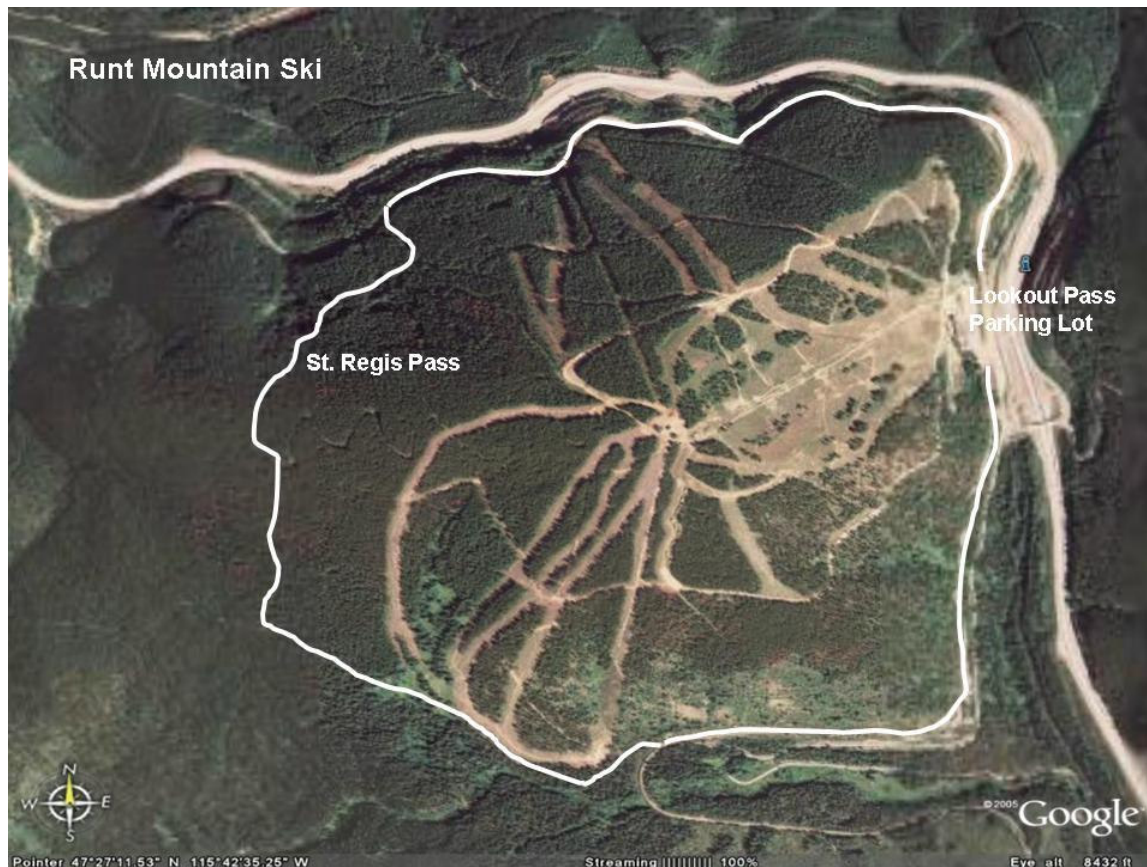


## Lookout Pass Cross-Country and Touring Skiing

If you are going to find snow to ski anywhere in the central Idaho Panhandle, it will be at Lookout Pass. Lookout hosts the popular downhill ski area, but it also has at least six Nordic and ski touring opportunities. When my daughter was younger and into downhill skiing and boarding, Lookout was a great area to take her, because as she skied the hill, I could ski free of the crowds and expense into the scenic Bitterroot high country or glide down abandoned railroad grades. Six suggestions are listed and mapped here, but there may be others I have not tried.

### **Runt Mountain Ski**

The Lookout Ski Area is located on Runt Mountain. An eight-kilometer (5 mile) ski around the mountain over St. Regis Pass starts from the parking lot at Lookout Pass. The lot is on the former grade of the Northern Pacific Railroad. Park at or walk to the north end of the lot. The typically groomed road leading first north and then wrapping west around the mountain is the old railroad grade. It is groomed as part of the snow machine trail network, so be aware of, and courteous to, these users. There is plenty of room on the grade for both activities. The grade leads down slope and around the mountain. You will pass the base of a ski lift. About a mile and three-quarters from the start, you will find a road leading very steeply uphill. Follow the road up the steep, but fairly short, climb. If it is icy, you will probably need to side step up the steepest part. You are literally on history's trail. The road you are traversing is one of two remaining intact sections of the Mullan Wagon Road in Idaho. Within a quarter mile the grade becomes more gradual and leads to the top of St. Regis Pass. By proceeding south and east through the open timber, you will ski down into the St. Regis Basin. You will see ski runs to your left. Follow the ski tracks down the upper St. Regis Valley past another chair lift base. Shortly beyond, you will emerge on the Northern Pacific Grade near where it crosses the St. Regis River for the first time. Ski the groomed grade uphill to the left. The rail grade will return you to the south end of the Lookout Pass parking lot.



