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Outdoors & Recreation

FISHING LINE:

A 27½, 9-pound rainbow taken on the San Juan.

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CLASSIC CROSS COUNTRY

SWEEPING MEADOWS OF ARIZONA'S
WHITE MOUNTAINS OFFER SPLENDID SKIING

Story and photographs by MICHAEL RICHIE • For the Journal

HANNAGAN MEADOW, Ariz. — I snow plow and pull over for a moment to take a look around. We've just finished an invigorating, 2-mile, gradual downhill run over early morning snow. The grade is perfect for using our arms and shoulders to double pole for added speed, with an occasional kick and glide.

This is classic, sun-drenched, Southwestern cross-country skiing at its best. We're following a well-groomed trail down a long, sinuous *ciénega* near Hannagan Meadow in Arizona's White Mountains. *Ciénega* is Spanish for "quagmire" and in the summer this boggy meadow will indeed ooze water and be covered with lush emerald vegetation.

For now, though, it is a glistening white, 50-yard-wide corridor through towering ponderosa pine, Douglas fir and aspen monarchs. We hope to get lucky and spot members of the reintroduced pack of Mexican gray wolves that call this area home. Large tracks abound and U.S. Forest Service pamphlets listing the "do's and don'ts" of wolf encounters are posted at all the trailheads, but we haven't had a sighting yet.

In a state that boasts more cactus species than any other place on earth, the White Mountains are Arizona's answer to the Alps. Forget that saguaro silhouetted against a fiery red sunset



ROOM TO ROAM: Hannagan Meadow's large, open patches of wind-scalloped snow are perfect for good, old-fashioned "flat-track" ski touring.

and think snow. Located in Arizona's southeast corner and protected within the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest, this Delaware-sized plateau is essentially just the westward extension of the same massive, volcanic eruptions that created the various Gila ranges. Taken together, the Gila and Whites are by far the largest mountain mass in the Southwest. On the Arizona side of the border, a half-dozen peaks higher than 10,000 feet crown the forested sky island. Mount Baldy at 11,590 feet and its companion Mount Ord at 11,357 feet are the two tallest.

Much of the high country around these peaks consists of sweeping, rolling meadows punctuated by mixed conifer and aspen stands — all of which adds

up to superb cross-country skiing.

Backcountry bliss

The gateway to the White Mountains is the Coronado Trail Scenic Byway. It starts in Springerville, Ariz., and runs south paralleling the New Mexico-Arizona border for 125 miles as it travels across the White Mountains before finally dropping off the Mogollon Rim back to the desert at Clifton.

The highly picturesque route culminates in the middle of the Hannagan Meadow area, 9,100 feet above sea level. Completely isolated yet readily accessible, these serene meadows, hidden by open, old-growth forests, are the perfect place for good, old-fashioned "flat-track" ski touring.

See MEADOW on PAGE C2



Y AND FOREST: Cross-country skier Larry Wright of Albuquerque glides through a shadowy stand of aspens near Hannagan Meadow in Arizona's White Mountains.

north and Clifton 1/5 miles south.

the Alpine ranger district. Craig Service, the lodge's

packs in the Southwest." "None of the original pack

ghostlike against somber fir trees. A low pitched howl

Meadow ideal for cross country

from PAGE C1

Cross-country skiing as a sport has splintered into several specialized sub-categories, each of which requires equally specialized equipment. Mountaineering, telemarking and skating on groomed tracks all offer their own unique thrills. But for me, the sport has always been more of a means to an end: It extends my love for rigorous, backcountry exercise into a year-round affair.

