

Poudre Canyon, Colorado

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Even on a gray day, the jagged ridgeline of the Nokhu Craggs looms distinctively over the Gould Lake Ski Trail, equally suitable for ski-touring and snowshoeing. (Claire Walter photo)

Poudre Canyon Snowshoe Trails

By Claire Walter
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The 1820s fur trappers who gave the Cache la Poudre River its name were prescient, but in a very different way than they ever could have imagined. They used the French phrase that translates as "hide the powder" to commemorate the large cache of gunpowder that they secreted along the river during a massive blizzard. Back then, they could not have

imagined that the upper reaches of the river would be treasured for powder snow drifting reliably from the skies that caused them grief but now is a valued recreational resource.

Even when winter days along the northern Front Range are sunny and balmy, clouds tend to stack up over the nearby high country – and it is hard to imagine how wintry it can be up there from November well into April and often May. Since the time of the Utes and the trappers, the area now called Cameron Pass ranks as one of Colorado's best winter playgrounds. Especially on weekends, droves of Fort Collins snowshoers and cross-country skiers head north on U.S. 287 to Ted's Place, a landmark intersection, where they turn west onto Route 14, with scenery that won't quit and unsurpassed recreational access. This is Colorado's northernmost year-round route into the heart of the mountains and to the vast, sparsely populated valley of North Park beyond. Only since it was paved in 1979 has it been maintained for year-round use.

As one of Colorado's designated Scenic and Historic Byways, this route through the Poudre Canyon makes for a dramatic drive in all seasons – whether or not you ever strap snowshoes to your feet. As you approach from the east, you will travel quickly from the near-desert to the montane and sub-alpine zones with vegetation changing dramatically from about 5,700 feet at the canyon mouth to 10,275 feet atop Cameron Pass. Scrubby dryland plants give way to the luxuriant conifers and aspens of the mountains.

The road flirts with the Cache la Poudre River, a (mostly) free-flowing watercourse that bears national Wild & Scenic River designation. From its headwaters in Rocky Mountain National Park, it has carved a canyon that is not only Colorado's longest but also arguably its most dramatic. Especially in the canyon's lower stretches, Poudre Canyon is sprinkled with small riverside resorts and campgrounds, often clustered in tourist-oriented hamlets such as Bellevue, Rustic and Glendevey. Many are closed or scaled-down in winter, but the good news is that winter day-recreation traffic moves along steadily, unimpeded by awe-struck summer visitors unaccustomed to curvy canyon driving, awestruck by the scenery or both. Along shaded portions and higher elevations, when the water's edge is rimed with ice and shaded banks are dusted with snow that contrast against the canyon's stark rock walls, the roadside snapshots can be unbearably beautiful.

Picnic areas and summer trailheads abound along the highway, some leading into the Cache la Poudre along the lower canyon and the Neota, Never Summer, Comanche Peak, and Rawah Wildernesses higher up. The Colorado State Forest flanks Highway 14 near Cameron Pass, and the northwest corner of Rocky Mountain National is not far away. That's a lot of protected, managed land to explore, and abundant trails enable you to do so.

After a snowstorm, many routes just off the highway become snowshoeable, but cover is reliable when at trailhead elevations of 9,000 or higher, more than 50 miles from the Ted's Place turnoff. Many are wide, unplowed summer roads that are often shared with snowmobiles, while others are narrower and open only for non-motorized recreation. Some are equipped with toilet facilities at the trailhead, not insignificant at a cold, wind-whipped trailhead parking area.

The first significant winter trails start around Chambers Lake, created by damming the Laramie River. Unplowed Green Ridge Road (County Road 103/Forest Road 190) on the right side of the highway flirts with the northeast shore of Chambers

Lake. It rises mildly toward smaller Lost Lake, Laramie Lake and eventually Twin Lakes. When frozen, these lakes, which nestle in gentle depressions in the land, have the appearance of clearings in the forest.