## **Rail Grade Skis to Taft and the Hale Fish Hatchery**

The abandoned Northern Pacific Railroad grade over Lookout Pass is an avenue for snowmobile and ski users. Skiing down the rail grade to the east to Taft or to the west to the Hale Hatchery above Mullan are both relatively easy outings. The traverse from Mullan to Taft is more challenging, but can be completed easily in a day. The grade is part of a groomed snowmobile trail system, but it is sufficiently wide to accommodate snow machines and skiers alike. The grooming makes the skiing relatively easy, because of the packed base. The grade is ideal as well for those few individuals who practice ski joring; the use of pulling dog(s) to help propel the skier along. When freshly groomed, it is an ideal skate ski route. Travel arrangements will be necessary with car drops to accommodate any one-way trips.

### **Lookout Pass to Taft: 14.8 kilometers (9.25 miles)**

From the south end of the Lookout Pass Parking Lot, ski south (downhill) on the railroad grade. After a short run south the grade turns west to loop out and cross the St. Regis River. Once around the loop it precedes east and southeast passing Copper Gulch and then east on a very long run to the Borax Tunnel. Much of this section of the grade is well removed from Interstate 90, but as the grade approaches the Borax Tunnel, it closes with the Interstate. About a quarter of a mile before the Borax Tunnel, the snowmobiles and the groomers make a hairpin turn to the left and proceed down a cut-across trail to the grade below. The trail can be skied, but it is narrow and lined with thick timber. Skiing down it is a “white knuckles” experience under most conditions and suicide, if it is icy.

You may follow the un-groomed grade at the top of this trail instead. It may show sign of some snowmobile uses. From the top of the cut-across, it is a short distance along the grade to the Borax Tunnel. At the tunnel, remove your skis and proceed through on foot. The tunnel is relatively short and straight. You can see the other portal as you enter. A flashlight is handy for this walk. Large icicles hanging from the roof and icy spots below are found along the walk. Use your poles for stability on the ice.

After leaving the tunnel, follow the grade as it loops back to the west. The bottom of the cut-across trail will be reached. The route will be groomed again from this point on to Taft. The grade soon passes under the Interstate, where again skis must be taken off and short walk is required.

After crossing under the Interstate, the grade crosses the St, Regis River and turns east. It is a long but fairly straight ski towards Taft. The slope the grade is perched on is south facing, so snow melts out faster here in the spring. As you approach Taft, the Interstate rest stop is just downhill off the grade. This is a good place to take a break use the facilities and have lunch, because there are no facilities at Taft. It does require a short downhill ski to enter and short climb back onto the grade.

Just beyond the rest area, the grade passes under Interstate 90 again. The ski removal and short walk is again required. Taft is a short distance beyond the second Interstate underpass. A large parking lot to accommodate snowmobile trailers marks Taft.

The grade can be skied in its entirety or one can ski down to a certain point and return to Lookout Pass. Since the grade only exceeds 2% near the top, the uphill ski is rather easy. A strategy used by some is to ski down to and beyond the Borax Tunnel to the base of the cut-across trail. Ski up the cut-across and return to Lookout Pass on the grade. Since the first Interstate crossing is roughly half the distance to Taft, this out and back ski is roughly 14 kilometers.

