

Ski to Winnemucca Lake

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I am drawn to this place and come here for spiritual rejuvenation and solitude. The mountains become my cathedral and the wilderness my church. And oh, did I mention fun? Yes, fun. In this place of spectacular beauty and magnificent mountains, it is possible, no, even likely, you will have a perfect day. I suspect, judging by the number of users who are often never seen, others feel the way I do. The hymns are silent and no one is standing on a rock sermonizing. This place speaks for itself.

The trail to Winnemucca Lake is the best backcountry ski in Alpine County, and perhaps one of the best in the Sierra. Begin at Carson Pass South trailhead. It is important that you place your snow-park permit on the dash. California Department of Parks and Recreation's Sno-Park Permits are available locally at the Alpine Chamber of Commerce.

The trail is suitable for beginners who feel comfortable on their skis as well as advanced skiers who can choose more challenging routes and slopes. The first 200 feet of the trail traverse a steeply treed slope, with a slight down and up. This portion of the trail's difficulty depends on snow depth and who makes the trail first. I've seen people look at this section and announce that they're going somewhere else. Persevere. It gets easier, and if you're on snowshoes, you'll have no problem. The trail continues, trending south, climbing slightly through a mixed conifer forest and descends into a drainage thickly forested with mountain hemlock.

The trail then begins to climb southwest, and you find yourself in a mixed forest of Lodgepole, Western White Pine, Mountain Hemlock and Whitebark Pine. It is interesting to note the difference in the bark of young and older trees. The bark of older conifers acquires an orange or red tinge and is often furrowed or plated. Lodgepole Pines maintain their fine textured bark with only a hint of orange. The bark of an old Mountain Hemlock is deep reddish brown. Further up slope, climbing out of the drainage, are fine examples of five needled Western White Pine with spreading crowns and cinnamon bark that is divided into large square plates. According to the Forest Service the largest Western White Pine in the U.S. is growing just a few miles from here.

As the trail jogs south, unseen beneath our feet, lays a Mokelumne Wilderness boundary sign. You will continue climbing, then level off, and finally descend slightly to an open area. Now, up a switchback and contour south for a long gentle route onto a divide north of Winnemucca Lake. On this gently ascending traverse, swish between isolated clumps of Whitebark Pine. This pine is a major food source for Clark's Nutcrackers, who cache the seeds from the cones in thousands of different sites, actually remembering where they put them. Seeds that are not eaten may sprout and form new trees. This symbiotic process is the usual way in which these trees reseed. In the Alpine County Sierra, the Whitebark Pine is *the* high altitude tree, generally growing only above 8500' and up to the tree line. Here they become dense, isolated, waist-high thickets in response to severe conditions.

Ahead is a magnificent view of Round Top, with serrated ridges extending east and the Sisters to the west. Further west is the Carson spur, showcasing Thunder Mountain and Thimble Peak along its northwest-southeast axis. Volcanic eruptions beginning 20 million years ago deposited much of the darker, reddish rock, mostly andesite, between here and Sonora Pass to the south. Contrast this rock with the occasional granitic rock you've been skiing over. North through Meiss (pronounced mice) Pass is Mt. Tallac on the southwest shore of Lake Tahoe. Nearby Red Lake Peak and the Freel Peak are part of the Carson Range that forms the eastern divide of the Tahoe Basin. A short climb to the crest reveals numerous peaks and ranges stretching around to the

east and southeast, including Hawkins Peak, Markleeville Peak, Silver and Highland Peaks as well as Mt. Patterson in the Sweetwater Range and Mt Grant on the southwest shore of Walker Lake. Back to the west, on a clear day, the Coast Range is visible.

Over the small divide and at two miles is Winnemucca Lake, frozen and snow-covered, lying in splendor beneath Round Top. It's a good place for lunch. From here there are many choices to continue your adventure depending on your ability, snow conditions and weather. Tracks of other skiers will point the way to the most popular spots but feel free to explore in any direction that looks inviting. Or, just retrace the route back to the trailhead. The return from here is mostly downhill and a pleasant run on skis. How many times have you heard this before?

Points of information for your safety:

The steeper slopes, especially northwest through easterly aspects, are avalanche prone. If you plan to be on these slopes carry beacons, ski in a group, know the snow, and check conditions prior at www.sierraavalanchecenter.org.

Check the weather the morning of your trip. It's available online at the NOAA's Reno site. Click on the backcountry link in the forecast section.

Leave no trace. Pack out everything you bring in and be considerate of other wilderness users.

Enjoy a section of high country that is so different from everyday experiences, you may find yourself smiling.

