



# SnowLine

The Official Newsletter of the

**TAHOE NORDIC SEARCH & RESCUE TEAM, INC.**  
 Lake Tahoe • Truckee • Donner Summit

**B**y the time you receive this issue of *SnowLine*, most all the ski areas of the Tahoe Basin will be open and inviting. The ski business is a competitive one, they say; ski areas and retailers of all things wintry vie for your Visa card. The past month has been a relatively unusual mix of winter weather—including skiable snow—and very few people about. The recipe of snow and holidays will change all that of course, and among the visitors willing to drop big coin on a pair of vinyl moonboots (every Lake Tahoe twentysomething knows instinctively: you'll never get a date wearing moonboots) will be the visitor that gets much more adventure than he or she ever bargained for. I'm speaking of the lost skier. They are *our* business.

Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue Team will search and rescue regardless of time of year, but the majority of our action happens mid-winter. Even though we're backcountry rescuers, the opening of the ski areas define, in a big way, the start of our search season. Approximately half of the people Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue Team finds are skiers or boarders that have strayed from their "resort" (as many of them refer to the lift areas). Most of these are visitors to the Tahoe Basin, Truckee, and Donner Summit. Visitors to the area, are, by definition, unfamiliar with the terrain and often underestimate Sierran weather. That, in a nutshell, is why they get into trouble.

The Nordic Team is prepared for search season. We already have several on-the-snow training sessions under our belts, the Team's equipment is state-of-the-art and organized, and our communication systems are tested, tried, and at the ready. Please attend the next general meeting of Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue Team. It's Monday night, **December**

**4, 6:30 PM** at the Granlibakken *Resort's* Ski Hut. It promises to be lively as ever.

If your Civil Defense (OES) card is pending or has expired, representatives from the Placer County Sheriff's Office will be in attendance **December 4** to sign you up.

## The Hard Line

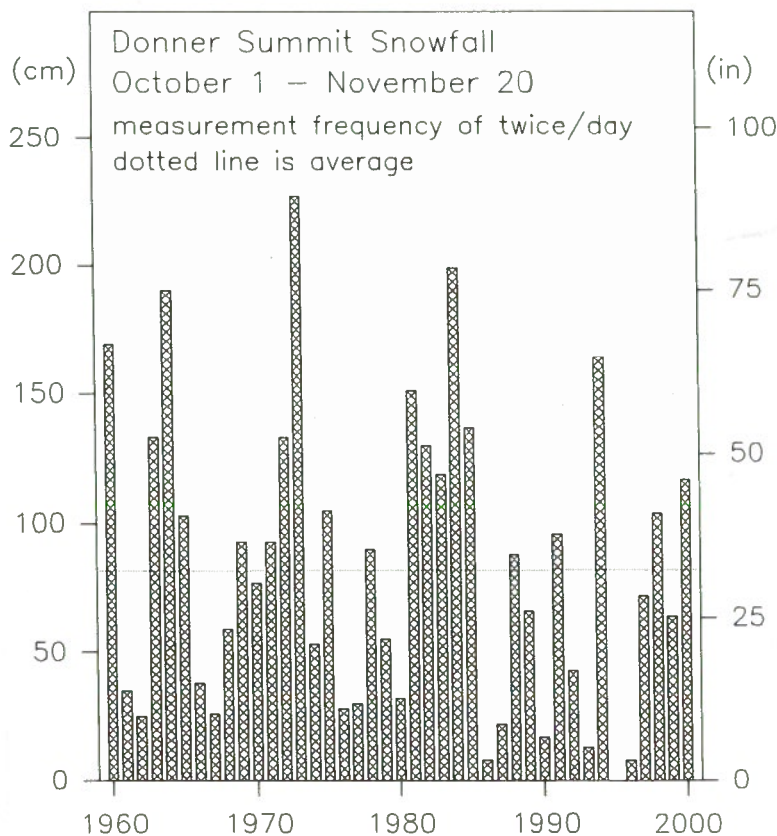
Two years ago the Bradley Hut, one of the Sierra Club-owned backcountry cabins near the Sierra crest, was dismantled and removed from the Five Lakes Basin. The structure was taken down because the cabin site lay about 400 meters inside the boundary of the Granite Chief Wilderness, a Wilderness designated as

do not meet specific historic requirements. The Bradley Hut, constructed with a foundation of local rock and deeply camouflaged among the fir trees, was, arguably, an innocuous structure. Nevertheless, it was dismantled. At the time, many lamented the removal of the hut; the Tahoe National Forest, which oversees management of the Wilderness, juried arguments for and against the Bradley Hut's (ultimate) demise for about five years before the hut's extinction. In 1993 Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue Team was contacted by the Forest Service and asked whether the Bradley Hut had ever played an important role in any

of our search and rescues, or if we thought it might in the future. Even though many of the Nordic Team's searches have originated a rock's throw from the old cabin, we had never used the cabin for any rescue purpose. The southern boundary of the Squaw Valley ski area, with trails accessible by snow machine (or wheeled vehicles in summer), is within a kilometer of the hut site, effectively precluding its use during a search or rescue. The Forest Service stuck to the hard line and removed the hut.

