

The Tahoe Tale

Sierra Nevada of California and Nevada

16-18 January 2024

Snowy peaks

Julie at Silver Lake

Amador County, California
Eldorado* National Forest
Elevation 7,300 feet / 2,225 meters

Snowy peaks

This is a story about snow. I like it. Mountains. I like them. And winter. My favorite season.

On the coastal plain of North Carolina, where my sister, Julie, and I grew up, all of those things were severely rationed by Mother Nature. In the part of California where I live now, I can get to them easily enough that I go to the Sierra Nevada every winter just to be in the snow and shoot pictures. Julie, who still lives near where we were born and raised and sees all the pictures, called a few weeks before Christmas and said, "Take me to the snow with you."

So, last week I met her flight at Reno, Nevada — just downhill from Lake Tahoe and squarely in the heart of Sierra snow country — where we spent a few days in a world we rarely experienced as kids.

Growing up, Hamlet would get enough snow one or two days some winters to turn the ground white. The first time that happened, though, was the most spectacular. I was in third grade. Just a month before, I missed the first days of school in my life with a case of mumps. All there was to see on television was the first-ever broadcast of an Olympic Games, in Squaw Valley, California, now called Palisades Tahoe.

I had no clue how that week of TV in February 1960 would affect my life. I simply learned basic facts about the world beyond my town that were fascinating:

1. There are places on Earth where the sun shines and snow still lasts past lunch.
2. There are people who can slide down mountainsides on "skis."
3. And there is a game called "hockey" in which guys beat the ice and each other with wooden sticks.



Sledding on Clay Street. (From OurHamlet.org, originally published in the Hamlet News-Messenger by Roger Simmons)

It looked like a lot of fun to me.

A couple of weeks later, my father waked me up on a Wednesday morning in March and said I should look out the front window. The snow in the front yard was different from what I remembered from past winters. Juanita Avenue had disappeared. So had the blades of grass that poked through earlier snowfalls. Heck, even the pinecones in the front yard were buried. Outside, snow fell into the top of my rubber rain boots. There was going to be no school.

Theologians and school teachers, which Julie was, know this as a state of grace.

— *Continued on fourth page*

Who let the dogs out?

Washoe County, Nevada

Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest

Elevation 7,800 ft / 2,400 m



Snowy peaks

— Continued from second page

Mail would not be delivered this day. Neither would a sale be recorded in the office of the Ford dealership. My parents, Julie, my brother Lee and I were soon at the Clay Street hill with a sled that came from somewhere. It spent the rest of the day sliding toward the railroad tracks at the bottom of the hill beneath a pile of family, friends and anyone else who could latch on.

There were no skis, but my father's golf clubs stuck in the snow made a great slalom course to run through in the back yard. And on Thursday, after an overnight sleet crusted the top of the snow with a layer of ice thick enough to stand on, his clubs were a suitable substitute for hockey sticks to bat around the pinecones we dug out from the base of the trees in the front yard. That soaked my wool gloves, so my mother gave me the long white cotton ones she wore to church.



Typical snow at the house where I grew up.

There was still lingering snow when we went back to school on Monday. But not Wednesday morning, when I awakened to another deep, school-canceling snow. Or the next Wednesday.

Three Wednesdays in March. Three big snows.

"You'll grow out of this," many people told me.

I would break my collarbone in a sledding accident a few years later. Crashed the Scarborough's VW on an icy bridge. Spent a week without a shower and ate meals cooked in our den fireplace after the ice storm of '69.

But when I moved to the Blue Ridge Mountains for my first newspaper job, I learned to ski. And then I began to take ski vacations to the Rocky Mountains. I got married and went to that 1960 Olympic venue for my honeymoon to ski with Emily. And once I began writing about the Olympics, I began to ski other Olympic trails in British Columbia and Utah and the Canadian Rockies and the French Alps. Covered hockey and figure skating. Spent January and February weeks in Moscow, Norway and Alaska.

There are things I've outgrown, my mother's church gloves among them.

