

Mesa Lakes Ski Tour by Dave Cooper

With friends reporting epic snowfalls on the Grand Mesa, we decided it was time for another visit to this winter playground.

On past outings, we had stayed mainly on the groomed trail system maintained by the Grand Mesa Nordic Council (<http://www.gmnc.org/>). For a change we decided to visit another area of the mesa, designated for backcountry skiing.

Two main trails begin at the popular Mesa Lakes Trailhead. On the west side of the road is the West Bench Ski Trail, while the Griffith Ski Loop heads northeast. We decided to check out the Griffith Lake loop.

The Griffith Lake trail offers many touring options, some requiring a car shuttle and some returning to the starting point at the Mesa Lakes Trailhead. We headed out towards Long Slough Reservoir, then turned around and headed back, making a detour to complete a nice loop trail passing by Water Dog Reservoir. For a short day I would highly recommend this loop trail.

Fresh powder makes for a fun day of touring - small.jpg

On the day that we skied here, a significant Arctic cold front was predicted to arrive by the afternoon, and it arrived right on schedule, creating blizzard conditions and very poor visibility while we were approaching Long Slough Reservoir. Even with the blue poles placed along the way to serve as trail markers, routefinding became an issue, and reminded us that people have become lost up here. With the wind rapidly covering up our tracks, we were happy to head back to the relative comfort of treeline.



Getting to the Mesa Lakes Trailhead: If approaching from I-70, drive to the intersection with Highway 65 in DeBeque Canyon (Exit 49), signed to the Powderhorn Ski area. Drive east then south on Highway 65. Pass the Powderhorn ski area 19.4 miles from I-70 and reach the Mesa Lakes Trailhead parking area 24.9 miles from I-70. The trailhead can also be reached from the south, via Cedaredge.

GPS coordinates for the trailhead (NAD83): 39°3'15"N, 108°5'29"W, 10,035 feet.

Hike Description

From the large parking area, carry your skis across the highway to the trailhead sign. Start skiing up the wide trail as it climbs gradually through aspen and conifers. At mile 0.4 reach a signed trail junction. This is the start of a loop trail. Stay straight (signed to Long Slough and Bull Creeks) to ski the loop in a

Statistics: The tour described gains and loses 432 feet in 4.9 miles round trip. If you eliminate the detour to Long Slough Reservoir and ski the loop described, you will gain and lose 210 feet in 2.6 miles round trip.

Difficulty: Suitable for intermediate skiers (strong novice skiers should enjoy the shorter loop trail) with good map skills. Due to the sometimes confusing proliferation of trails, pay careful attention to your route. Remember, you can always reverse your route if you're not sure which way to go. This is backcountry touring and people have become lost in this area. I always carry a GPS receiver.

clockwise direction. In one tenth of a mile reach an information kiosk with a detailed map. Here the ski trail turns right, leaving the road going to Stump Pond. Continue climbing gradually to another road junction at mile 1.0. (Yellow-painted posts may be visible, poking up through the snow.) Bear right here and climb a moderate hill as the trail heads east, then drops gradually, reaching another junction (shown on the map as "Loop Junction") at mile 1.3. To continue around the loop, take the right fork as it drops down into an open area, or, for a longer outing, stay left, heading towards Long Slough Reservoir.

Starting up the wide trail - small.jpg

The trail to Long Slough heads north, dropping 100 vertical feet on a fun run down through forest to an open area. Here's where the occasional blue poles become important. Follow the poles northeast across open terrain, gradually climbing to a broad saddle above the west end of Long Slough Reservoir, at mile 2.5. Although the trail continues, we turned around at this point due to deteriorating weather conditions, retracing our tracks back to the Loop Junction, reached at mile 3.6. To complete the loop, turn left (southwest) and drop into an open area. Continue skiing southwest, passing Water Dog Reservoir on your left shortly before reaching a gate at mile 4.4. Continue past the gate as the trail descends, returning to the first signed Trail Junction at mile 4.6. Turn left and follow your tracks back to the trailhead.



Heading uphill from the road junction at mile 1.0 - small.jpg





A good day out, despite the conditions - small-2.jpg

TOPO! map printed on 01/19/11 from "Untitled with wpts2.tpo"
 108°05'30" W 108°05'00" W 108°04'30" W 108°04'00" W WGS84 108°03'10" W



