

Bard Creek ski tour

by Dave Cooper

Before getting to this week's tour, I wanted to share a cautionary tale with you.

With reports of up to two feet of new powder it seemed like the perfect day to stretch the legs on an old favorite, the Bard Creek Trail. As I headed out the mercury hovered around zero and was destined to stay there all day.

Conditions were excellent for a late November day. At the parking area I recalled the last time I'd been there with several friends. As we prepared to head up the trail a dog belonging to another group of skiers decided to relieve himself on a friend's pack - he was not amused.

The trail was untracked, so it was a bit of work breaking through the new snow. I knew, however that the rewards of skiing down the trail in the fluffy powder would more than make up for the effort.

I was a little more than four miles up the trail when the cable of my binding broke. Although I had my usual fifteen pound pack with me with lots of extra clothing, food, water etc., I'd neglected to put in any repair materials. I'd used the spare cable on a previous trip and hadn't replaced it. The skiing for the day was over. Nothing for it but to put the skies on the pack and posthole back down the trail.

While the consequences of the equipment failure this time were nothing more than to rob me of the downhill run I'd been anticipating (and to make the outing more strenuous than it would normally have been), it made me think about preparedness in the backcountry, especially in winter and especially if you are traveling alone.

If you spend much time in the mountains, you can be sure that accidents, injuries and equipment failures will occur. Perhaps even (though I hate to admit it) poor judgment. Whether an incident becomes serious or not depends on how well prepared we are to deal with it.

Being prepared goes beyond just having the skills to complete a trip under normal conditions. It includes the ability to handle the unexpected, to stay calm and assess the situation, to have the physical conditioning to tap reserves if needed.

For several years I taught winter mountaineering skills for the Colorado Mountain Club. Shortly after one of the schools had ended I was contacted by a recent graduate to tell me that some of the techniques learned in that school had come in useful on a recent hut to hut ski tour. Difficult snow conditions had slowed them down. Unable to locate the next hut and with night falling they used some of the skills they had learned to construct emergency snow shelters for the group. Everyone spent a relatively comfortable night and they were able to continue the trip the next morning. For more information on the schools offered by the Colorado Mountain Club, go to <http://www.cmc.org/>.

Most of the time the outcome of a mishap isn't too serious. For those occasions where it might be, I recommend acquiring the skills to handle the unexpected.

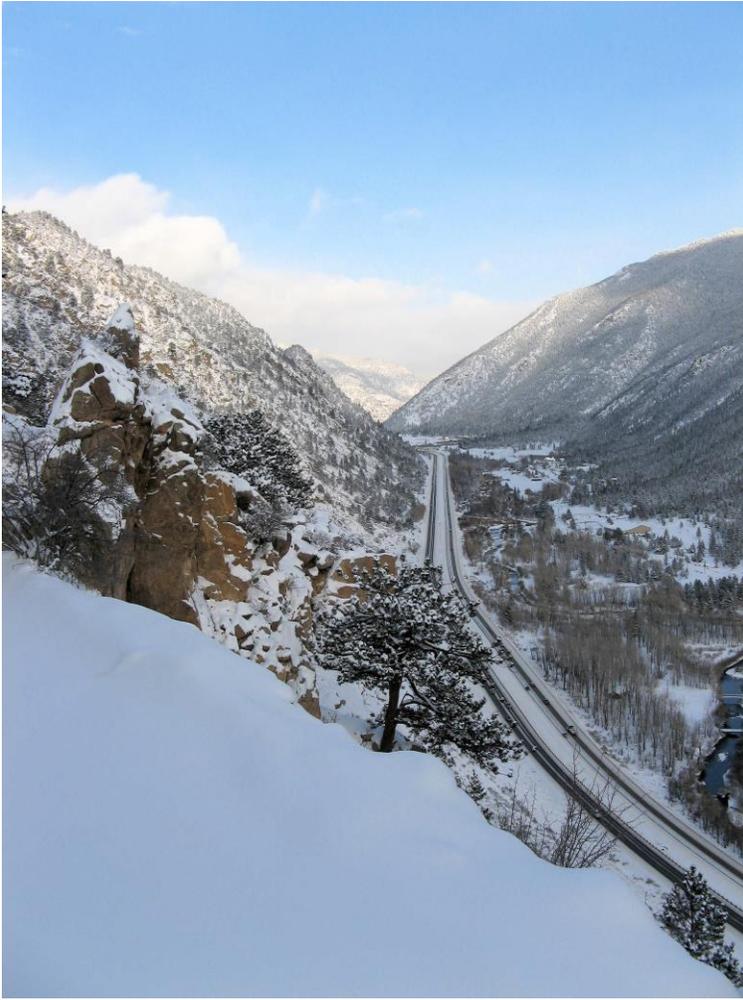
Back to the tour...

Getting to the Trailhead: From I-70, take Exit 232 and follow US Highway 40 into the town of Empire. At Jenny's Restaurant, turn left onto Main Street and drive south for 1.1 miles to the end of the plowed road, near the junction with a private road. Park in the small, plowed out area on the left side of the road.

Hike Statistics: Trailhead to treeline at 10,900 feet: 2180 feet of total elevation gain in 5.3 miles one way.

Difficulty: A long intermediate ski mostly on a roadbed. For a less strenuous day the trip can be shortened and is suitable for beginning skiers. If you stay below treeline the avalanche potential is low.

USGS Quad: Georgetown, CO; Grays Peak, CO



Hike Description

From the plowed parking area, which is almost a mile before the old parking area, head south up the road as it gains a small ridge directly above I-70. It's an impressive view from here.

Overlooking I-70

The road continues through a roadcut and soon turns away from the highway and gradually climbs through an area of private properties. The somewhat intimidating "KEEP OUT" signs refer to the property on either side of the road. Stay on the road and you'll be fine. (As always, respect private property).



Skiing through the road cut

At 0.9 miles pass the turnoff for Republican and Democrat Mountains. Reach the Arapaho National Forest Boundary after 1.6 miles. The trail steepens slightly for a short distance before again flattening out, and reaches the old Bard Creek Mine after 2.7 miles (staying straight at a couple of road junctions along the way). Litz and Lankford, in their excellent but hard to find guidebook "Skiing Colorado's Backcountry Northern Mountains - Trails and Tours" (Fulcrum Press), suggest this as a good lunch spot for those wanting a shorter day.

Bard Creek Mine

For those continuing on, re-enter the National Forest at 2.9 miles and continue to climb gradually, staying right at another road junction at 3.2 miles.

The trailhead for Bard Peak is reached after 3.4 miles (at the road closure) and the trail narrows. The trail, with occasional blue diamonds, continues to treeline just below 11,000 feet, which is where this tour ends.



Beyond this point avalanche hazard can increase substantially.

Head the skis downhill and enjoy a fast run down.

