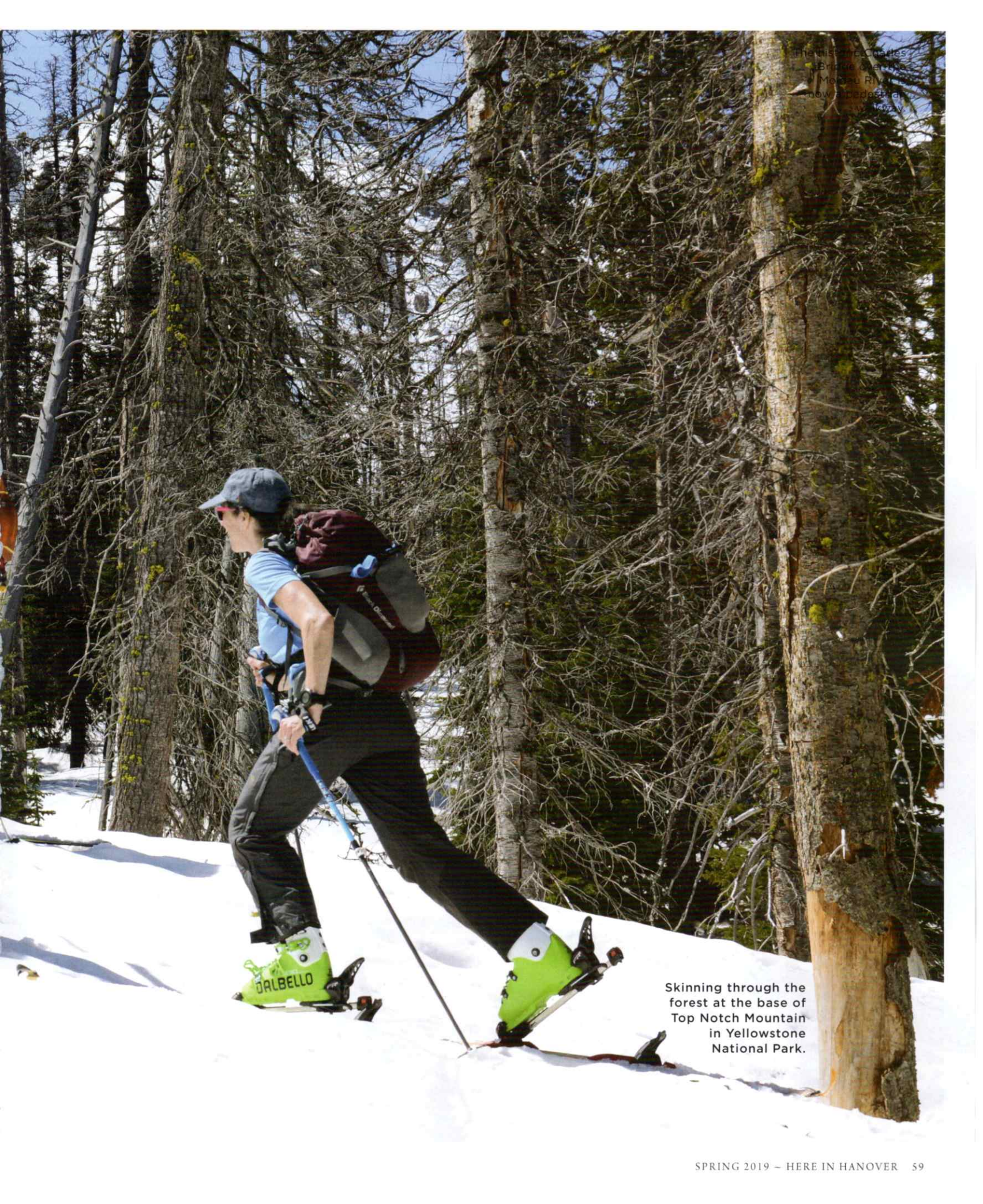




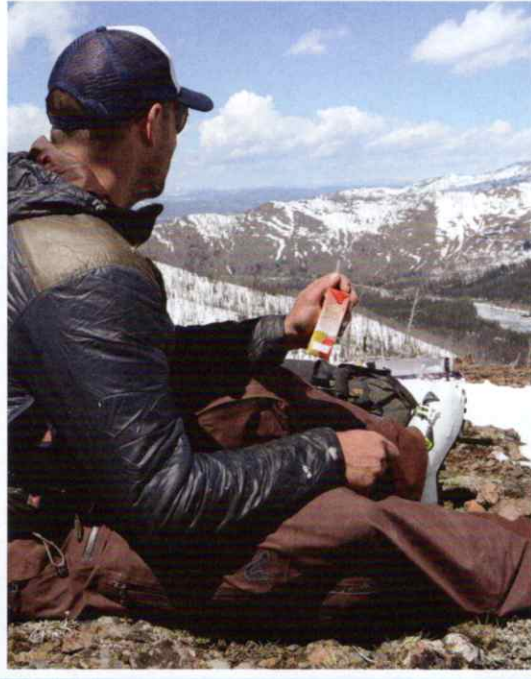
STORY **Lisa Ballard**
PHOTOS BY **Jack** AND **Lisa Ballard**

Making Tracks

Spring skiing in Yellowstone National Park



Skinning through the forest at the base of Top Notch Mountain in Yellowstone National Park.





Opposite, larger photo: View of Yellowstone Lake from a high ridge on Top Notch Mountain.

Opposite top, from left: Hikers discuss their next move below an avalanche-prone cirque. Taking a break to enjoy the view. Ogling the panorama.

This page, below: Adjusting skins after a snack at the half-way point.

Yellowstone National Park, the nation's first national park, is a mecca for wildlife watchers, backpackers, hikers, and anglers. Old Faithful, the Grand Canyon of Yellowstone, and Mammoth Hot Springs are just a few of the many famous features in this internationally renowned, 3,500-acre public marvel of mountains, lakes, geysers, and other geothermal formations. The park attracts more than four million visitors each year, mainly during the summer and early fall. Only about 4 percent come the rest of the year.

