

Grand Mesa Cross Country Ski Trails

by Dave Cooper



Panoramic views of the Elk and West Elk Mountains, seen from Grand Mesa

Skiing on top of Grand Mesa had been high on my list for a long time – it just never seemed to happen, for whatever reason. On a recent trip to the West Slope to visit friends in Montrose, however, the opportunity presented itself. Several days of snow, wind and low temperatures gave way to clear blue skies and almost no wind. The ideal time to get out the cross country skis and check out the area.

With an elevation of approximately 10,000 feet, the Grand Mesa seems to catch many of the storms coming in from the west. Wonderful snow conditions and great views make this a fun outing, although at this time of year trails can get a little icy if it hasn't snowed for a while.

The Grand Mesa is under the jurisdiction of the Grand Mesa National Forest, while the ski trails are maintained by the Grand Mesa Nordic Council, a non-profit group. No fees are charged to access the trail system.

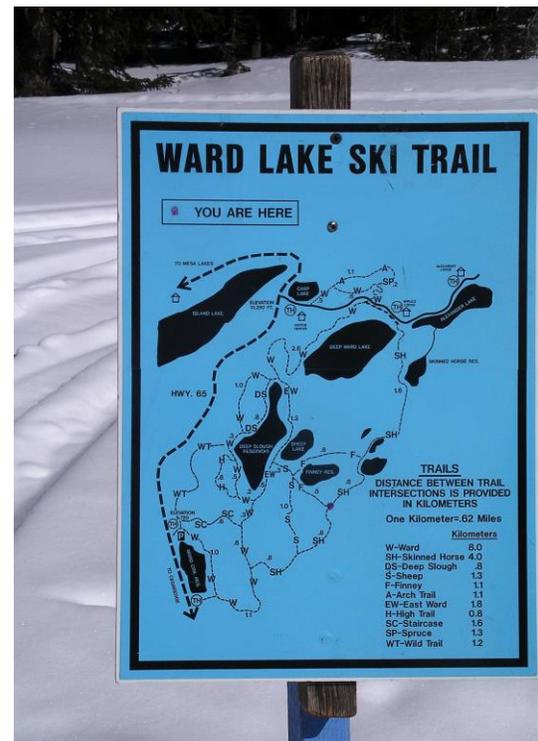
Ski trails are divided into two types – groomed and back country. The groomed trails have both a set track and a skating surface, while the backcountry trails are just that – unmaintained.

Trails are well marked by a combination of blue diamonds (often with trail names written in their center), blue posts in open areas and where necessary, blue plastic arrows indicating trail turns. Trail junctions are supplied with information boards / maps. In addition, maps may be available at trailheads, although it would be wise to print out a copy of the trail map from the Grand Mesa Nordic Council website (<http://gmnc.info>).

One of the excellent trail junction information boards

Getting to the Trailhead: State Highway 65 cuts across the top of the Grand Mesa, allowing access to the cross country skiing either from the north off I-70, or from the south via the town of Delta. Note that if arriving from the north, there is a chance that the road could be closed above Powderhorn Ski Resort in adverse weather conditions.

If approaching from the north, take Exit 49 from I-70 (signed to Powderhorn Ski Area) and drive south on State Highway 65 for approximately 35 miles, passing Powderhorn on the way, until you reach a junction with the road signed to the Visitor Center. Turn left onto this road. Continue past the Visitor Center for half a mile to the Ward Lake trailhead (Waypoint "Trailhead"). If approaching from the south, from the junction of US Highway 50 and State Highway 92 in Delta, drive east on Highway 92 for 3.9 miles to an intersection with State Highway 65. Turn north on Highway 65 and drive for 27.6 miles to the turnoff to the Visitor Center. Turn right and drive half a mile past the Visitor Center to the Ward Lake TH.



For this week's trail we explore a "sampler" in the Ward Lake area, combining both groomed and backcountry trails. Remember though that there are many miles of trails up here, suitable for all ability levels.



One indication that they receive plenty of snow up here.

Trail Description

From the trailhead parking area, walk across the road to the Ward Lake trailhead and start skiing on the groomed Ward Trail as it heads along the west side of Deep Ward Lake. Stay on this trail, passing junctions with the East Ward and Deep Slough trails, both heading off to your left, until a trail junction with the Wild Trail after 1.3 miles.

