

Taft Area Ski Tours:

The Taft area is about 6 miles east of Lookout Pass in Montana. The area's location to the leeward of the Bitterroot Crest assures that it receives heavy snowfall and builds a thick snow pack each winter. Taft is located along Interstate 90 which allows rapid travel to the area. One can leave Coeur d'Alene and be at the Taft Parking lot in an hour and fifteen minutes. The Taft Interstate exit is the first in Montana after crossing Lookout Pass. The exit lane and a quick right leads you to Taft's only feature, a large parking lot surrounding a Montana Highway Department sand storage facility.

The town of Taft ended after the completion of the Taft Tunnel on the Milwaukee Grade. The Taft Area is popular with snowmobile users, who fill the lot. These trails are on established roads that are sufficiently wide to accommodate snowmobile and ski use. The typical cautions of going early and yielding over to the side for snow machine traffic apply here.

From the Taft Parking Lot, at least four ski trips can be made. These are primarily on snowmobile trails and abandoned railroad grades, where, except for one notable case, the chance of avalanche is low. Substantial parts of some routes are not used by snowmobiles. The sections can give an opportunity to experience a backcountry ski without significant avalanche danger. Other sections of these skis are on downhill sections of groomed roads allowing a fast ski down.



East Portal Taft Tunnel Ski: 13.8 km (8.6 miles)

The ski to and back from the Taft Tunnel is a circuit using two abandoned railroad grades and two forest roads. It incorporates groomed snowmobile trails and a long section of the Milwaukee grade that is not groomed. The trip starts from the east end of the Taft Parking area by following the groomed snowmobile trail east. You will have an opportunity to cross the St. Regis River as two trails diverge. Go straight rather than crossing and you will be on the Northern Pacific Grade just south of the Interstate. Follow the grade for 1.2 kilometers (0.75 miles). The grade intersects the Dominion Creek Road running south across a bridge and north under the interstate.

Follow the road to your right across the bridge. The Dominion Creek Road is typically groomed for snowmobiles. The road climbs a hill and then turns south up Dominion Creek. The creek will pass under the road. Just above this point, beavers have dammed the stream creating a large wet area, typically snowed under. Wildlife sign often abounds in this area. After about 2 kilometers on the road, you will see a trestle span ahead. Just before you reach the trestle, a road cuts sharply off to the left. Follow this short, but steep road, which at times is groomed. After a short ski, you ski out onto the Milwaukee Railroad Grade. Complete the hairpin turn onto the grade and follow the grade up. You will very quickly come to the east end of the trestle spanning the Dominion Road and Creek. From the trestle there are good views of Dominion Creek below.

As you leave the trestle, a tunnel will come into view ahead. Ski to the tunnel and remove your skis for the walk through. It is a fairly short and straight tunnel, through which the other end can be seen as you enter. From the tunnel the grade heads north along the east flank of the ridge between Dominion and Rainy Creeks. It turns around this ridge and into the Rainy Creek drainage. As the grade swings back to the south and back up Rainy Creek, about 2.3 kilometers (1.4 miles) from the tunnel an overview location is reached. From this viewpoint, you can look down on the Taft parking lot. From the viewpoint the grade has a generally south direction up the Rainy Creek Valley.

Another 3.4 kilometer (2.1 miles) ski brings you to the East Portal of the Taft Tunnel; the popular starting point of the Route of the Hiawatha Bike Trail. Facilities (restroom, picnic tables and exhibits) are available at the east portal, but the area receives so much snow that unless you are there early in the winter, these are snowed under or you must climb down to make use of them. The fifty yard trip to the east portal itself should be made, but during the winter the large doors on the tunnel are closed, barring entry.

From the east portal the 4 kilometers (2.5 miles) ski back to Taft is remarkably fast. Follow the fairly steep parking lot entrance road down to the Rainy Creek Road. As part of a snowmobile route the road is typically groomed. The road leads north down the Rainy Creek drainage downhill back to Taft. As you approach Taft, you cross a bridge over the St. Regis River and soon join with the Northern Pacific Grade where you earlier skied east. Turn to the left and you shortly arrive at the Taft Parking Lot.