Just up the highway is the portal to the popular route to Blue Lake. Officially known as the Sawmill Creek Trail, it offers glimpses of Chambers Lake as it leads through a long, gentle stretch through a thick lodgepole forest. After crossing frozen, drifted-over Sawmill Creek, the route enters the Rawah Wilderness and steepens considerably. Blue Lake, a natural mountain feature, is trapped in a deep little valley with trees on one side and the mostly open slopes of Clark Peak on the other.

Two options present themselves for enjoying the Long Draw area on the left side of the highway. The main trailhead, shared by motorized and non-motorized users, directly accesses the 10-mile Long Draw Road. Many snowshoers can't bear sharing a snowmobile route and opt for the Long Draw/Meadows trailhead, but others appreciate the well-packed trail. In either case, snowshoers soon veer off onto either the Long Draw Ski Trail or the Meadows Ski Trail, both named before snowshoeing became a popular winter recreational activity. This area is notable for hilly terrain, beautiful stands of beefy Ponderosa pine, denser subalpine fir and Engelmann spruce and thick willows captured in a frozen wetland that is inaccessible in summer.

The reservoir road slices between the Comanche Peak and Neota Wilderness areas, while the Meadows Ski Trail climbs through the latter toward Zimmerman Lake, where you are rewarded with a splendid mountain panorama. That reward comes more easily if you continue driving past the roadside Joe Wright Reservoir to the Zimmerman Lake Trail, which is a quarter the distance and less than half the elevation gain of the Meadows Ski Trail.

Across the highway from the Zimmerman Lake Trailhead is access to the Montgomery Pass Trail. This short and steep route is perfect for a workout, imperfect for a casual snowshoe outing. It starts along Montgomery Creek briefly through a clearing before entering the spruce/fir forest. After a lung-busting ascent, you reach Montgomery Pass, which is considerably higher than nearby Cameron Pass, which the highway crosses. From there, you can gaze across the forest to North Park's expanse, the flat white surfaces of frozen lakes and reservoirs and a chain of snow-capped summits.

A large parking area at the crest of Cameron Pass access the Michigan Ditch Trail, which is short, wide, flat and ideal for new snowshoers, families with small children and lowland visitors who might not function too well at more than 10,000 feet above sea level. It offers a great deal of scenic bang for the buck (and since it is in the Colorado State Forest, you will have to pay a modest use fee) for its stunning views of Mt. Richthofen and the Nokhu Crags, rock spires that are a signature of this part of the Never Summer Range.

Dropping down the west side of Cameron Pass puts you into the heart of the Colorado State Forest. The Gould Lake Ski Trail, also named before snowshoeing soared, is a fabulous loop trail bracketing the Michigan River. The trail is known for accessibility, scenery, good snow, relatively low usage and the possibility of seeing a moose. There are two natural access points, one at the Ranger Lakes Campground and the other at the Gould Community Center, both on the left side of the highway. In either case, this loop can be snowshoed in several combinations by stringing together forest roads and trails, crossing or circling the broad Michigan River Valley with its backside view of the

Nokhu Crags and leading through an aspen-conifer forest. This was a historic logging area, and the trail features remnants from the timber days. Interpretive signs identify a snow-covered lump as sawdust from former movable mills that worked this area. Another pile is comprised of neatly stacked, decades-old trim, remnants when round logs were sawn into flat boards, and yet another next landmark features old cabin ruins.

Of course, when you are finished snowshoeing, you can return to Ted's Place via Colorado 14. Another possibility is to plunge into North Park, where a roadside moose sighting is also possible. Turn left in Rand and follow Colorado 125 through the lonely, rolling expanses of this enormous valley until you hit U.S. 40 just west of Granby, which along with Fraser and Winter Park, offer an abundance of places to stop for a bite before climbing over Berthoud Pass and a return to the Front Range. It's a long drive, but it completes the circle and turns a snowshoe excursion into a modest road trip.

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