



Skiing at Enchanted Forest Cross Country Ski Area, near Red River.

Slip-Sliding Away

One skier's quest for perfectly groomed cross-country trails.

Unlike most skiers in New Mexico, I like to slide horizontally, not vertically. I also prefer groomed trails where no dogs, snowshoes, or snowmobiles are allowed, preferably through tall trees. That's because I grew up in Minnesota with cross-country ski trails at the end of my street. My parents, descendants of Swedes, had a regular Saturday morning ritual: They would bundle up their five kids in triple layers and bribe them into the sub-zero-degree day with a few hours of cross-country skiing followed by a giant breakfast at the local greasy spoon.

While I still remember the misery of frostbitten toes, the frozen slime mask that formed around my face from breathing through a scarf, and never being able to catch my dad no matter how hard I skied, I'm more grateful to my parents for teaching me how to cross-country ski than just about anything else they taught me. I've found that there's no better way to clear my head and reset my default mode to "joy" than a few hours in the winter wilderness gliding on snow, feeling my appendages work in harmony while working up a good sweat. I change my style and ski-and-boot setup depending on snow conditions—electing either classical (the traditional method of cross-country, skiing in a parallel groomed track) or skate skiing (which looks like ice skating on groomed corduroy)—but the feeling I get with either is nothing short of phenomenal. Plus, it's a cheap high: At most groomed cross-country areas, skiing is generally \$10 to \$20 per day, or roughly one-fifth the cost of a downhill lift ticket.

The only change from my childhood ritual, now that four decades have passed and I live in New Mexico, is that I eat breakfast first (a green-chile-and-bacon breakfast bur-

rito from El Parasol in Española) and travel a lot farther to find groomed cross-country trails. It's a challenge in a state tectonically designed for downhill skiing. To improvise, I sometimes wake before dawn to skate-ski loops around the beginner Magic Carpet run of Ski Santa Fe. Or I'll drive an hour west to the seven-kilometer Pajarito Nordic Ski Trail, near Los Alamos, possibly the only place on the planet that requires showing an ID at a nuclear-site checkpoint en route to the area. These small hits of corduroy mildly satiate the junkie in me. But for a real fix, I need the Enchanted Forest Cross Country Ski Area, three miles east of Red River.

My once-husband turned me on to this spidery 33K trail network, shrouded by aspen and ponderosa, when we moved to New Mexico in 1995. A competitive biathlete, that rarefied Nordic skier who also fires guns at targets along the way, he had heard about the legendary mom-and-pop operation from a Russian skier, who heard about it from the University of New Mexico Nordic ski team coach. The Lobos host an annual ski meet there, and definitely have the home-court advantage: The Enchanted Forest covers six hundred acres and tops out at 10,040 feet, which makes it arguably the highest Nordic ski area in the U.S.

"It doesn't matter if it's a record or not," says Geoff Goins, the co-owner since 2010. "You still have to breathe hard."

I'm meeting Goins for a pre-ski chat inside the Enchanted Forest's "Day Lodge." The 1,500-square-foot building is an ever-expanding maze packed with wooden tables surrounded by orange pleather benches, rental skis, communal coffee cups, and a very large array of Nordic nostalgia. On the "Snow Shrine," a shelf of trinkets above the wood-burning



Clockwise from left: Yuki Inu (Japanese for "Snow Dog") and Enchanted Forest co-owner Geoff Goins. The view from the ski area's central command. Signs of humor abound. The main building embraces the ski area's history and down-home vibe.





The lodge at Enchanted Forest Cross Country Ski Area.

stove, there's a stuffed squirrel, a skiing Santa Claus, and a yellowed newspaper article about how beer is the best workout fuel.

Goins, 44, is an ebullient, blue-eyed astronomer who works summers in Bryce Canyon National Park. He and his wife, Ellen, bought the business from her parents, John and Judy Miller, in 2010. The Millers opened Enchanted Forest in 1985 after running another Red River institution, Powder Puff Mountain downhill area (now closed). They sold it after they skied California's Royal Gorge, the largest Nordic ski area in the country, for the first time. So enamored were they with the aerobic joy of groomed trails, they decided to carve out a similar playground in the Carson National Forest, and worked out a deal to lease a few hundred acres from the U.S. Forest Service.

