

By Lisa Ballard

Idaho Snow Trek

Nordic skiing at historic Railroad Ranch

When my sweetheart, Jack, invited me to spend the night in Harriman State Park in a backcountry yurt accessible only via a cross-country ski trail, I was confused. The only Harriman State Park I knew was just north of New York City, a nice respite from the metropolis with hiking trails that might have cross-country skiing for a fleeting moment during the winter. I gave him a quizzical look.

“Right Harriman. Wrong state park,” he said. “I’m talking about the one in Idaho that used to be Averell Harriman’s ranch.”

Seeing the famous railroad tycoon’s former cattle ranch, fittingly called the Railroad Ranch, sounded more promising, but I had trouble getting my head around flying across the country to go cross-country skiing in a state park. Nothing against Nordic sports or state parks. I love lapping the groomed track at the Woodstock Country Club for exercise, and I spend a lot of time at state parks in Vermont during the summer, usually to have a picnic, go camping, or find a trailhead for a hike. However,

traveling to the Rockies for a ski vacation has different connotations for me, something bigger ski-wise like Big Sky or Vail, or a national park terrain-wise like Grand Teton or Glacier National Park.

Jack had visited Harriman State Park before. Just 38 miles west of Yellowstone National Park, he had fond memories of the trail system, wildlife watching, and sleeping in a yurt. I had never slept in a yurt or any shelter that I had to ski to, plus it was something Jack wanted to do, so I agreed to go.



The author skiing on a few inches of feather-light powder in Harriman State Park, Idaho.



HARRIMAN'S HERITAGE

Upon arriving at Harriman State Park, I learned two things. It was not small—11,000 acres—and Averell was not the only Harriman involved with the Railroad Ranch. His father, Edward Henry Harriman, in partnership with the Guggenheim brothers, Solomon, Murry, and Daniel, purchased the property, a working cattle ranch, in 1908. The elder Harriman never visited his investment. He died a year later. E.H. Harriman's widow, Mary, and their three youngest children, Carol, Averell, and Roland, went to the ranch and loved it, especially Roland, who spent the most time there during his adult life with his wife, Gladys.

Edward Roland Noel Harriman (1895–1978) was a graduate of Groton School and Yale University. During World War I, he served as a lieutenant in the US Army for 10 months before contracting pneumonia and receiving an honorable medical discharge. After working for three years

at Averell's shipbuilding company, he joined his brother's investment bank in New York City as its vice president. In 1927, he and Averell formed Harriman Brothers and Company, which soon merged with Brown Brothers and Company to form the prestigious Wall Street firm, Brown Brothers Harriman. Roland also served as chairman of the Union Pacific Railroad for 23 years and as a director of the Union Banking Corporation.

William Averell Harriman (1891–1986) was the more public personality, especially known among skiers for building the glamorous Sun Valley Resort in the 1930s. In addition to his far-flung business interests, he was a political dynamo, serving as secretary of state for political affairs under President Kennedy, governor of New York, secretary of commerce under President Truman, and ambassador to the United Kingdom and Soviet Union at various times in his career. He also ran for president twice unsuccessfully.



Above: Skiing toward the barns at the Railroad Ranch.

Right, from top: A skier emerges from a trail through the tall timber. Bird watchers on Nordic skis on the bank of the Henry's Fork of the Snake River. A pintail duck on the river.

FROM RANCH TO PARK

The Harrimans, especially Roland and Gladys, used the Railroad Ranch as a Western getaway, but as they aged into their 80s, it became less practical to retreat to the ranch. In 1977, Roland and Averell Harriman donated it to the state of Idaho, with the condition that the state manage it professionally. The request prompted the creation of the state's Department of Parks and Recreation prior to and in preparation for the generous gift. The park opened to the public in 1982.

Today, Harriman State Park lies within a wildlife refuge known for its fantastic vistas and world-class trout





fishing on the Henry's Fork of the Snake River, which carves an eight-mile swath through the ranch. The river is named after Andrew Henry, a fur trader who first came to the area in 1810 for the Missouri Fur Company and who built the first American fur-trading post west of the continental divide (on the upper Snake River).

The Henry's Fork, where it flows through the park, is a destination for avid anglers seeking oversized rainbow trout. During the winter, its large patches of flowing, open water attract ducks, geese, and trumpeter swans. Two-thirds of the trumpeter swans that winter in the Lower 48 are in Harriman State Park!

SKIING TO THE YURT

Harriman State Park is also a mecca for cross-country skiers, snow-shoers, and fat-tire bikers. Its trail system isn't huge, but it's enough, with 24 miles of groomed track.

Clockwise from top left: The author pauses during a snow squall. Skiers pass by the old ranch houses. One of the ski-up backcountry yurts.

From the parking lot, we loaded our overnight supplies and gear into backpacks and a heavy-duty plastic bin that Jack had mounted onto skis to drag the three-quarters of a mile to the yurt. The day was a brisk 20 degrees and crystal clear, and the flat track was in perfect shape.

We glided past a sizeable snowy meadow and through serene woodlands, pausing now and again to take photos and to look at animal tracks. When we reached the yurt, the first thing I noticed was its name, "Cygnet," which means young swan. I dearly hoped for the chance to see a trumpeter swan, knowing the park's reputation as a winter haven for these graceful white birds, the largest waterfowl species in North America, with a wingspan over 10 feet



Need to Know

To reserve a yurt or to stay in one of the historic ranch buildings, contact the park office at (208) 558-7368, parksandrecreation.idaho.gov/parks/harriman.

