

### Colorado Snowshoeing

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**Colorado snowshoers can choose from numerous uncrowded winter trails. (Ral Sandberg photo)**

### Secret Snowshoeing Trails

*Three great winter trails you might never have thought about.*

By Claire Walter

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The most popular winter trails that are easy accessible from the Front Range are *popular*. Very popular. Sometimes, too popular. Crowded parking areas access trails that have lost their sense of solitude that many snowshoers treasure – particularly on weekends. You can still find the sense of tranquility and solitude on trails beyond the mainstream of snowshoeing and ski touring. Here is a trio of uncrowded routes:

#### South Chicago Creek

This trail, which nibbles at the fringes of the Mt. Evans Wilderness, is sparsely used even in summer. Winter usage is lower still. Even when parking areas for other trailheads so close to Front Range cities overflow, you might not see anyone on this hike paralleling South Chicago Creek. The summer parking area resembles a forest clearing with the trailhead at just under 10,000 feet, marked by a sizable informational sign and a trail register for the Mt. Evans Wilderness up a short incline on the left. The trail bears southwest with little deviation and few bends until becoming indistinct at about 11,300 feet.

The route climbs steadily – some would say relentlessly, given that with such light use, you might well be breaking trail – through the coniferous forest. You might spot a snow-covered rectangle in a clearing to the left of the trail. This old cookstove, a remnant of a sawmill that once occupied the site, is the only real landmark along the way, and it might be buried in the snow. There are no views until the trail peters out just about at treeline, where you will see the commanding face of 13,600-foot Gray Wolf Mountain. Return the way you came.

**GETTING THERE:** From I-70's Exit 240 (Idaho Springs/Mt. Evans), south on Colorado 103 for 8.9 miles to an unsigned road on the right, marked on some maps and indicated in some guidebooks as Hefferman Gulch Road/Forest Service Road 247 (you will see the backside of a stop sign). Over Squaw Pass from Bergen Park, on the left 4.5 miles past the Mt. Evans Road. Then 1.2 miles to the summer trailhead or at least about one mile to a fork in the road, with an iron gate to the left. Take the right fork. Or, begin snowshoeing up the unpaved road past a handful of houses and cabins, adding about another 500 feet of elevation gain to your hike

#### North Fork Trail

This beguiling trail follows the North Fork of the Big Thompson River, just northeast of Rocky Mountain National Park. More about a moderate excursion than a dramatic high-country adventure, this low-key route offers good snowshoeing after a storm but perhaps some bareboots hiking in a dry period. From a starting elevation just under 9,000, it drops a couple of hundred feet and then ascends about 350 feet to culminating at a historic resort site. It

Direct access to the Comanche Peak Wilderness and the North Fork Trail (Forest Service Trail #929) is from the south side of the parking area near the restrooms. A wider road up Bulwark Ridge that passes a summer resort is

through at a metal gate at the west side of the parking area and is farther from the wilderness boundary. You can use either route both on the outbound hike and on the return, or make a loop by starting your hike on one trail and ending it with the other. Both routes connect to form the North Fork Trail that continues to your destination, the remnants of the deserted resort village in a valley called Dunraven Park.

If you begin hiking to the Bulwark Ridge Trail, ascend straight up a wide road flanked by pines and aspens. This is the most likely section to be snow-free and crests just before the Comanche Peak Wilderness boundary sign. Proceed straight through a lodgepole gate, and drop into the North Fork valley. Stay on the main route, because it passes private property and several resort buildings. Go around the small rodeo area and continue your descent.

At the junction of the narrower North Fork Trail, gently ascend into the Comanche Peaks Wilderness. As the woods deepen, so does the snow cover. The valley first narrows into a chasm, with the stream on your left, then widens, and the trail crosses over a wooden bridge and skirts a forested hillside in an area dominated by huge pine trees. At a summer sign directing horses to the right and foot traffic to the left, take the left option and cross the stream again over another wooden bridge. The valley then opens to a large open area, the ghost of a hunting resort developed by the Earl of Dunraven. It was abandoned in the early years of 20<sup>th</sup> century, reportedly following an outbreak of dysentery, but one cabin remains (on the left of the open area) from the old resort, which might be marked as Dunraven Park on some maps, Deserted Village on others, and not at all on still others. Turn around here and retrace your route as far as the Bulwark Ridge Trail/North Fork Trail junction, where you can return the way you came or bear right onto the latter trail that leads along the cliffy valley. The trail makes a sharp right up a steep, wooded hillside back to the Dunraven Trailhead parking area.

**GETTING THERE:** From Estes Park, Route 43 (Devil's Gulch Road) to the northeast past Glen Haven. From Lyons, U.S. 34 west toward Glen Haven and turn right onto Larimer County Road 43 to Larimer County Road 518 for about two miles to the large parking area on the left at the end of the road. This is marked as the Dunraven Trailhead parking area.

### Long Draw Trail

This trail is well known to Fort Collins winter recreationists, but compared to the major routes on the east side of Rocky Mountain National Park, the Brainard Lake area, and Vail Pass, it is not heavily used. Additionally, snowshoers from elsewhere are often surprised by the scenic drive, as well as by the pleasant route through mixed trees and intermittent clearings. It is accessed directly from the well-maintained road through Poudre Canyon. From the parking area (described below), begin following snowshoe and ski tracks toward the forest, crossing an often-windy open area but soon entering the trees. Frequent blue diamonds mark the trail that climbs steadily through a narrow valley. It levels out as it winds through a series of deep woods and small clearings.

It briefly joins Long Draw Reservoir Road (Forest Service Road 156), a wide route that is extensively used by snowmobiles. Go left and continue along the road for a short distance, then at a ground stake marked 30/35 and a subtle wooden sign affixed to a

tree, bear right onto the Long Draw Ski Trail. The lovely trail climbs and winds through dense woods, including numerous beautiful Ponderosa pines. After a sharp bend to the left, the route enters a large open area with widely spaced lodgepoles and a panoramic mountain view. After a few more small rises and dips, the trail narrows and drops toward the Long Draw Reservoir Road. Although this is not a heavy-use trail, but be alert for descending skiers. The ski trail levels out slightly before actually intersecting with Long Draw Reservoir Road. You can either turn around retrace your route, or go left onto the road for the return to the parking area.

**GETTING THERE:** From Fort Collins, take U.S. 287 and turn left (west) onto Colorado 14 for 53 miles to a large, restroom-equipped parking lot on the left side of the road.

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