It's tougher to get into Yellowstone when the snow starts falling, usually by the end of September. Many of the roads to and through the park close, but Nordic skiers, backcountry skiers, and snowshoers still come to explore parts of its 1,000-mile trail network or zig-zag to the top of a 9,000-foot ridgeline and then float down a powdery slope. In the spring, that powder becomes delightful corn snow.

Last May, my husband Jack and I met several friends atop Sylvan Pass (elevation 8,530 feet), a high point in the road that enters Yellowstone from its east gate, 53 miles west of Cody, Wyoming. An avid skier, I had heard rumors about Yellowstone's untracked bowls and glades and longed to experience them. No lifts, of course, but having skied Tuckerman Ravine on Mount Washington almost every spring since the early 1980s, I didn't mind hiking for my turns. It had become a rite of spring. This year, the climbing would simply be in a different, albeit much higher, place.

HEADING TOWARD TOP NOTCH PEAK

From Sylvan Pass, we thought we had two options: Top Notch Peak (10,238 feet) on the south side of the road and Avalanche Peak (10,566 feet) on the north side. Our plan was to skin up one of them. Though the snowbanks were higher than our SUV, one glance at Avalanche Peak from the pass and our decision was obvious. Avalanche had only a patchwork of snow here and there. It looked unskiable, but Top Notch Peak looked promising.