OPTIONS INCLUDE:

- Railroad Ranch Dormitory & Dining Hall: For groups up to 40. Rustic log dormitory and original cookhouse.
- Bunkhouse & Cookhouse: Sleeps up to 13 people.
- Laura Clarke Scovel Education Center: 10 cabins and conference center.
- Ranch Manager's House: 4-bedroom log home.
- Cattle Foreman's House: 3-bedroom cabin.
- Two Mongolian-Style Yurts: Each sleeps up to 6 people. Includes woodstove, camp stove (for cooking), firewood, lantern light, table, and benches. Bring in water (or purify it from nearby Thurman Creek), small propane canisters for the camp stove and lantern, cooking gear, food, and bedding.

MORE DETAILS:

- Cell phone service is unreliable, and there are no landlines.
- Rangers live on-site at the Ranch Foreman's House and the historic Ranch Office.
- Pets are allowed only in the parking lots and must be on a leash at all times, with the exception during the winter of the Harriman Hounds Trail.

WHEN TO GO:

- February 1 to March 31 is prime time snow-wise.
- Reserve well in advance, as soon as the date you want is open for registration, up to a year in advance.
- Bring the kids! There are plenty of flat, beginner-level ski trails.

parksandrecreation.idaho.gov/parks/harriman

From top: Kite-skiing across one of the meadows on the Railroad Ranch. Trumpeter swans wintering on the Henry's Fork.

wide and weighing up to 48 pounds.

I had seen only one wild swan before, a mute swan, which is a slightly smaller species than a trumpeter swan. It landed on the Connecticut River just north of Hanover about 15 years earlier. It dwarfed nearby Canada geese that foraged for the same aquatic vegetation in the shallows near the riverbank. I remember watching it for an hour, fascinated by its long neck and its size. I had never seen a wild trumpeter swan.

SWAN'S SONG

Jack and I enjoyed our evening in the Cygnet yurt, which had a woodstove, bunk beds, a table, and cookstove in it.

After filling our bellies with hearty beef stew, we settled into our sleeping bags. "I hope we get to see swans tomorrow," I said, as my eyes drooped shut.

The next morning, Jack took me on a tour of the ranch. We skied past the ranch buildings, some of which people rent similar to the yurts. A half-dozen or so skiers were heading out from the former cookhouse, which is now a bunkroom for visitors. We followed the group a short way then split off from them to glide past the barns and out to a meadow.

At the far end of the meadow, we came to a warming hut, the former Jones house, and took a break to warm our fingers and toes and have some hot chocolate. The Jones house had been the ranch cabin of Charles Jones, a wealthy oilman with the Atlantic Richfield Company who owned 25 percent of the Railroad Ranch during most of Averell and Roland's tenure there. He sold his share to the Harrimans

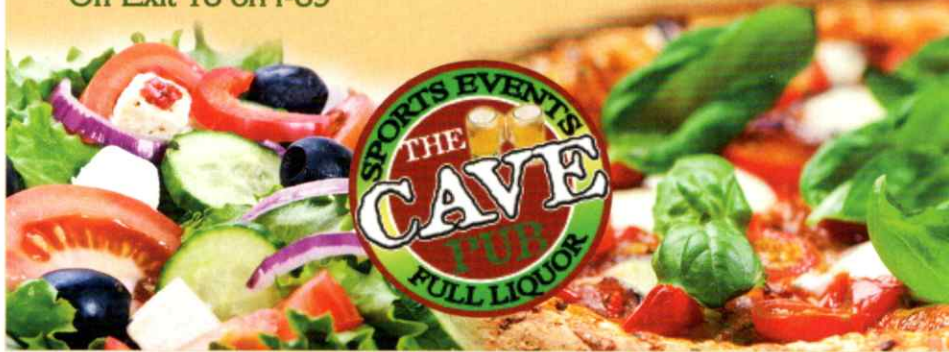
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in 1961, and that allowed the Harrimans to eventually give the ranch to the state of Idaho.

When we left the Jones house a half-hour later, snowflakes drifted down silently from the sky. A mile farther down the trail, those light flurries turned into a heavy snow squall that quickly dumped a couple of inches onto the track.

Feeling wet and fearing a downright blizzard, we shortened our intended route back to the yurt, cutting toward the Henry's Fork off the quickly disappearing track. With only sunglasses for eye protection, I could hardly see. The white snowy air blended seamlessly with the white snowy ground. But I could hear. Hoo-onk. Hoo-onk. Swans!

I headed closer to the river. At first, I could see only a few pintails and golden-eye ducks, their darker bodies in starker contrast against the white landscape, but as the snow let up, the swans appeared, first as long-necked ghosts and then as the graceful kings and queens of the river. A couple dozen of them had congregated on an elongated patch of open water that zig-zagged through the ranchland. I grabbed my camera and started taking photo after photo. An avid birder, it was a moment I will always cherish.

Harriman State Park is unlike any state park I've visited in Vermont. For starters, it's a historic cattle ranch where a number of wealthy business magnates came to experience ranch life during the early to mid 1900s. But more importantly, it's a place for outdoor recreation and a sanctuary for wildlife, especially the intriguing trumpeter swan. 

Lisa Ballard is a freelance writer, photographer, and professional skier. To see more of her work, go to www.LisaBallardOutdoors.com.





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