### **Lookout to the Hale Hatchery: 12.6 Kilometers (7.9 miles)**

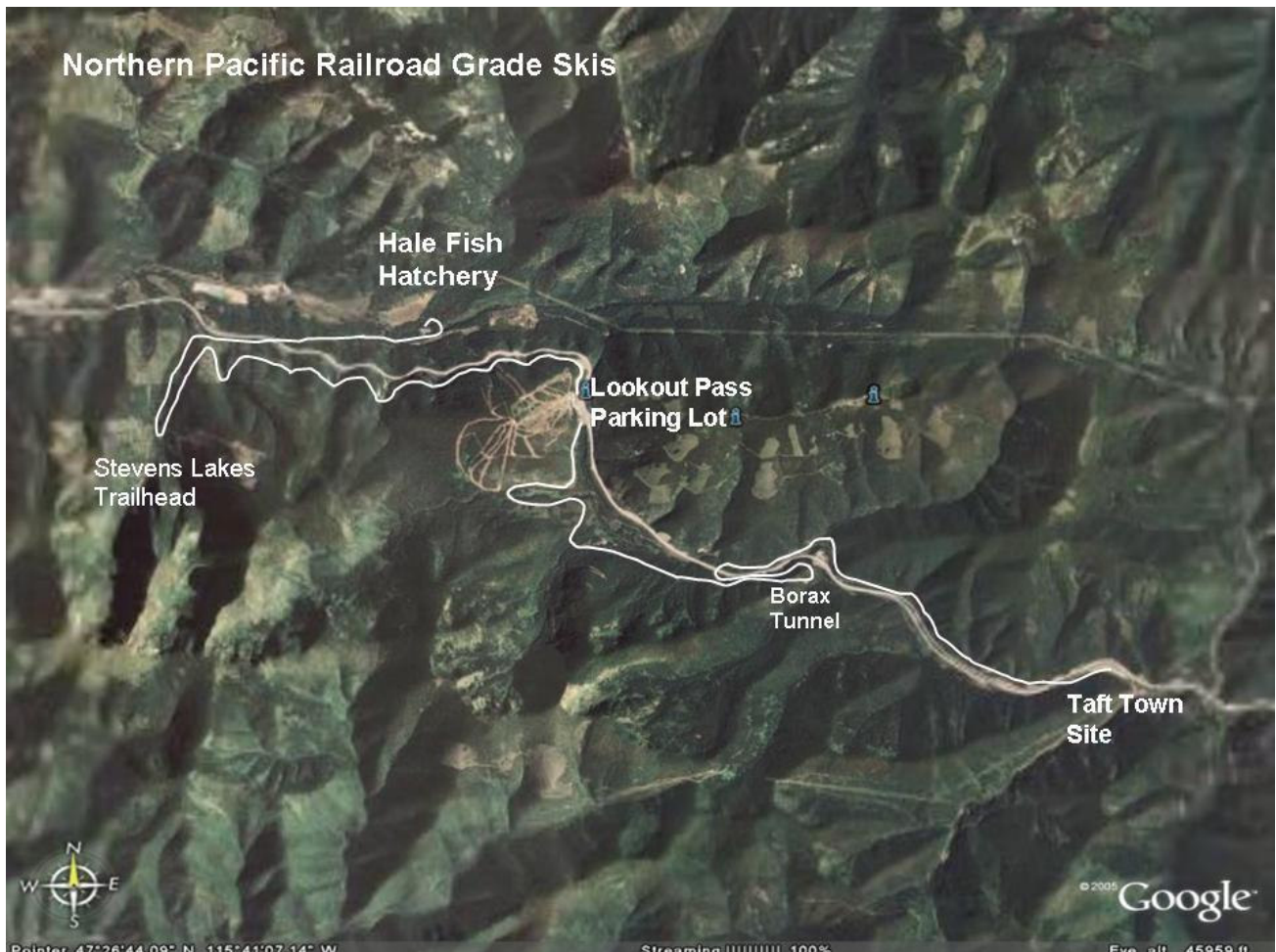
The ski west along the Northern Pacific grade begins at the north end of the Lookout Parking lot. Follow the grade north and then west as it wraps around Runt Mountain. The grade makes a several miles run along the hillside above the Interstate towards the Willow Creek Valley. Along the way, a few picnic facilities have been installed at overviews of the Silver Valley. If you are there early enough in the season, these may be useable, but they are soon snowed under.

At two locations, trestles that once served the railroad have been removed. At these locations the route leaves the grade temporarily and follows road segments cut deeper back into the gulches to find and cross the stream before they again loop back to the grade. After the second road segment of this type, the grade rounds a distinct point and turns southwest up the Willow Creek Valley.

Traveling down the grade on a clear day, the skier has views from the grade up into the Stevens Lakes Basin at the head of Willow Creek and to Stevens Peak beyond the basin. Just prior to reaching Willow Creek, the grade switches sharply back on itself at the Stevens Lakes Trailhead. A vault toilet is located at the trailhead making it unmistakable. The route proceeds downhill to the northeast at a 2% grade. Follow the grooming and not the tire tracks as that will be the Willow Creek Road.