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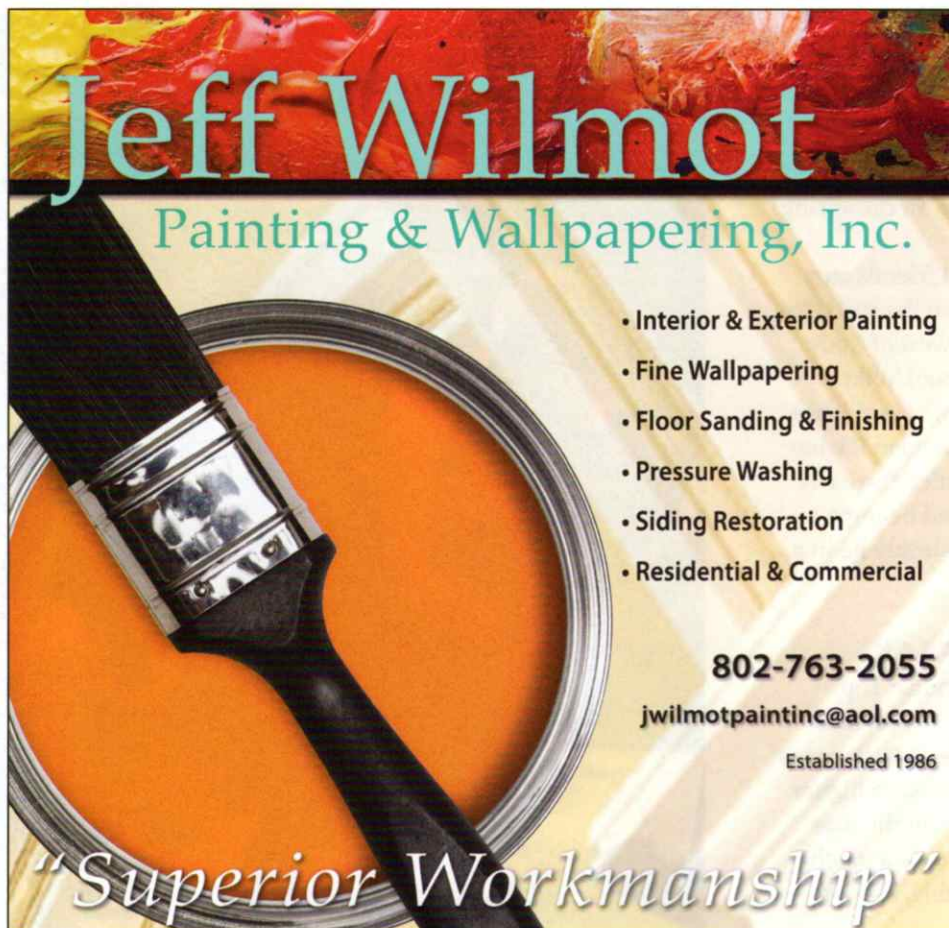
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KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Skiing in Yellowstone National Park is a true backcountry experience. If you go, keep these tips in mind for your safety and enjoyment:

- All unplowed roads and trails are open to cross-country skiing and snowshoeing. Stick to these corridors if you don't have a guide and are not experienced with winter backcountry travel.
- This is wild country with all its dangers, including unpredictable weather and wildlife. Dress in layers. By late March, the bears may be awake. Bring pepper spray and wear it where you can grab it.
- Give geothermal features a wide berth. The snow around them is usually icy, and what looks like bare ground might be a thin layer of ice over a boiling pothole.
- Check in at a ranger station. Some park areas could be closed to protect wildlife. Trail conditions are also available there and at the ski shops at Mammoth Hot Springs and Old Faithful.
- A permit is required to camp in the backcountry.
- Stay hydrated. Yellowstone is high, cold, and dry. Use insulated water bottles so liquids don't freeze.
- Never approach wildlife! Let them move away from you. If they don't move, go around them, not through a herd. Give animals an escape route through shallow snow or on a packed trail. Keep a minimum of 75 feet from bison and other large animals, 300 feet from bears and wolves.
- Avalanches can occur on any slope at any time. Always carry a transceiver, shovel, and probe, and know how to use them. Cross slopes one at a time.
- Sun protection, for both skin and eyes, is a must at the elevations you'll ski at—7,000 to 10,000 feet—especially during the winter with the intense solar reflection off the snow.
- Leave your skinny touring-center skis at home, even for Nordic skiing on the roads. You'll need wider off-trail skis to break trail.



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Clockwise from above:
View across Yellowstone
Lake from the
rocky beach.
Bighorn sheep shedding
their winter coats.
Springtime in Wapiti,
Wyoming, 3,000 feet
lower than nearby
Sylvan Pass. Skinning up
a broad corridor
of corn snow.