But snow, mountains, winter? Nope.

And neither has Julie.



Emerald Bay

El Dorado* County, California

Emerald Bay State Park

Elevation 6,220 ft / 1,896 m



Palisades Tahoe Ski Team

Placer County, California

Tahoe National Forest

Elevation 6,200 ft / 1,890 m



Palisades Peak

Peak elevation 8,895 ft / 2,708 m

Photo point elevation ~7,900 ft / 2,410

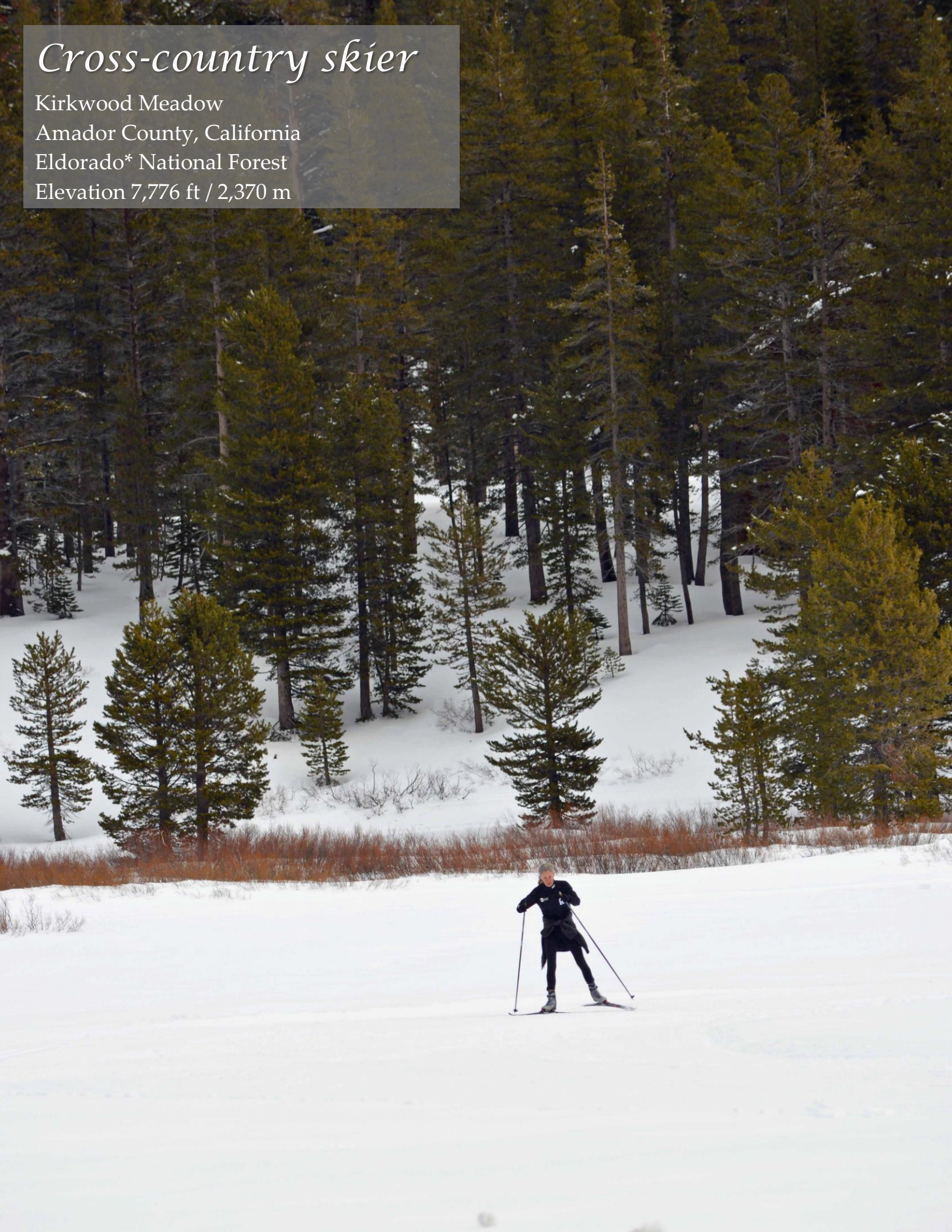
Cross-country skier

Kirkwood Meadow

Amador County, California

Eldorado* National Forest

Elevation 7,776 ft / 2,370 m





Royal Gorge neighborhood

Soda Springs
Nevada County, California
Eldorado* National Forest
Elevation 6,768 ft / 2,063 m



