

The Holiday Herald

5-7 December 2022

Lake Tahoe region, California and Nevada

'Tis the Season





Reflection

Donner Lake, elevation 5,936 ft / 1,809 m
Tahoe National Forest / Nevada County

Tis the Season

Even though I grew up in a part of North Carolina where snow rarely covers the landscape, white-capped mountains, snow-burdened evergreens, and sharp pinpricks of light in the darkest and coldest night skies have always been the picture my mind conjures when I hear the word “winter.”

This snow-covered concept of the season is reinforced by ads for four-wheel drive vehicles that dominate commercial breaks during fall TV football games, filling an important societal void left by Christmas cards when country snow scenes and reindeer faded from style in favor of family photos — many of them from last summer’s vacation.

Nevertheless, the impact of Christmas cards during my formative years forever entangled that holiday and winter into a single frosty fantasy time for me. That’s despite not seeing my first real yuletide snowflake in 71 years until last December in Massachusetts. And despite knowing that winter, lighted trees and long nights were borrowed from other traditions before Christians decided Christmas would be a holiday and that it would be celebrated at the winter solstice.

That’s why these newsletters — this is the 14th year I’ve done one at Christmas — always are illustrated with snowy landscapes. My holiday and my favorite season united by a single visual aspect that is my hobby.

Greeting-card winter is also foreign to the part of California where I live now. But Christmas-card winter is just half a tank and 3½ hours’ drive away in the Sierra Nevada. Unless, that is, the weather necessary to create the winter wonderland happens while I’m driving up the hill, the highways close, and I run the car engine for short spurts every 15 minutes or so to stay warm while the snowplows work their way through miles of stalled traffic.



Our neighborhood’s Hanukkah House.

So what? I’m surrounded by what I love.

The area around Lake Tahoe is where I usually go for my seasonal photo fix because the highways there are too important not to plow (there are plenty of Sierra highways that aren’t plowed) and the snow, even in a drought-plagued state, is so reliable and the daytime weather, even in winter, is so comfortable.

Truckee, for example, gets more than 200 inches / 5.2 meters of snow annually and temperatures fall below freezing (32°F / 0°C) there on 228 of the 365 nights each year. That’s more sub-freezing nights than Fairbanks, Alaska. Yet even in winter, Truckee’s average daily high is above 40°F / 4.4°C in every month. This daily temperature swing between frigid and fairly warm is why California snow ends up in a condition known to skiers as “Sierra cement.”

I know my holiday isn’t the only one crammed into these few weeks when the year changes and a season begins. Hardly anyone doesn’t have at least one about now. You don’t live in my world; we live in ours.

Happy holidays, whatever yours are and wherever you are.



Round Top / Caples Lake

Round Top mountain, elevation 10,381 ft / 3,164 m

Caples Lake, elevation 7,802 ft / 2,378 m

Eldorado* National Forest and Mokelumne Wilderness (Round Top) / Alpine County



Kirkwood Inn

Kirkwood, elevation 7,800 ft / 2,400 m
Eldorado* National Forest / Alpine, Amador & El Dorado* counties