“Top Notch is a nice ski,” said our host John, a friend from Cody who had organized our trip. “You can see Yellowstone Lake from the top. It’s a really nice view.”

We put on our skis by the side of the small pullout and headed into the woods. There was no discernible trail. Numerous ski tracks wandered off here and there among the airy conifers. John knew the way, and the rest of us—five skiers, including two of John’s friends from Cody and one of ours from the Upper Valley—followed in a colorfully clad train.

It was early, 7am. The forest floor was crusty, shaded from the first tendrils of sunshine and subject to previous daytime thaws and evening freezes. We weaved among the Douglas firs, climbing with each stride and warming up quickly from the exertion. Our pace was steady but reasonable, and I enjoyed the repeated slide, step, slide, step of my skis moving forward as my breathing picked up.

Within an hour into our uphill climb, the temperature had climbed above freezing, and everyone stripped to tee shirts or, in John’s case, no shirt. “Funny how 40 degrees feels tropical after a long winter below freezing,” I mused.

It was 20 degrees warmer in the valley. We had spent the night at John’s cabin in the small settlement of Wapiti just outside the park’s boundary. What a difference a thousand feet makes! Around the cabin, the grass was green, and the lupine were in full bloom. The previous afternoon, I went for a walk to stretch my legs. It was a short one, only a few





Lunch on the rocks with a glorious view!

hundred yards, as a mammoth-sized bull bison lounged on the hillside just below the cabin.

WORKING FOR OUR TURNS

The next day was gorgeous for our backcountry adventure—deep blue above and white underfoot. Top Notch Peak has about a dozen skiable routes cascading off its double-humped summit. It's 2.1 miles to the top, with a gain of 1,840 feet. We would, indeed, work for our turns, though the work seemed less strenuous than climbing to the base of Tuckerman Ravine from Pinkham Notch. There was too much to look at. As we crested each knoll, the view only got grander; then we reached a ridge where we got our first look at the ski lines. I was ready to drop in.

“Not yet,” said John, pointing to a narrow swath of snow between two tall banks. A white bowl poked up invitingly

from the far end of the white corridor.

We kept going, down the trail, then paused at the base of the cirque. I dearly wanted to climb it, but an alarm sounded somewhere deep in my brain, and the small hairs on the back of my neck suddenly stood on end.

A number of oversized snowballs had rolled down the headwall here and there, gathering size the farther they went. A small avalanche of them had churned up the otherwise smooth surface about a third of the way across the expanse.

“Let's go up,” drooled one of the others in our party, seeing only the untracked snow.

“I'm going back,” I murmured, turning toward the way we had come.

The others looked at me in surprise, but then the mood of the group turned thoughtful. My friend from the Upper Valley turned with me. As we started

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back toward Sylvan Pass, the others skirted the bottom of the bowl to get atop one more ridge to see Yellowstone Lake, then headed back as well. On the way back, we made turns down 1,000 vertical feet of silky corn snow. Afterward, we drove over the far side of the pass to the edge of the lake. We had the rocky beach to ourselves, except for a couple of Barrow's goldeneye ducks that came ashore. A line of snowy peaks stood tall on the horizon across the water.

"Are you disappointed about not reaching the top of Top Notch?" asked my friend as we ogled the majestic mountains. "Not at all," I replied. "I loved every moment of it. The downhill part was the reward."

Reaching the summit would have been nice, but it was not the ultimate goal of our trip. The chance to go backcountry skiing was. It was a memorable day in one of the most scenic places on Earth. How could that be disappointing? **H**

FOR MORE INFO

For a professionally guided backcountry ski trip in Yellowstone National Park, contact Yellowstone Ski Tours, yellowstoneskitours.com.

For list of places to ski and snowshoe on your own in Yellowstone National Park, go to nps.gov/yell/planyourvisit/skiing-and-snowshoeing.htm.

For backcountry gear rentals, contact Timber Trails in Livingston, Montana, timbertrailsmontana.com.

ONLINE EXTRA

Find more photos online and read about Lisa's recent awards from the North American Snowsports Journalists Association (NASJA) at www.hereinhanover.com.



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