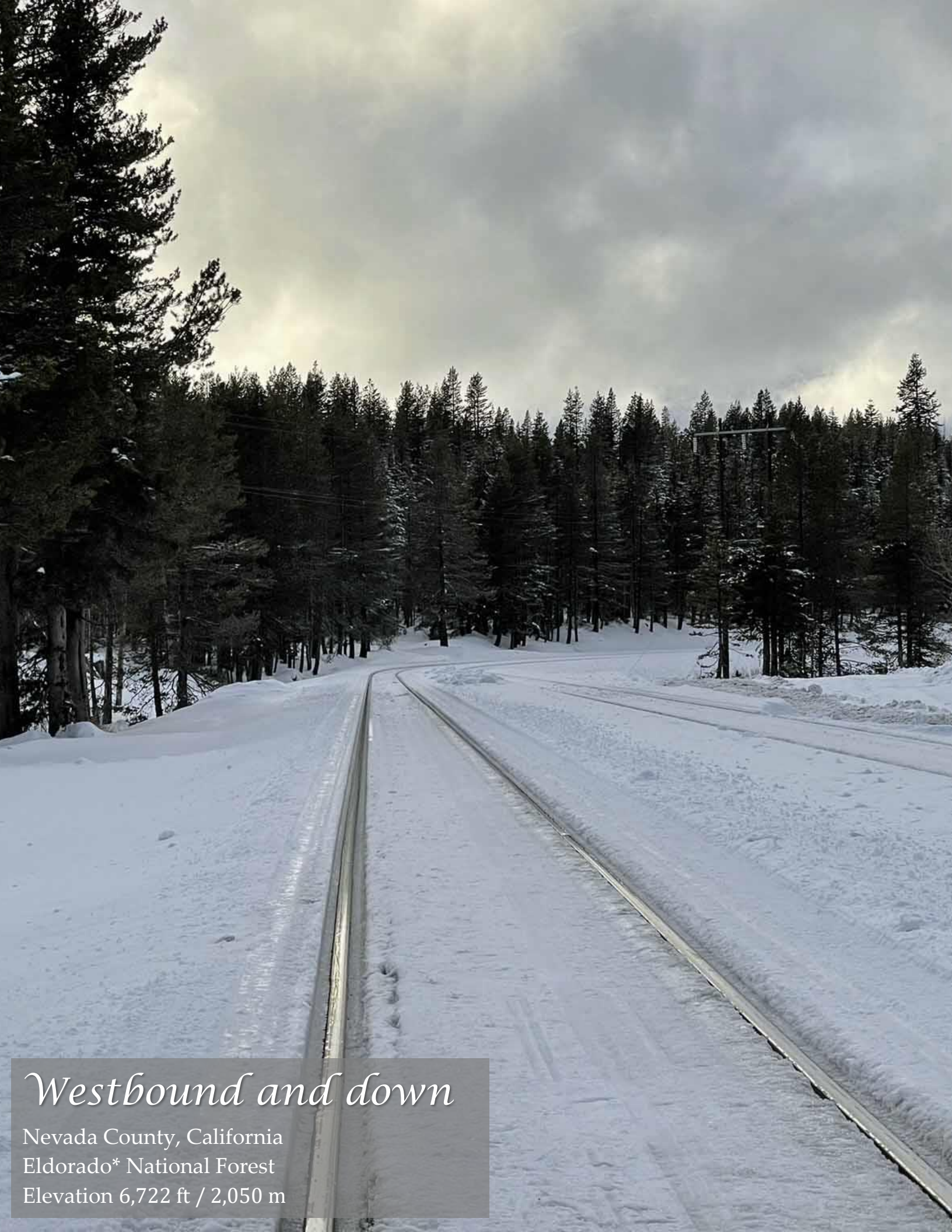
Fire and ice

Amador County, California
Eldorado* National Forest
Elevation ~7,800 ft / 2,380 m