Hike Statistics:

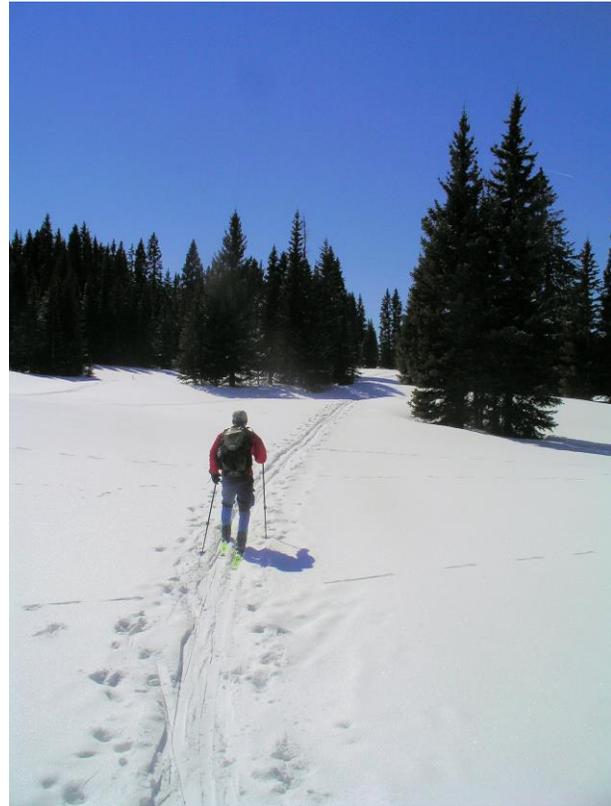
On this loop trail the cumulative elevation gained and lost is 650 feet in a total distance of 6 miles.

Difficulty: The Wild Trail is rated "Most Difficult", while the rest of the loop is considered "Moderate".

USGS Quads: Grand Mesa, CO

The Wild trail is well named, and forms the greatest challenge on the loop. Rated Most Difficult, the Wild trail initially undulates quite gently before plunging down the narrow trail between large, solid-looking conifers (i.e. don't run into them!). Most sections of the downhill average about 7 degrees, with the steepest section approaching 15 degrees and including some sharp turns. This section is quite exciting.

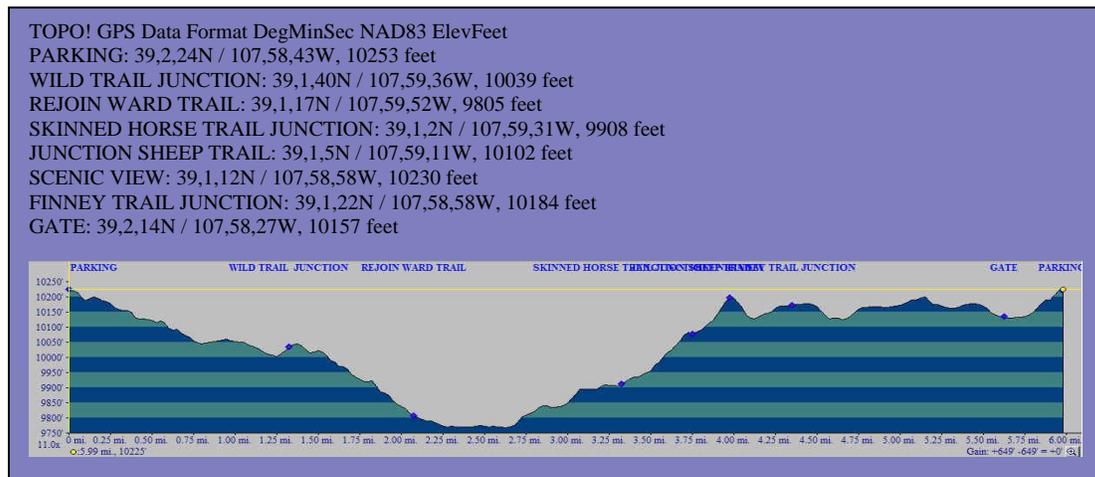
After three quarters of a mile the Wild Trail dumps you out (possibly quite literally) onto the relatively mild Ward Trail again. Time to dust off any snow that might somehow have accumulated on your clothing. Pass an alternate trailhead and continue on the Ward Trail as it heads towards the southernmost point on the loop, staying to the east of Ward Creek Reservoir. Stay on this section of the Ward Trail for a total of 1.2 miles as the trail turns north again before reaching an intersection with the Skinned Horse trail. Turn right (northeast) onto the Skinned Horse Trail and find yourself once again on a backcountry trail. You will stay on the Skinned Horse Trail for the rest of the outing, another 2.7 miles.



From the intersection with the Ward Trail the Skinned Horse Trail climbs quite steeply for almost 0.6 miles, where a slight detour will bring you to a spot with fine views of several mountain ranges (Waypoint “SCENIC VIEW”). See if you can identify the peaks of the Elk Range, West Elk Range and even some of the peaks in the San Juan Range (Uncompahgre and Wetterhorn Peaks for example).