The grade will cross under Interstate 90, necessitating removal of skis and a short walk. The grade will remain on its northeast direction towards the Hale Hatchery crossing next the Mullan Pass Road. Shuttle cars can be cached at this location for the return trip, space permitting, however, it is only a little further to the Hale Hatchery.

The Mullan Pass Road may require another ski removal and walk, depending on the snow conditions. Following the grade from the road on down, it soon enters a large loop as it crosses the South Fork Coeur d'Alene River. Just as this loop straightens to the west, the grade meets a road. Turn left onto this road and in a very short distance, the Hale Hatchery marks the end of the ski. If you miss this turn, you will not go far on the grade, because the bridge immediately to the west of this point is out. Cars can be parked here for the shuttle or a couple hundreds yards to the west along the road at Shoshone Park. The hatchery typically has a few trout on hand during the winter and even a feed dispenser, should members of the party want to kill time, while the car(s) left at Lookout Pass is rounded up.



## **Lookout Area Ski Tours:**

At least three ski touring opportunities are available into the St. Regis Lakes and Copper Lake Basins located near Lookout. Snowshoes can be used on these routes as well. These are backcountry routes into areas where avalanche can be a real danger, if conditions are right. These areas should not be entered except in a group. Each member of that group should have an avalanche transceiver, snow shovel and ideally, poles that can be adapted for probing a snow pack. The avalanche danger in the St. Regis Basin can be compounded by snowmobile use where a very few number of individuals “high mark” on the north-slope of the basin. Although it has not occurred dramatically in the basin in recent years, high marking adds to the potential of triggering an avalanche.

## **St. Regis Lakes:**

Depart from the south end of the Lookout Pass Parking Lot and follow the railroad grade down to the St. Regis River crossing (2 km). Ski across the river and turn right (west) up the valley. A hiking trail follows this route. It is advisable to stay south of the river to prevent the necessity of a stream crossing lower in the valley where snow bridges are less likely or if present, less stable. The trail will intersect a wider road further up the valley. At a point about halfway to the lakes, it is necessary to cross the river to its north side. This crossing exposes the travelers by placing them at the base of an avalanche prone slope. All precautions, including digging a snow pit to examine avalanche danger, spreading the party out, and carrying transceivers should be taken, while crossing the next half-mile of terrain. As the St. Regis Lakes are approached the final grade up is steeper. Skis or snowshoes may be required for the final pitch to the lakes. If one does not climb to the upper lakes, but continues up the bottom of the basin to the southwest, another lake (Lower St. Regis Lake) can be skied to over relatively gentle terrain. It is 3.6 kilometers (2.25 miles) from the railroad grade to the lakes.

## **Stevens – St. Regis Lakes Overview:**

Another tour far less prone to avalanche is along the ridge between the St. Regis and South Fork Coeur d’Alene Basins to an overview of the Stevens Lakes. The route is essentially along the state line. After skiing down to the St. Regis River crossing on the rail grade, turn to the right (west) before crossing the river. Pass the ski area lift base and along the outer edge of the ski runs. As you follow the road opening west and north, you will break away from the ski area. If the steep road up the ridge is missed and the fork that follows the river is taken, you will be soon be skiing under avalanche chutes. The road steadily climbs the ridge west. Travel along the ridge is safe from avalanche, but typically more exposed to the winds. The road will climb to a high point, at which the St. Regis Basin will be to the south and east, the Stevens Lake Basin will be to the south and west, and the upper Silver Valley will be to the north. The views are of some of the most rugged terrain in northern Idaho. The road you followed does wend down into the Willow Creek drainage below the Stevens Lakes, but is quite steep and not recommended.

## **Copper Lake Basin:**

Using the same route to the St. Regis River crossing, continue along the railroad grade another 1.6 kilometers (1 mile) to Copper Gulch. The substantial stream flowing from the gulch is the next major stream crossed by the rail grade after the St. Regis River crossing. As the gulch is approached, look for a hiking trailhead marker. Follow the trail which becomes two tracked another 2 kilometers up the gulch and Copper Lake is encountered. Copper Gulch turns up sharply behind the lake, but open slopes to the south of the lake can provide a telemarking opportunity, if the avalanche conditions permit.

**St Regis and Copper Basins  
Backcountry Ski Tours**

**Lookout Pass  
Parking Lot**

**Stevens–St Regis  
Lakes Overview**

**St Regis Lakes**

**Copper Lake**



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