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Lisa Ballard

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# Turning Back

*A backcountry trip in Yellowstone tests a skier's sense of danger*

**Lisa Ballard**



I'VE SKIED DOWN REMOTE AND SETTLED SLOPES FOR MOST OF MY LIFE and have a honed sense of terrain, but in the spring of 2018, I faced a dread in Yellowstone National Park that reminded me how important gut instincts are. I've visited Yellowstone a dozen times. I love to test myself physically and mentally in its wild corners, away from the millions who visit the park each year. Every time I go, I experience something new, and I often think about an early Yellowstone-area fur trapper named John Colter because, like him, I've scared myself there.

In 1808, Colter almost died on an exploratory fur-trapping expedition into Yellowstone for Manuel Lisa's Missouri Fur Company. It was Colter's second time in this geologically active region, which he called, "a stinking place where springs spout steam and boiling water." People who had heard his stories called Yellowstone "Colter's Hell." The Blackfoot Indians, whose territory he was trapping, captured him, stripped off his clothes, and told him to run. Colter ran naked through the wilderness in a backcountry game of cat and mouse with Blackfoot warriors who desired his scalp. Miraculously, he escaped. The area was indeed Colter's Hell. This all happened seven decades before it became the first U.S. national park.

I have often wondered why Colter didn't turn back, even though Yellowstone's landscape made him feel a sense of dread. This is the aspect of Colter that stayed with me as I ran into my own terror on what started out as a lighthearted backcountry skiing trip.

IN SPRING, MANY MONTHS' WORTH OF POWDER TURN INTO DELIGHTFUL corn snow if you hit it right. My husband, Jack, and I met several friends atop Sylvan Pass (elevation 8,530 feet), a high point in the road that enters Yellowstone from its east gate, 53 miles west of Cody, Wyoming. I had heard rumor of Yellowstone's untracked bowls and glades and longed to ski them. There were no lifts, of course, but having skied Tuckerman Ravine on Mount Washington almost every spring since the early 1980s, I didn't mind hiking for my turns. It had become a rite of spring. The tradition would simply be in a different place.

From Sylvan Pass, we thought we had two options: Top Notch Peak (10,238 feet) on the south side of the road and Avalanche Peak (10,566 feet) on the north side. Our plan was to skin up one of them. (Skinning is skiing uphill with synthetic fur on the bottom of the skis. This provides traction

*Skiers head toward Top Notch Peak.* LISA BALLARD

to avoid slipping backward.) Although the snowbanks were higher than our SUV, with one glance at Avalanche Peak from the pass, our decision was obvious. Avalanche, with its southern exposure, had only a patchwork of snow here and there. It looked unskiable, but Top Notch appeared promising. Our friend John, who organized the trip, told us Top Notch was “a nice ski,” and that from the top we would see Yellowstone Lake.

We put on our skis by the side of the small pull-out then headed into the woods on a route John knew well, although there was no discernible trail. Numerous ski tracks wandered off here and there among the conifers. Our group of six, including two of John’s friends from Cody and one of ours from Orford, New Hampshire, followed in our colorfully clad train.

At 7 A.M. the forest floor was crusty, shaded from the first tendrils of sunshine and subject to a cycle of daytime thaws and evening freezes. We weaved among the Douglas firs, climbing steadily with each stride. I heated up quickly from the steady exertion, enjoying the steady slide, step, slide, step of my skis as my breathing picked up. Our pace was steady but reasonable.



*Top Notch Peak seemed to hold enough snow for the group to ski down it.* LISA BALLARD



An hour into our ascent, the temperature climbed above freezing, and four of us stripped to T-shirts. John took his shirt off. “Funny how 40 degrees feels tropical after a long winter below freezing,” I mused.

It was 20 degrees warmer in the valley than on the side of Top Notch Peak. We had spent the night at John’s cabin in the small settlement of Wapiti, just outside the park’s boundary. What a difference a thousand feet makes! Around the cabin, the grass was green, and the lupine were in full bloom. The previous afternoon, I had gone for a walk. It was a short one, only a few hundred yards, as a mammoth-sized bull bison lounged on the hillside just below the cabin.

The next day, the day of our backcountry skiing adventure, seemed perfect, with cloudless, azure skies and no wind. Top Notch Peak has a double-humped summit. It was 2.1 miles to the top, with a gain of 1,840 feet. We would, indeed, work for our turns.

As we crested each knoll, the view got grander and grander. Then we reached a ridge where we got our first look at a few ski lines. I was ready to drop in. “Not yet,” said John, pointing to a narrow swath of snow between two tall banks. A white bowl poked up invitingly from the far end of the white corridor.