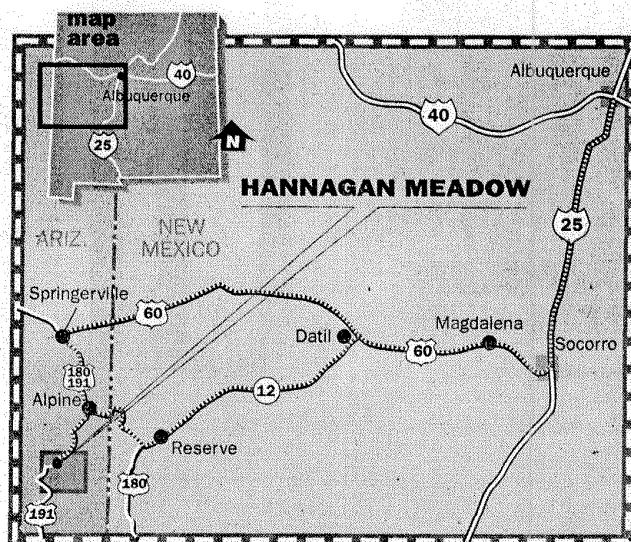
The Hannagan Meadow area with its nonthreatening terrain, reliable snow and lack of crowds is ideal for beginners, families or couples on a romantic interlude. Or for people like me who just like to occasionally ski through beautiful, tranquil high country all day long without encountering another person.

Hannagan Meadow Lodge is yet another reason this area is an ideal Southwestern cross-country ski destination. A genuine Arizona original, the log structure was built at the meadow's edge in 1926 to commemorate the completion of the then-dirt Coronado Trail. Various additions over the years have resulted in a comfortable main lodge with five accompanying log cabins.

The main lodge, which is run as a bed and breakfast, has eight suites and a spacious restaurant. It is the only hint of civilization along the Coronado Trail between the village of Alpine 30 miles north and Clifton 75 miles south.

Wolf song

What Hannagan Meadow



RUSS BALL / JOURNAL

Hannagan Meadow

GETTING THERE: From Albuquerque take I-25 south to Socorro, then head west on U.S. 60 to Datil. Continue west on U.S. 60 to Springerville, Ariz., then take the Coronado Trail (U.S. 180/191) south for 50 miles to Hannagan Meadow. The route is about 250 miles and takes 4-5 hours.

WHEN TO GO: Mid-December through mid-March offers the best guarantee for good snow.

ACCOMMODATIONS: Rooms at Hannagan Meadow Lodge cost \$70 to \$125. Call: (928) 339-4370 for reservations and (928) 339-4705 to talk directly to lodge personnel.

Lodge may lack in sophistication it certainly makes up for in location. We stayed in one of the cabins and had only to walk out the door and put on our skis to explore the 20-plus miles of groomed trails maintained by the lodge in cooperation with the Alpine ranger district.

Craig Service, the lodge's manager, says, "I'm living my dream." He and his wife, Diane, are friendly, helpful and very knowledgeable

about the surrounding outdoor attractions.

I quickly realized everyone associated with the lodge takes personal pride in what they call "our" wolf pack. Nick Ramon, the resident guide, brags, "We've got the best of the 10 reintroduced packs in the Southwest."

"None of the original pack has been lost to disease or irate ranchers," Service says. He attributes this to "the extremely strong bond

between the alpha male and alpha female."

Both agree that cross-country skiers are the visitors most likely to get a glimpse of a wolf. In a few instances, they say, the pack has even warily followed skiers for a while before vanishing back into their own world.

Service's dream also includes impossibly blue skies, intoxicatingly fresh air, peaceful isolation and pure, sweet well water — "like people other places pay a dollar fifty for, for a small bottle," he says. Having consumed several satisfying gallons of that water on the five ski tours we did during our two-night stay, I can heartily agree with him.

As long, violet shadows lengthen slowly across Hannagan's pristine meadows, we decide to go for one last twilight ski in the hopes of seeing wolves.

The lingering rays of sun turn aspen tangles into woven gold and accentuate the rich texture of wind-scalloped snow. There's a surreal feeling to it all — very calm, but with an exciting edge that comes from functioning in such an alien environment.

On the far edge of the meadow, the lodge lights promise a warm fire, companionship and good food when we return.

We enter the forest and soon pass through a grove of huge aspens, their creamy white trunks gleaming ghostlike against somber fir trees. A low pitched howl echoes off the ridgeline ahead. This will be the closest we come to skiing with wolves.