At the end of January of this year, my work partner Walt and I were on day three of a ten day snow survey ski tour when Walt fell and broke his middle finger. We splinted it, and by wearing a mitten Walt could still grasp a ski pole. But he was vexed by the thought of at least a week more skiing through demanding weather and terrain. It was Walt's call, and he opted for getting out. I contacted the Inyo National Forest on our satellite phone and requested a helicopter to pick him up at Big Whitney Meadow, a day's ski

north of where he busted the finger. They refused to authorize a helicopter landing in either the Golden Trout, Sequoia-Kings, or John Muir Wilderness—all the terrain that



such about 30 years after the construction of the cabin. Laws governing what can and cannot be done in a federally designated Wilderness prohibit permanent structures that

surrounded us. As it was not a life-threatening injury, the Forest Service once again stuck to the hard line, this time by not allowing motorized vehicles in a wilderness area. After further satellite phone negotiations (including a comical scene with emergency room nurse Beth from Bishop talking me through reducing the injury while I yanked on Walt's finger), Walt and I skied two more days to the Wilderness boundary where a military helicopter flew in to pluck him out. Ironically, the military helo boys spotted us from the air, did not like the LZ (landing zone) we had chosen (outside the Wilderness) and proceeded to set down 200 meters away—back inside the Wilderness!

Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue Team has conducted searches and rescues on private land (ski areas, upper Coldstream), state park public land (Burton Creek, Donner Memorial), within city limits (incorporated Carson City), and plenty of federal public land, including the Granite Chief, Desolation, and Mt. Rose Wildernesses. We have used snowmobiles, snowcats, and/or helicopters within all of the above. It's fair to say that during an emergency, everyone involved with a life-threatening rescue—including state and county cops, USFS personnel, and Nordic Team members—are of the mind to ask permission for vehicle use *after* the lost persons are rescued. This is above and beyond policy. It is, I think, common (human) sense.

Historically, economists and politicians have cavalierly decided the value of human life, but as lowly backcountry rescuers we are not endowed with such voluminous gift of prudence. So we must proceed as best we can, and fully use all resources at our disposal. When the Inyo National Forest refused us helicopter support, our first reaction was disgust for that faceless bureaucracy, how could they let us down at a moment like this? But a little time and distance often puts sharper perspective on what once was a muddy view. Walt's gammy finger was a significant obstacle to our work (and his physical and

mental health) but not life-threatening. The reason we were out there in the first place was that the remote snow survey sites are all within a wilderness area. If they weren't, the surveys would most assuredly be conducted with helicopter support. In fact, the Inyo National Forest's decision—based on little potential for loss of human life—is a position both understandable and honorable. The line was drawn as an attempt to preserve the precarious balance of what makes wilderness areas wild.

More and more of our searches end with helicopter assistance. This is by far the fastest (but safest?) way to move our patients out of the mountains, but we must be cautious never to take it for granted. During numerous rescues heavy weather has eliminated any possibility of air support, and we've endured the anxiety and dread associated with backcountry helicopter mechanical difficulties. Outside of life- or limb-threatening circumstances, we, as a Team, have to be cognizant that there are those that deride the use of snowmobiles, snowcats, or helicopters in our local Desolation, Mt. Rose, and Granite Chief Wildernesses. If, during a search, we find ourselves chasing down a false lead that has lured us deep into the wilds, we can always rely on the old trusty kick-turn, and ski out of there.

## Team Trainings

Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue Team trainings are held several times per month and involve both on-the-snow and theoretical learning opportunities. Please be kind to the training leader: give them a call and let them know you will attend. The times listed below are *departure* times. The Team garage is located at 223 Fairway Drive, behind the Tahoe City Chevron.

**December 2:** Training Committee co-Chair Paul Honeywell (546-8609) leads a ski tour in the Mt. Rose area. Depart the Team garage at 7:30 AM or meet up at Sheep Flat on the Mt. Rose Highway at 8:15.

**December 9:** Doug Read (583-6381) will lead a combination mock search and snowmobile training in the Blackwood and Powderhorn Creek watersheds. Depart the Team garage at 7:30 AM. Don't rule out the possibility of towing behind a snowmobile, i.e. bring bomber-warm clothes, thick mitts, and bend those knees!

**December 12:** Jim Coffey (583-1276) and Steve Reynaud (587-4723) will lead a discussion on snow and avalanche safety at the Kings Beach firehouse, 6:30 PM.

**December 17:** As ski area chairlifts expand into previously wild terrain, ski area paying customers are granted new opportunities to become lost beyond the new area boundary. We've seen this with new chairlifts at Diamond Peak, Alpine Meadows, Northstar, Sugar Bowl, and Squaw Valley. This winter Northstar opens a new lift on Lookout Peak, which bottoms-out slightly above the south edge of Martis Valley. Bernie Mellor (546-2238) will lead a tour of the surrounding terrain. Though we will be doing some riding on the chairlift, be prepared, as usual, for off-piste skiing, both uphill and down. Depart the Team garage at 7:30 AM or meet (as a group) in the Village at Northstar at 8:15.

Wintering over,

—Randall Osterhuber

## Team Officers

President	Joe Pace	583-1806
Vice President	Steve Twomey	525-7280
Treasurer	Scott Schroeffer	546-2809
Secretary	Terri Viehmann	582-1695
Board Members	Karen Honeywell	546-8609
	Ray O'Brien	581-4358
	Dirk Schoonmaker	583-2929
	Russ Viehmann	582-1695
Directors-at-large	Randall Osterhuber	587-3092
	Douglas Read	583-6381
	Gerald Rockwell	583-5376

## Committee Chairs

Cuisine	Debra Schroeffer	546-2809
Dispatch	Jackie Thomas	587-2687
Education	Karen Honeywell	546-8609
Equipment	Russ Viehmann	582-1695
Great Ski Race™	Douglas Read	583-6381
	Randall Osterhuber	587-3092
Newsletter	Randall Osterhuber	587-3092
Snowcats	Scoop Remenih	583-1684
Snowmobiles	Ray O'Brien	581-4358
Training	Paul Honeywell	546-8609
	Bernie Mellor	546-2238

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