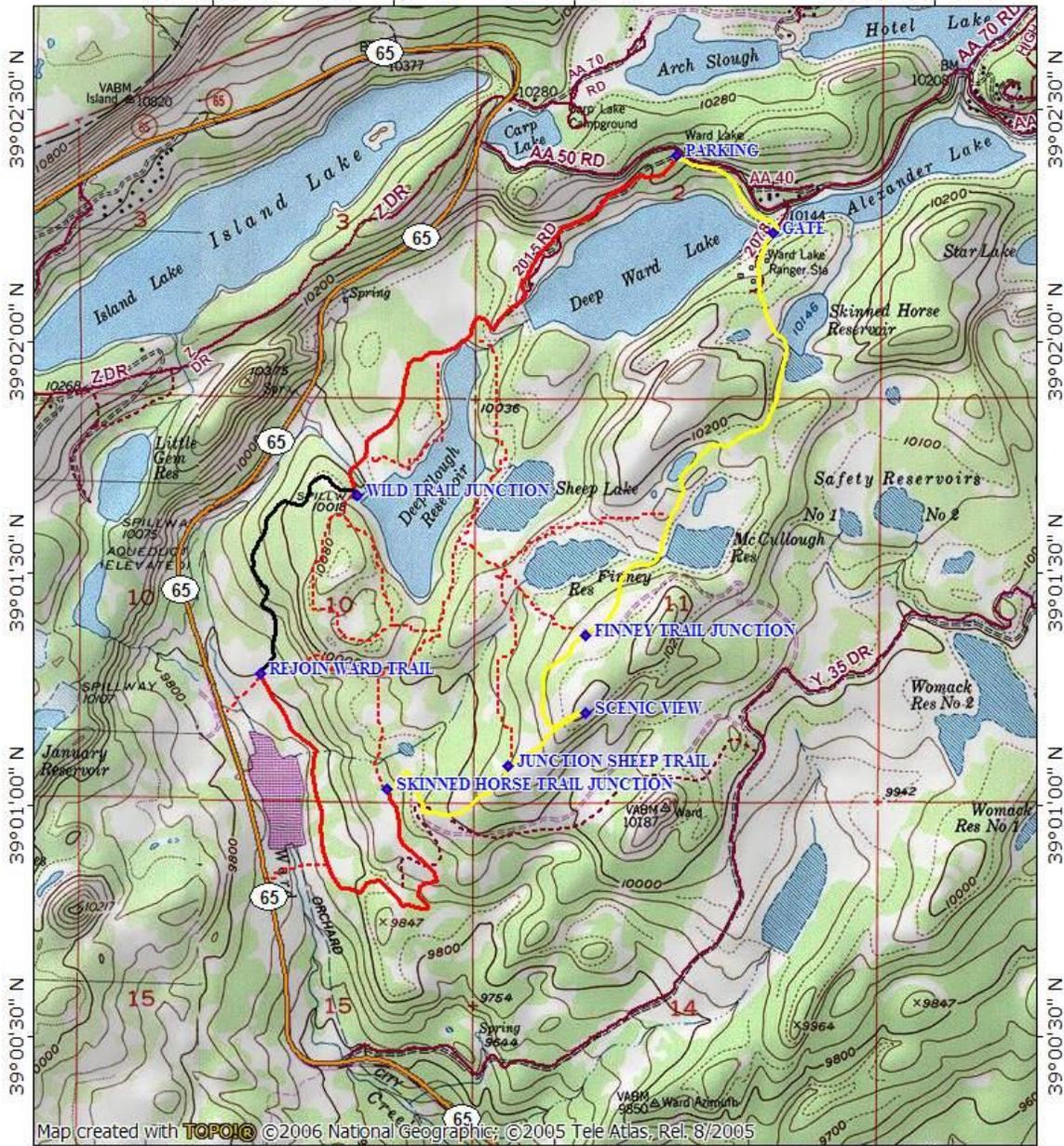
Gliding across the flats

Re-join the Skinned Horse Trail and continue on undulating terrain as the trail heads northeast through wooded and open areas, passing several trail junctions along the way. The trail turns north as it nears the east side of Deep Ward Lake, becomes more of a logging road and passes through the cabins of the Ward Lake Ranger Station. Pass through an open gate as you exit the Ranger station and look for the trail to make a sharp left turn at an almost totally buried outhouse. Follow the trail as it parallels the road for just over 0.3 miles, meeting up with the Ward trail again a few yards from your starting point.



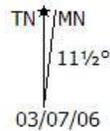
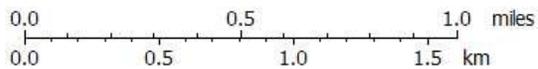
TOPO! map printed on 03/07/06 from "Untitled5.tpo"

108°00'00" W 107°59'30" W 107°59'00" W WGS84 107°58'00" W



Map created with TOPO! © 2006 National Geographic, © 2005 Tele Atlas, Rel. 8/2005

108°00'00" W 107°59'30" W 107°59'00" W WGS84 107°58'00" W



-  **Skinned Horse Trail**
-  **Ward Trail**
-  **Wild Trail**
-  **Other Trails (approximate)**