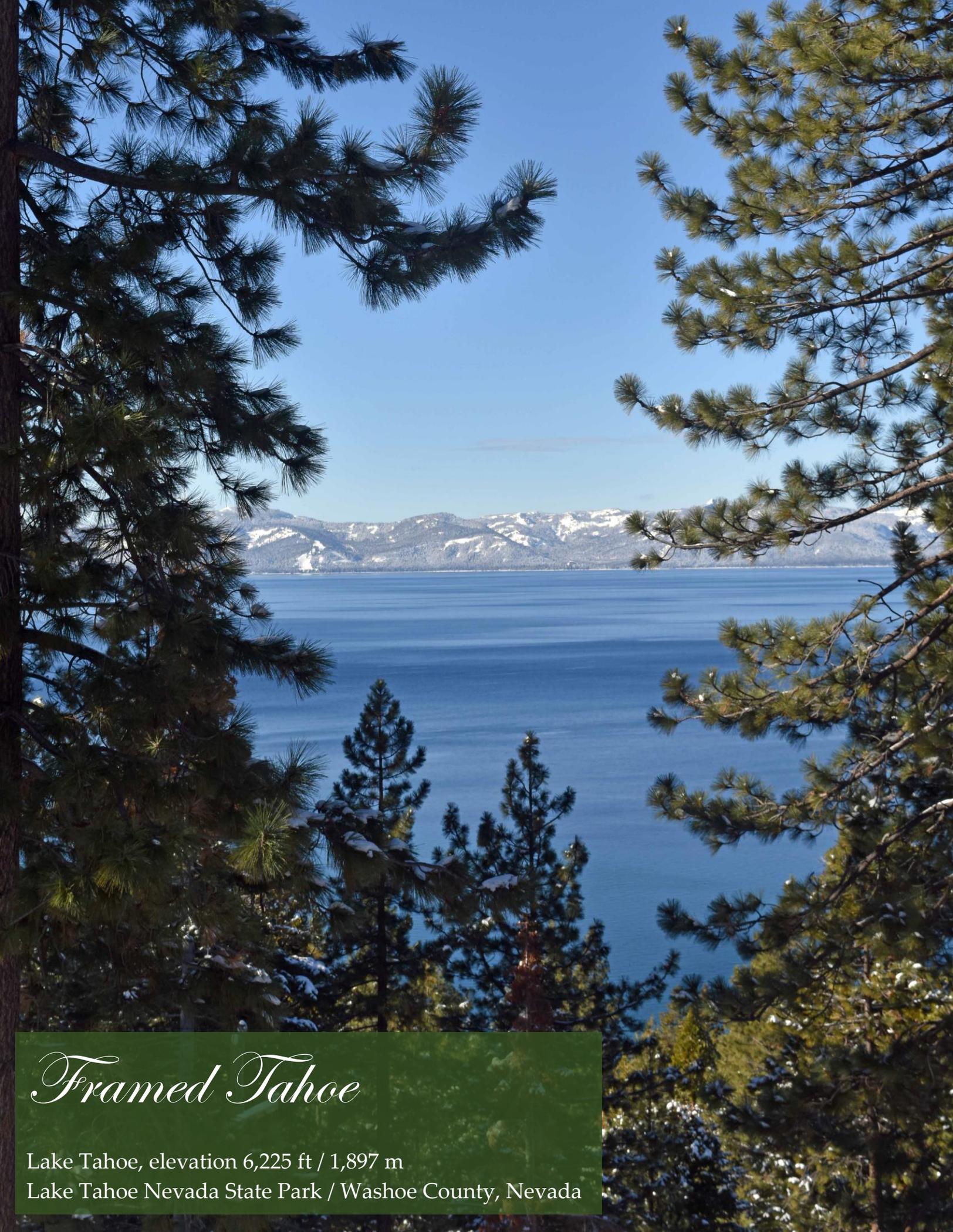
Solitude

Luther Pass, elevation 7,740 ft / 2,359 m
Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit (U.S. Forest
Service) / Alpine County



Placid lake

Donner Lake, elevation 5,936 ft / 1,809 m
Donner Pass (photo location), elevation 7,056 ft / 2,151 m
Tahoe National Forest / Nevada County



Framed Tahoe

Lake Tahoe, elevation 6,225 ft / 1,897 m

Lake Tahoe Nevada State Park / Washoe County, Nevada

Notes on photos

COVER — The name “Donner” looms over landmark-naming in California’s Nevada and Placer counties the way Donner Peak, named for the ill-fated wagon train party of 1846-47, looms over Donner Pass and Donner Lake. Here, its 8,019-foot / 2,444-meter summit catches the first rays of the rising sun while the lake’s basin, where I am, is still in shadow and lingering mist. I’ve written before about the Donners and the ghastly consequences of their failed attempt to surmount the Sierra Nevada’s eastern wall before winter’s arrival.