Kit Carson Pass

Alpine County, California
Eldorado* National Forest
Elevation 8,574 ft / 2,613 m



Westbound and down

Nevada County, California
Eldorado* National Forest
Elevation 6,722 ft / 2,050 m

Notes on photos

*** — Eldorado National Forest and California's El Dorado County are not spelled the same way, just so you know.**

JULIE AT SILVER LAKE — This is not the only Silver Lake in the California Sierra. But this Silver Lake is one of several reservoirs that were built for fire protection and drinking water storage along the stage coach and Pony Express route that was eventually became State Highway 88. Today these reservoirs are often the site of mountain cabin resorts with swimming beaches, boating, fishing and hiking in summer when they're not frozen over. You already know who Julie is.

WHO LET THE DOGS OUT? — Just below Nevada's 10,785-foot / 3,287-meter Mt. Rose ski area at the northeastern corner of Lake Tahoe, this meadow attracts hikers in summer and cross-country skiers, snowmobilers and snowshoers in winter. The view is looking east. Along the edge of the forest but beneath the snow on the right is Ophir Creek, which in summer flows away from this camera position down Chickadee Ridge into Washoe Lake, named for the indigenous tribe that once lived here.

EMERALD BAY — This is the only shoreline inlet on Lake Tahoe, which is the largest alpine lake in North America and the second deepest U.S. lake — after Oregon's Crater Lake — at 1,645 feet / 501 meters. In the Washoe language, Tahoe means "the lake." Emerald Bay is on the California (western) side of the lake and contains Tahoe's only island, Fannette Island, which has a stone "tea house" at the top of its hill. Before the bay was incorporated into a state park, the island was owned by Lora Josephine Knight, who built her summer home, Vikingsholm, on the bay's shore in 1929. Knight's first husband, James Hobart Moore, made his fortune through controlling interests in the Diamond Match Co., U.S. Steel, Union Pacific Railroad and Nabisco. Six years after his death in 1916, Lara married St. Louis stockbroker Harry French Knight, who happened to be president of the St. Louis Flying Club and was friends with a member pilot named Charles Lindbergh. The Knights were major financial backers of Lindbergh's solo transatlantic flight to Paris in 1927, and Lindbergh stayed at the Knights' New York house the night before he took off from Long Island.

PALISADES TAHOE SKI TEAM — This group of high school-age skiers and their coaches are about to catch another lift to the top of Julia's Gold, the groomed trail in the background, for more giant slalom training. Five alumni from this team were members of the U.S. Ski Team at the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing. Another eight Beijing Olympians — two skiing for the United States and six others representing Australia, New Zealand and Brazil — were members of the Sugar Bowl Ski Team less than a 30-minute drive away.

PALISADES PEAK — Julie and I used sightseeing lift tickets to ride to the Gold Coast area of the upper mountain. On our way down, the clouds that had enveloped us at the top began to break up over Palisades Peak to the south, which skiers reach on the Headwall Express lift visible running to the top of the ridge. The CII trail runs down the ridge line, and the trails that branch off from it are all expert level runs.

CROSS-COUNTRY SKIER — Most American skiers are downhill (Alpine) skiers, but it was a cross-country (Nordic) skier, nicknamed Snowshoe Thompson, who brought skiing to California. He was a Norwegian immigrant who settled in the Sierra foothill town of Placerville in 1851. He began to carry mail over the Sierra from Placerville to Genoa, Nevada, using the skis he brought from the old country. The route he skied is now U.S. 50, and the trip took three days eastbound and two days back to Placerville. The Kirkwood ski area is best known for downhill skiing but it also has a sizeable network of trails in three complexes: along Caples Creek, climbing to more than 9,000 feet / 2,740 meters in the Schneider System and 9.3 miles / 15 kilometers of easy trails here in Kirkwood Meadow.

