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Ski slopes on the prairie

By KEVIN WOSTER
Argus Leader Staff

To someone inclined to slide down snowy hillsides on two expensive sticks of wood, South Dakota might seem like a land to end all skiing ambition.

It isn't.

That's not to say the prairie state will challenge Colorado or Idaho as the winter place to be. But there are a few hills around that are tall enough to get a flatlander high for a weekend.

Great Bear is the closest, centered in the wooded bluffs of the Big Sioux River valley two miles east of Sioux Falls. With its moderate slopes and a vertical drop of 220 feet, Great Bear is especially attractive to beginners. But many advanced skiers use the area to stay in shape for more demanding trips to the mountains.

Skis, poles and boots can be rented for $6.50 per day. A daily pass costs $10 for those over 14, $7 for skiers 14 and under. Preschoolers ski free. Cheaper rates are offered at certain times during the week.

Ski lessons are available at group and private rates ranging from $4.50 $15 per hour. Adults may take a four-week evening ski class for a total of six hours. Cost is $60, including skis and lift. A similar class is offered to young skiers, ages 5-17, for $40. Advanced ski clinics also are held.

Another ski area in eastern South Dakota is in the northeast corner of the state at Big Stone City. Inkpa-Du-Ta Ski Area, with a vertical drop of 150 feet, features night skiing Tuesday and Thursday and is open weekends from 1-5 p.m. Weekend lift tickets are $4 for adults. Seniors ski free. Rentals, snacks and ski lessons are available.

For skiers ready to step up from Great Bear and Inkpa-Du-Ta, the trail leads west to the Black Hills and Terry Peak and Deer Mountain. It's not quite Colorado-type skiing, but is considered by many to be the next best thing.

At 7,071 feet and with a vertical drop of 1,200 feet, Terry Peak is billed as the highest ski slope east of the Rocky Mountains. The mountain has 20 ski runs and is open seven days a week from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Adult daily passes run from $8.50 to $12. Boots, skis and poles rent for $11.50.

Terry Peak is four miles southwest of Lead on Highway 85. Another mile down the road is the turnoff to Deer Mountain. Considered more of a family ski area than Terry Peak, Deer Mountain is 6,650 feet high, has 24 ski runs and a drop of 700 feet.

Skis, boots and poles rent for $10 per day, $5.50 at night. Night skiing is open Wednesday, Thursday and Friday from 6:30-9:30 p.m. Both Deer Mountain and Terry Peak offer ski instruction, with prices ranging up to $15 per hour.

Adult daily passes at Deer Mountain sell for $10.50 Saturday, Sunday, holidays and during the holiday season — Dec. 19 to Jan. 3. The price is $8.75 during the week for the rest of the season. The area is closed Monday. Rates are cheaper for young skiers and those over 62. Half-day rates also are offered.

Motels and hotels are plentiful in nearby Deadwood and Lead, with the per-person nightly price ranging from $20 to $40. Lodging is also available in Rapid City, Sturgis and Spearfish. Group rates are available at many places.

For those headed east from Sioux Falls, skiing also is available by driving a few hours into Minnesota.

The Mount Kato Ski Area near Mankato has six lifts and offers rental equipment, lessons and evening ski trips. Prices at Mount Kato are comparable to South Dakota ski spots. The drop there is 250 feet.

The Hole-In-the Mountain Ski Area in Lake Benton has a vertical drop of 175 feet, three rope tows and five runs. Tubing also is offered. Lake Benton is about 28 miles east of Brookings, S.D.

Ski areas are scattered throughout the Twin Cities region, and also farther north in the Duluth area. Size ranges from areas comparable to Great Bear to the Afton Alps Ski Area 15 miles east of St. Paul. Afton Alps has 32 runs, a 350-foot drop, 18 lifts and extensive lesson opportunities. A weekend daily pass for adults is $12. Skis, poles and boots rent for $7.

Downhill equipment sells for $200 or more

Most beginning skiers take advantage of the rental equipment offered by commercial ski areas. Those who want their own equipment should be prepared to spend $200 or more.

If the equipment is new, skis, boots, poles and bindings probably will cost from $200 to $350. That's for good quality equipment. Prices go up from there.

A pair of skis sells for $150 to more than $300. Boots range from $80 to $300. Bindings sell for $75 to $100 and poles sell for $18 to $45.

That will get you down the slopes. If you're interested in stylish sweaters, gloves, jackets and ski suits, figure on spending a few hundred dollars extra.

Denny Bruggeman
Cross country skier

Cross country on skis

By JOEL BROWN
Argus Leader Staff

The only sound you hear is the soft swishing of skis beneath you and the chit-chat of your partner.

It's cross country skiing and there are no crowds to fight, no noise from people or music blaring from a chalet. There is nothing like it, according to its proponents.

But don't be fooled by the wintery glow, cross country skiing is work.

"If someone is interested in cross country, I advise them to rent equipment the first three or four times. A lot of people go out and buy equipment and decide they don't like it because it's hard work," Denny Bruggeman said.

Bruggeman is a pioneer in cross country in this area. When he started skiing at Newton Hills State Park, he was virtually alone. Now he won't go near the park because of all the people there.

"The interest has been a gradual thing. I began to see more people in 1973 and the last — well we haven't had snow for two years — four years it has increased by the herd," he said.

Cross country skiing as opposed to downhill skiing is a sport requiring a much skinnier ski with a much different shoe (not boot) and less of a binding. Cross country skiers, the ones with wool knickers, traverse all kinds of terrain including hills and mountains.

"I like to go fast and go down hills. The steeper the better. I like to ski mountains. The thrill is going down the steepest you can handle.

