

Backcountry Skiing in Eagle River

By Jeff Brand 11/15/2010

I am going to describe some trips you can take on Eagle River and nearby. They don't require technical skills mostly, however, the ski conditions are often quite variable. Remember you could be breaking trail, following snow machine tracks or sometimes skiing across ice. I'll try to point out hazards, not many, in each trip.

Eagle River

Access to Eagle River is from Eagle River Nature Center (ERNC), mile 7.4, Briggs Bridge(Loop Road Bridge), Eagle River Campground(north and south side at Glenn Hwy Bridge).

Eagle River from Eagle River Nordic Center - The trails here are: 1. Albert Loop Trail, a short and pleasant ski but is a multiuse trail. Watch for kids and dogs and walkers. I would ski out the Crow Pass trail to Four Corners and then head to the River and then head back or got on the river. The Albert Loop entrance directly below the Visitor Center is a steep and curved hill and often packed and has foot traffic. You can get onto the river by going straight where the trail bifurcates to the Yurt (L) or Albert Loop(R). Going upriver from the Yurt is classical technique until the freeze thaw cycles hit in March and then you can skate ski till you reach about the area of the Perch and then you get to open water. Rapids Camp can be rocky and could require walking in spots. 2. Dew Lakes Trail: This trail is narrower, not groomed but suitable for skiing or snowshoe. Also, less people. The trail takes off to the Left in several spots from the Crow Pass Trail prior to Four Corners. There are orange tabs on the trees marking the trail. There are three cutoffs that go back to the Crow Pass Trail and allow a round trip. Mountain Meadows is first and Rapids Camp is the second cutoff. Skiing past RC Cutoff is not advised by me, snowshoe is okay. The cutoff trails needs a lot of snow to hide the rocks so you could need to walk in some spots. When you reach the RC/Crow Pass intersection you could take your skis off and walk down the steps to the river and ski back the river to the Albert Loop trail. 3. Eagle River-downriver: At the west end of the Albert Loop Trail before heading back to the visitor center you can access the river and ski downriver as far as you desire. Follow the snow machine trail or make your own. Some holes in the ice, sometimes overflow but little danger of breaking through. I learned my lesson to not ski past where the snow machines stop. Maps are available at the Visitor Center.

Mile 7.4- This is the North Eagle River Entrance off ER Road. There is a pedestrian trail at one end of the parking lot and you can ski out to the river over the footbridge. The slough under the footbridge is skiable up to the old Moose Pond but beware of thin ice, overflow and open leads. The pedestrian trail dead ends at a braid of the River and by skiing down river(R) you can ski as far as you want, a good destination is to the next river marker(triangular green on a streetsign-like post) and veer right and take the slough back to 7.4 parking lot. You can reverse this loop by starting near the kiosk in the parking lot. This slough frequently has ice

overflow late in the year but follow the snow machine or other skiers tracks. In the spring you can skate ski to South Fork and back but it is a bit long.

Briggs Bridge- Coming from Anchorage on ER Loop Road take road to the summer canoe put-in and park in the upper lot (the lower lot is gated off). The trail on the left of the lot goes under the bridge (dirty snow from road above) and gives you access to the river to ski downriver to the Glenn Hwy. bridge. This takes you on the river where the summer raft trips go. The river is open in the middle but the ice on the sides is thick, follow the other skiers' tracks or snow machine trail and enjoy the Canyon views, really nice ice and water pictures. 2. From the parking lot, hop the gate ski down hill on the road and look for another gate on the right. Ski past this gate and this is the old homestead road and can be skied to South Fork or to South Fork Falls. Lots of little ups and downs, some overflow. The road is no longer plowed but easy to follow. The Muni has a sign delineating private property and the trail access around it, never an issue. At South Fork find the usual ice bridge over South Fork and follow the road till you can see a power line uphill on your R. Ski towards this and go past it till you hit a road crossing. Take a left and you can ski out the Valley on this still used homestead road. Go right and you end up in Riverview subdivision. Go straight and you'll get to the lower falls. When you ski back down remember it is downhill, narrow and you can't snowplow, so don't be surprised if you fall-I do! When you get back to South Fork on a good year with good ice you can ski to the river (easy to find) and ski back on the river for a loop. Most years ER is open at South Fork so be careful and only go where the snow machines go. Also, remember the river is braided and has an Ox Bow, the trail is straight. This is about a 2 hour trip.