We kept going. The corridor ended at the bottom of an impressive cirque. I dearly wanted to climb it.

A number of oversized snowballs had rolled down the headwall here and there, gathering size the farther they went. A small avalanche of them had churned up the otherwise smooth surface about a third of the way across the



*Mike Gimmeson, an experienced backcountry skier in Yellowstone National Park, pauses while skinning up Top Notch Peak.* LISA BALLARD

expanse. Looking at the conditions, an alarm sounded somewhere deep within my brain. The small hairs on the back of my neck suddenly stood on end.

"Let's go up," drooled one of the others, seeing only the untracked snow.

"I'm going back," I murmured, remembering some advice that David Breashears, a veteran of numerous Everest expeditions, once gave me. "Listen to your instincts in the mountains," he said. It was a casual tidbit offered over a Thanksgiving dinner more than twenty years ago. His words echoed in my head. My instincts were on full alert.

Avalanches are typically triggered by precipitation, wind drifting, or drastic temperature changes. These cause a layer of snow to become too heavy to adhere to the snow underneath. On Top Notch, the top layer had become soft and heavy in the sun each day and then had frozen each night for at least a week. The slide down the bowl was new, within the last 24 hours. What's more, the weight of the surface snow was getting heavier by the minute under the morning sun, perhaps enough for gravity to pull more of it down the slope. A skier could set it off, too.

A pitch does not need to be super-steep to let go, only 25 degrees, or the equivalent of an intermediate trail at a ski area, although the steeper the slope, the more likely it is to slide under uneven snow loads. The bowl before us looked nearly flat at the bottom but quickly got vertical, about 45 degrees at the top. It reminded me of the headwall in Tuckerman Ravine, except for the lack of "lunch rocks" at the bottom. There were no spectators here, just our small band of backcountry skiers.

The others looked at me, surprised. Then the mood of the group turned thoughtful, as I am usually the first one to say, "Let's go!" especially when it comes to skiing something steep and untracked.

"Come on, Lisa," said one of the other skiers, "You've climbed all this way. You're almost there. Just a little higher, and you'll get an awesome view, not to mention a great run down."

I hesitated. To get to that spot had required much more effort than just our half-day climb. Days of planning, gathering gear, traveling, and the money . . . hadn't I earned these turns? The mountain tempted me. It called to me, like many peaks do. Getting to the top and then skiing down its white-mantled cape had filled my thoughts for days. Yet now that I was here, I had second thoughts. The conditions weren't perfect. They weren't even close to good, judging by the recent snowslide that now softened in the morning sun. Did I have the willpower to trust my senses? I felt like a hungry dieter peering at a bowl of candy.

But getting caught in an avalanche would not be sweet. The thought unnerved me. I knew what I must do. I turned around to head back the way we had come.

My friend from Orford joined me. The others continued on, but instead of heading up the bowl as originally planned, they decided to play it “safe.” They skinned up the ridge on the side of the cirque. Luckily their route proved stable. We met them at the trailhead on Sylvan Pass a couple of hours later.

“Are you disappointed about not reaching the top of Top Notch?” one friend asked.

The ones who made it to the top got both the glorious view then a couple thousand feet of skiing bliss on buttery corn snow. I had carefully picked my way down through tight timber.

No, I was not disappointed. “I loved every moment of it,” I said, “until we saw the avalanche.”

Of course, nothing had happened. Had I overreacted?

Some say explorers have a sixth sense that warns them of danger, yet it’s hard to heed that intangible warning when a hard-earned goal is in sight. I listened on Top Notch Mountain. I’m convinced the danger was real. The others who made it to the top were lucky, even though they chose the smartest approach of all possible ways once they got up there.

I thought again of John Colter, who had escaped from the Blackfeet, perhaps over Sylvan Pass. (Historians believe he likely entered Yellowstone from Cody.)

I have no regrets. Reaching the summit would have been wonderful, but the day was still memorable. I had skinned up most of a mountain in one of the most scenic places on earth. How could that be disappointing?

*Editor’s note: To all those who head to Tuckerman Ravine in the White Mountains this spring, may you keep David Breashears’s advice to Lisa Ballard foremost in your minds.*

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A longtime member of the AMC and a professional skier, LISA BALLARD (formerly Lisa Densmore) has trekked and skied around the globe. When she’s not climbing or schussing down a mountain, she writes about her adventures for various magazines and websites from her base camps in Red Lodge, Montana, and Chateaugay Lake, New York. Visit her at [lisaballardoutdoors.com](http://lisaballardoutdoors.com).