"When we bought the place from John and Judy three years ago, we put in the contract that they don't have any input in the day-to-day operations," Goins laughs, "but that doesn't mean Judy doesn't still give us hers."

The Millers, who are now both pushing 80, still ski almost every winter day. As does their daughter, Mary, who happens to walk in the door as Goins is telling me how trail names like Face Flop Drop, Peter Pan, Little John, and Malaboggen (Mary's childhood nickname) came to be.

"It's a nickname I despise," Mary tells me as she laces up her ski boots. But the name lives on in trail maps and on painstakingly carved trailhead signs, all 235 of which Goins recently re-carved by hand.

"This place has been a labor of love for 27 years," Mary tells me as she walks out the door and grabs her skis.

It's late winter and the snow is melting into slush. But both the skating and classical tracks are still fresh, thanks to Goins' early-morning pass with the groomer. I classical-ski the outermost loop, Jabberwocky to Sherwood Forest to Northwest Passage, a roughly 8K trail that snakes through the woods with steep climbs and fast, curvy downhills. This first loop is always painful—I'll feel like my lungs are bursting for the next 45 minutes—but it's always worth it. When I finally top out at 10,040 feet, the panorama of Wheeler Peak, Gold Hill, and the Upper Red River Valley sprawls out in the sunshine. This is the most coveted stop on my tour, where I take time out to breathe, let the sun warm my body, and thank the universe that New Mexico has far fewer sub-zero days than Minnesota. Some of my friends tell me I'm a little nuts to drive five hours round-trip from Santa Fe for a cross-country skiing fix. But there could be plenty worse addictions, I think as I fly through pine and aspen, gathering speed on the downhill and dreaming of hot cocoa back at the lodge. ❖

Stephanie Pearson is featured in "Storytellers," on p. 8.

Going Places

Enchanted Forest

NEED TO KNOW

Depending on the snow and how fanatical you are about grooming, there are four excellent spots in New Mexico to find regularly groomed ski trails, both classical (skiing in parallel groomed tracks) and skating (skiing that looks almost like ice skating on groomed trails). Most ski areas groom the same trail for both skating and classical, with four to five feet for skating in the center and a parallel track on the side for classical skiing.

ENCHANTED FOREST CROSS COUNTRY SKI AREA

A day pass is \$16 for adults, \$8–\$13 for kids. Ski lessons and full rentals are available. (575) 754-6112; enchantedforestxc.com

The most convenient accommodations are at the **Golden Eagle Lodge**, just a few miles down the mountain in Red River. Reserve Room 18, a brand-new, two-bedroom suite with a wood-burning fireplace, full kitchen, and room to sleep eight. Bonus: Owner Jerry Vowell brews his own small-batch-roasted Fire Mountain Coffee. From \$130 per night. (800) 621-4046; rediverlodge.com

ANGEL FIRE RESORT

For beginner skate skiers, there's no better place to start than Angel Fire. The new 13K trail system on the Angel

Fire Resort Country Club golf course, 1.5 miles from the downhill area, is roughly 1,000 feet lower than the Enchanted Forest and offers level, open terrain. Adult day pass, \$10; kids 13 and under ski free. Full rental and lessons available. (575) 377-4320; bit.ly/angelfirexc

SOUTHWEST NORDIC SKI CLUB TRAILS

This nearly 7K network of skating and classical trails is tucked into a forested canyon northeast of Pajarito Mountain Ski Area. Southwest Nordic Ski Club volunteers groom and maintain the trails. Trail access is free, but donations are welcome. For trail maps and information on how to join, visit swnordicski.org.

VALLES CALDERA NATIONAL PRESERVE

It's tricky to hit the Caldera, just west of Los Alamos, on a day when the trails in this wide-open crater are well groomed and the sun hasn't baked them to slush. But more than 80 percent of the 60K trail system is groomed, so when the snow flies, call the automated snow line (505-216-2690) or check the snow report at skinewmexico.com. Adult day pass, \$10; kids 5–15, \$5. No ski rental or lessons available. (866) 382-5537; vallescaldera.gov

Cross-country skiing in the Valles Caldera, near Los Alamos.