"It's just like downhill only its more exciting. You're not locked in the vise of a big boot. The downhill shoe I compare to a vise. It's one solid unit from knee to foot. Cross country skis provide better downhill thrills, I think," the Sioux Falls man said.

Bruggeman's favorite place to ski is the Gallatin National Forest in Montana. He won't reveal his favorite spots in this area. "I'm selfish about it. I've got some secret spots where there is no one else."

Union County State Park and the Big Sioux Recreation Area at Brandon are two more places to cross country ski and there are local golf courses. Those spots are crowded at times.

The act of cross country skiing is much like walking or skating in a straight line. The basic move is simple to learn. Turning, going down hill, stopping and getting up after a fall are harder to pick up. Classes through the Sioux Falls public schools are available in December and February.

The sport also rates as one of the best fitness sports coming close to running, walking, biking and swimming in terms of exertion and cardio-vascular conditioning.

"You've got to stay toned up. We ride bikes for 20 miles some days and walk a lot. I'm not into jogging — hurts the knees," he said.

His wife, Annie, and five children, the oldest is 20 and the youngest 11, all are hooked on the sport.

"It's a family activity. You take a sandwich and fruit and a little cup for water out of a stream. That's all you need. You can go for miles. If you want, you can stop to play or have some wine and cheese. It's an intimate sport. I like to go out with close friends," Bruggeman said.

His family takes a week of vacation in the winter flying to Bozeman, Mont., and traveling to the Big Horn Mountains or Glacier National Park for a week of skiing.

Bruggeman's tips for beginners:

- Rent skis first instead of buying.
- Waxable or non-wax skis are a matter of personal preference so find out what you want.
- Learn the sport from a ski instructor.
- Don't take your dog along. They

*CROSS COUNTRY
Continued on page 2D

Cross country beginner outfitted for $95

A beginning cross country skier can be outfitted for about $95 by watching for sales. For another $70, a beginner could get top-notch equipment on sale.

More expense comes from specialty skis for racing or mountaineering, and finer quality shoes. Bindings are similar in quality and price.

A package includes skis, bindings and shoes. Accessories include wax for waxable skies, wool socks and knickers, backpacks and other clothing.

Shoes are made of synthetic or leather material with top-grain leather the most expensive and durable. Gortex, a new breathable synthetic, also is expensive.

New shoes are available with narrower toes for better control.

The most popular skis are fiberglass laminated on wood. Wood skis also are available as are 100 percent fiberglass. Skis with wider toes also are available this year for better control.

Skis are fitted by weight and not height.

Waxable skis can be adapted to snow and weather conditions, while non-waxable skis have a fish-scale type bottom that performs reasonably well under all conditions. Clinics for waxing are available regularly at ski shops.

Great Bear Ski Area getting ready for public — snow or no snow

By KEVIN WOSTER
Argus Leader Staff

The thin layer of snow covering the Great Bear Ski Area will soon get deeper — whether nature helps or not.

December traditionally marks the beginning of the downhill ski season, even to South Dakotans. Great Bear is expected to be open to public skiing by next weekend if weather and equipment cooperate. And manager Dennis Finke will see to it that there is plenty of snow cushioning the slopes. Most of it probably won't come from the sky.

Finke, owner and manager of the area for 13 years, has for several days been guiding a mechanical snow maker up and down the area just off Rice Street two miles east of Interstate 229. He hopes to build a base of three to four feet by the first of January.

He is beginning this season with a base of mostly artificial snow about a foot deep. If recent snowfalls become regular, so much the better.

"We never count on snow anymore," Finke said. "But it makes it nice aesthetically. And it gets people thinking about skiing."

It also gets Finke thinking — and remembering the ski seasons of 1978 and 1979 when about 18,000 skiers came to Great Bear each year. Enthusiasm for the sport dropped during the last two winters, as a lack of snow and warm temperatures took people's minds away from winter sports like skiing.

Finke thinks things will turn around this year, and is spending $400,000 on improvements to prove it.

For the first time, skiers at Great Bear will ride a chair lift to the top of the area's 10 ski runs. The lift will run 36 chairs, each of which will carry four skiers. The chair lift will carry 2,400 skiers per hour. There also will be three rope tows.

Of the $400,000, buying and setting up the chair lift took about half, Finke said. The rest was spent on contouring the slopes, installing underground water systems for the snow-making machines, and buying new snow-making equipment.

Finke said two years of water drought across the nation brought hurried advancements in the business of making snow. He is now taking advantage of those advancements.

"With the new equipment we can do a better job of making snow for less money," he said.

Finke said smaller ski areas like Great Bear are less dependent on natural snowfall because they can cover their limited runs with manmade snow. The bigger areas can't afford that, he said.

Despite difficult financial times, Finke is hoping for a good year. The tight economy should help Great Bear, he said.

"People can't afford to travel as much," he said. "A small area like ours that is close to a major population center has an advantage."

Finke said Great Bear is in the second stage of a three-part plan to fully develop the area, which is leased from the city of Sioux Falls.

Part one is establishing a market and reputation, which he said has been done. Part two is developing the chair lift, contouring the slopes and improving the snow-making system. Part three will be expanding the number of ski runs back into the wooded draws and hillsides east and south of the main area.

Finke said that development will include another chair lift, possibly by next skiing season. "That's if we can get a break from the weather," he said.

"We've got about 35 acres of runs now, but there 135 acres that we think could be developed eventually," Finke said. "We've got a lot of room."

Argus Leader photo by PAUL HORSTED
Dennis Finke watches his snow-making machine at work.

Argus Leader photo by JOHN DANICIC JR.
A skier kicks it up at Great Bear Ski Area.

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