Bullion Pass Ski: 17.4 kilometers (10.9 miles)

The ski to Bullion Pass follows the established snowmobile route up the Hanaker Creek Road. The ski can be started from the east end of the Taft parking lot or from the east bound Interstate 90 rest stop. Round trip from Taft, it is 17.4 kilometers, but is shortened to 14.6 kilometers (9 miles) by starting from the rest stop. Aside from the shortened route, the rest area provides facilities at the start and finish and avoids a location between Taft and the rest stop where snowplows can throw road sand onto your route.

Follow the Hanaker Creek Road west from Taft, or the rest stop, paralleling Interstate 90. About 4.4 kilometers (2.8 miles) from Taft, you will approach a steep slope and the road will cross the St. Regis River and then make sharp turn to the left (south). It is a generally uphill ski 4.3 kilometers (2.7 miles) to Bullion Pass. As you approach the top of the pass you will encounter a large power line.

Just beyond the Pass is the Bullion Mine site. The slopes above the road near the mine offer the opportunity for telemark skiing, avalanche conditions permitting. Any telemark skiing should first be assessed by digging a snow pit to check the potential for avalanche. Transceivers and probe poles should be part of your gear included for the trip if telemark skiing is anticipated. Skiers going to the top of the pass cover terrain that has low avalanche potential.

The return to Taft or the rest stop is over the same route. The downhill run to the St. Regis River can be a fun glide, but if it is icy, it is a white knuckles experience.

Hanaker Road- Borax-Northern Pacific Loop: 12.3 kilometers (7.7 miles):

A ski loop with Taft at its start and finish can be made using the Hanaker Creek Road and the Northern Pacific Grade with a short steep climb up the Borax Tunnel debris pile connecting the two. Most of this route is on groomed snowmobile trail, over which avalanche danger is very low. However, the climb up the Borax Tunnel debris pile is on a steep slope with reduced “anchor” vegetation. Accordingly, this climb should only be undertaken when the snowpack is known to be stable. The spring snowpack is often stable on this slope.

Start this ski by leaving the Taft area from the west end of the parking lot. Ski the Hanaker Road 4.4 kilometers (2.75 miles) through its large bend to the south. As you approach the turn to the south you will see the steep slope to the west and as you ski south up the road the steep slope will be immediately to your right. Travel as far as the south end of the steep slope and then turn back to climb the slope. Then begin to work your way up the slope with climbing traverse, kick turns and climbing traverse. The climb can be accomplished without skins by a sufficient number of climbing traverses (4 or 5). A heavy snowpack and skies that have scales are a big assist.

As you reach the top of the slope you emerge on the Northern Pacific Grade near the east end of the Borax Tunnel. The grade is not groomed at this point. Ski downhill on the

grade to your right as it rounds the corner after the Borax Tunnel. You will soon reach the groomed section of the grade just before it passes under Interstate 90 for the first time.

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.

Taft to Saltese and Return: 18.2 kilometers (11.4 miles)

Another ski loop with Taft as its start and finish is available to the east. Follow the East Portal Taft Tunnel route described earlier east along the Northern Pacific Grade and up the Dominion Creek Road to the Milwaukee Grade (3.2 kilometers; 2 miles). At the top of the steep connector road ski straight or down the railroad grade. The grade runs north out of the Dominion Creek drainage and wraps east around the mountain. This grade is groomed some years and not others. A 7.4 kilometer ski (4.6 miles) from the top of the connector road brings you to Saltese. You will see the small town across the Interstate on your left as you approach. The town has a restaurant/ bar that can be a nice rest stop on the tour.

You will approach a trestle crossing a road. Just before the grade goes onto the trestle a road to the left leads down to the road below. Under icy conditions, this steep road can cause the prudent skier to walk. A few yards to the north, is the Northern Pacific Grade. The Northern Pacific Grade is typically groomed. Follow the grade west (left). It parallels Interstate 90 for 7.6 kilometers (4.8 miles) back to Taft. You will intersect your outbound route as you reach the Dominion Creek Road. The only drawback to the ski back from Saltese to Taft is the road noise along the adjacent Interstate. Skiers often receive many waves from bored semi-truck drivers.

During some years both the Dominion Creek-Milwaukee Road and Northern Pacific parts of this trip are groomed for snowmobile use. If a skate skier can work out the groomer's schedule, and be there shortly after these sections are groomed, this is a great 18.2 kilometer (11.4 mile) skate ski.



Taft to Saltese Round Trip Ski

Taft
Parking
Lot

Dominion
Creek Road

Northern Pacific Grade

Milwaukee Grade

Saltese

© 2007 Europa Technologies

© 2007 Google™