Eagle Campground

Park at the gate at the prison entrance and ski down Hesterberg Rd into the campground and down to the river, or park at the base of VFW road (North side). Ski upriver to Briggs Bridge or beyond and back through the Canyon. Ski downriver (dirty snow under the bridge) and into Fort Richardson on the river but you will be limited to about a mile and then the river opens up due to the ER Water Treatment Plant, pretty views downriver here.

Peters Creek downriver

Take the North Birchwood exit on the Glenn and drive towards Birchwood Airport. Turn right on the last road on the right before the Airport, Stoltz Road and park off the road at the bridge. Ski, snowshoe or walk on the obvious trail till you reach the mouth of Peters Creek. Go right and make your own trail or follow the snow machine tracks. Classical or skate, with your dog. You are skiing along Knik Arm and on a clear day you can see from Sleeping Lady to Denali to the Butte. Watch for ice overflow, also don't get close to the edge of the arm as the tide cuts gullies into the side and has collapsible snow. In the spring you may even see Sandhill Cranes.

South Fork

Take Hiland Road and follow the directions to the trailhead for South Fork. The first bit of the trip is uphill so waxless skis or skins are helpful. After you level off head out the valley and soon you will drop down to a bridge across South Fork to an old road bed that heads to Symphony and Eagle Lakes. Stay in the flat lands near the river as this is avalanche territory. This is a 10 mile ski. Then pick your way over the moraine and there is an abandoned hut where you can rest and eat. Be prepared for changing snow conditions depending on whether it has been windy.

Peters Creek Trails

This backcountry trail system offers a full-day experience for the experienced back-country skier. To get to the trailhead take the Glenn Hwy. to the South Peters Creek exit. Turn left at the bottom of the off-ramp onto Ski Road which winds up the hill. Take a right at Whaley which turns into Chugach State Park Rd. Go up several switchbacks and take a left on Kullberg Rd. and then quickly right on Sullins Rd. Take a right on Malcolm which heads straight up the hill. At the top of the hill is a Chugach National Forest trail sign which marks the trail head. Winter – Limited motorized use. Snow machines only permitted with snow pack deeper than 3 feet (seldom opens). When open, snow machines are restricted to the non wilderness area portion of Peters Creek drainage. Description: The trail begins as an old road bed that leads to the previous site of a homestead. The road generally climbs in steps for the first 1.5 miles gaining around 500 ft in elevation. At this point, the primary Mt. Eklutna Trail (foot traffic only) veers left and climbs toward the peak of Mt. Eklutna. Continuing on the roadbed the trail rolls on for approximately 1/2 mile when the trail splits again. This time an alternate trail splits off to the right and parallels the road bed, but lower down in the valley. Besides being narrower than the road bed, this trail is full turns and ups and downs. Both trails continue up the valley another mile until they reach Four-Mile Creek. The upper road bed ends at the former homestead clearing where it tees with two narrow single-track trails. One trail turns left and follows the Four Mile Creek drainage for approximately 1.5 miles before disappearing into open tundra, the other trail turns right and connects with lower Peters Creek trail. This connection makes for a popular loop for skiers in the winter. The lower Peters Creek trail crosses Four Mile Creek and then contours the valley for another 2 miles with lots of turn, ups and downs. At this point the trail is closed to bicycles, but continues 11 more miles to the base of Mt. Rumble.

These trips are mostly flat, not difficult other than not being groomed and subject to ice and wind. You can't get lost. Sometimes, though the changing snow conditions can be frustrating. Have fun. Poke around as these trips can be separated or combined. I've never encountered an unfriendly snowmachiner, the river has lots of room and snow machine tracks make a good trail. If you bring your dog remember a leash for the ERNC trails near the visitor center.