REFLECTION — This early morning view looks south across Donner Lake and the wall of forest along Schallenberger Ridge on the far shore. The lake is calm — that surface is not ice — and the shore is lined with vacation houses. The ridge gets its name from Moses Schallenberger, who, as a 17-year-old boy, was on the first wagon train to successfully cross the Sierra in 1844-45, two years before the Donner party. Schallenberger helped build a cabin near the lake where, because he was too weak to walk through the snow, he had to be left to winter alone for three months before another member of the wagon train returned to rescue him. Schallenberger settled in San Jose and had a 115-acre / 47-hectare farm on the former site of the *San Jose Mercury News* building, where I worked for 15 years. An elementary school a few blocks from my house is named for him.

ROUND TOP / CAPLES LAKE — *(*California’s El Dorado County, which borders Alpine County, and Eldorado National Forest use different spellings for their names. Go figure.)* At an elevation nearly 2,000 feet / 610 meters higher than Donner Lake, Caples Lake — a reservoir created by the El Dorado Irrigation District — usually freezes over in winter whereas Donner does not. Round Top, the mountain in the distance, is a popular hiking and rock-climbing destination. Both are near Kit Carson Pass, which once was used as the Pony Express and stagecoach route over the Sierra and now is crossed by California Highway 88. Alpine County, which contains both landmarks, had just 1,204 residents in the 2020 census, making it by far California’s least populous county. Its only settlement of any size, Markleeville, population 200+, isn’t even a town but a “census designated place.” Ninety-six percent of the county’s land is within three national forests: Eldorado, Stanislaus and Humboldt-Toiyabe.

KIRKWOOD INN — I wrote about this place, now just a restaurant owned by the Kirkwood ski resort across the highway, in my 2014 holiday newsletter “Stockings were hung ...”

SOLITUDE — Three cross-country skiers make their way across Grass Lake Meadow on Luther Pass south of Lake Tahoe. They’re in the center of the photo if you haven’t spotted them yet.

PLACID LAKE — I’ve photographed Donner Lake many times from this point on Donner Pass but returned this day to shoot a time-lapse video of the morning fog being burned off the lake by the rising sun. That scene is part of a companion video to this newsletter. It condenses two hours of peacefulness into 36 seconds of roiling cloud being peeled back from the valley.

FRAMED TAHOE — You are looking west between Ponderosa pines from Lake Tahoe’s Nevada shore toward California. Although the casinos that draw many visitors here are on the Nevada side, they are clustered at the two points where the state line crosses the north and south shores. Most of the Nevada shore is much less developed than the California side.

TRUCKEE SIDEWALK and TRUCKEE TREE — The long arc of Truckee’s story is population displacement. The Shoshone and Paiutes of pre-white history were nomadic had little reason to hang around once the Transcontinental Railroad came through in 1868, bringing in white and Chinese settlers. But the Chinese — a thousand were brought in by the Central Pacific Railroad to build the line eastward up and over the Sierra — were driven out within 20 years, by 300 members of the “Order of the Caucasians” in a bloody riot known as the Trout Creek Outrage. The growth of winter sports, especially after the 1960 Winter Olympics at nearby Squaw Valley (recently renamed Palisades at Tahoe) created a tourism economy based on outdoor recreation that slowly built the population to 16,729 by the 2020 census. In the last three years, however, Truckee has become a “Zoom town,” with its population growing at a 10% annual rate as Silicon Valley tech workers, unchained from their office cubicles by the Covid pandemic, have moved to the mountains for cheaper housing close to skiing, hiking and boating. As a result, the median home value in Truckee, according to Zillow, has climbed 55.3% over that span to \$1.1 million, making housing increasingly unaffordable for long-time residents.



Truckee sidewalk

Truckee, elevation 5,817 ft / 1,773 m
Tahoe National Forest / Nevada County



Truckee tree

Truckee, elevation 5,817 ft / 1,773 m
Tahoe National Forest / Nevada County