.

Guests seeking a double reward of exercise and food can now partake in the “soup and shoe” – but not in that order. The \$35 package, which is slated every Sunday afternoon, includes an easy-going snowshoe hike followed by hot soup at the Kirkwood Inn located next door.

“Snowshoeing is really taking off,” Waldear said, while watching customers filing out of the lodge and onto their skis and shoes. She estimated about 40 percent of the business involves walking with claws.

“We tell people you can be an expert in 10 steps,” she said of the ease in learning.

Waldear encourages her customers to enjoy the outdoors every step of the way, herself relishing her office per se because “not many people can say they manage a ski center” for a living.

“Where you headed?” Waldear asked Jaime Levy of Oakland at the

trailhead.

Levy replied that she sought intermediate terrain, and Waldear urged her to check out Jobe's Jaunt. The popular route is sprinkled with signs providing the history of Snowshoe "John" Thompson's 20-year mail runs from Placerville to Genoa, which he started in 1856 carrying a 90-pound bag on 11-foot skis with a balancing pole. The 90-mile journey presumably took him through the Schneider Trail system of El Dorado County.



A special route has been created for youngsters.

In the spirit of Thompson's three-day solo journeys, Levy insisted she would find some peace and quiet.

"I like the idea of being by myself. I engage with people a lot (all other days)," she said.

Nordic Center employee David Wise can relate. The South Tahoe High School graduate and former ski team racer traded the cerebral for the physical, leaving an engineering degree from the concrete jungle at MIT for an escape back to Tahoe's

natural environment.

Wise, 23, is very encouraged by this year's ski conditions and has noticed a surge in his age group taking up skiing.

All ages take the Bay Area ski bus up for the day at 4:30am for \$85 and get dropped off at the Kirkwood Mountain Resort downhill area. From there, some cross country ski across the meadow to access the upper trails. Others take the shuttle hopper from one area to the other.

Mark Becksteadt, a Kirkwood second homeowner from Los Altos, is skipping the meadow this year. He noticed the flat area where many take their dogs skijoring was getting crowded. He brought his skate skis over to the main lodge to hit the Agony trail to skate ski.

Laura Cabral of Santa Clara was working on her skills on the learning track located at the bottom of the trailhead.

She cautiously worked on the smooth motions, enjoying having the track to herself. There's definitely a learning curve with skate skiing, characterized by quad burns with short, skinny skis.



Veronica Tan of Singapore taking lesson.

"I'm trying out my moves. I took a lesson six years ago and struggled," Cabral said, adding how jealous she is of a friend

who's mastered the sport. "She skies in a jog bra."

Veronica Tan of Singapore just wanted to get the hang of staying upright on skinny skis. She took a lesson offered by the Nordic center in the hopes of remembering her former snow days living and going to college in Minnesota.

The Kirkwood Cross Country and Snowshoe center offers beginning and skate lessons, as well as ski skills and tour packages for \$58 a day. Equipment rentals cost \$27, the going rate of the ski pass.

The ski area hosted a Winter Trails Day on Jan. 9 and has scheduled full moon snowshoe treks on Jan. 23 and Feb. 20. Sunset seekers can view the colors on guided hikes on March 5 and 12.