ROYAL GORGE NEIGHBORHOOD — These mountain houses are part of a large housing development just west of Donner Pass on the crest of the Sierra. They are adjacent to Royal Gorge, which claims to be the United States' largest cross-country ski resort with 120 miles / 195 kilometers of trails. The trails extend into the wilderness and through the unincorporated communities of Norden and Soda Springs.

FIRE AND ICE — There's still plenty of evidence of the 2021 Caldor Fire on the western slope of the Sierra, and the contrast of blackened tree trunks against the snow cover makes that abundantly clear. The fire forced the evacuation of more than 20,000 people in Alpine, Amador and El Dorado counties and burned 347 square miles / 900 square kilometers. As big as it was, however, it was only the 15th largest and 16th most destructive fire in state history. The U.S. Forest Service said a father and son who called in the initial fire report had caused the blaze through the careless use of firearms, but a judge ruled there was insufficient evidence to try them.

KIT CARSON PASS — This low point in the Sierra wall that separates California from points east is where State Highway 88, the descendant of the stagecoach and Pony Express route, crosses the mountains. It's also a strategic crossing with another route, the Pacific Coast Trail, a footpath that runs north from the USA-Mexico border to Canada following mountain ridges including the Sierra Nevada. This is a U.S. Forest Service maintenance cabin used by trail crews and rangers who patrol the route.

WESTBOUND AND DOWN — Looking west along the transcontinental railroad at Soda Springs, just west of where the rails pierce Donner Pass through the Big Hole, a 2-mile / 3.2-kilometer tunnel. The mountain ridge is now part of the Sugar Bowl ski resort. The rails continue downhill to Sacramento as part of the Union Pacific Railroad.

SEARED AHI CAESAR SALAD FOR LUNCH — At Palisades Tahoe, the open-air figure skating / hockey rink and opening ceremonies stadium on the valley floor for the 1960 Winter Olympics have long been replaced by a tourist village of four- and five-story condominiums, ski shops and restaurants like this one, where we ate lunch. Among the lodging facilities in the village is the 55-room PlumpJack Inn, owned by California Gov. Gavin Newsom. The ski area was developed in 1949 by Wayne Poulsen, a star skier at the University of Nevada at Reno, and Alex Cushing, a Harvard lawyer who had visited Tahoe in 1946 and liked the area. Poulsen bought the first land from the Union Pacific Railroad, but Cushing took control of the development in a dispute and began lobbying the International Olympic Committee in 1954. When I covered the Olympics for the *San Jose Mercury News*, I interviewed Cushing for a feature story (which I cannot find) about how the resort successfully landed the 1960 Games, beating out St. Moritz, Switzerland, and Innsbruck, Austria. One of the things Cushing was proudest of was getting the IOC to drop bobsled from the program, which saved considerable construction costs. It was the only Winter Olympics not to have a bobsled competition. Cushing remained chair of the Squaw Valley Ski Corporation until he died in 2006 at the age of 92. The resort went through several ownership changes and since 2017 has been owned by Denver-based Alterra Mountain Co., which is a partnership between KSL Capital and Henry Crown and Company, owner of the Aspen/Snowmass ski areas in Colorado. Alterra owns several ski areas in the United States and Canada including California's Mammoth Mountain and Deer Valley in Utah. It is one of the two giants in the North American ski resort industry. It competes against Vail Resorts, which owns the Tahoe-area resorts of Heavenly, Kirkwood and Northstar plus Whistler-Blackcomb in British Columbia, skiing venue for the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics.



Seared ahi Caesar salad for lunch

Palisades base village
Elevation 6,000 ft / 1,830 m