BY DAN KOSTRZEWSKI
PHOTO BY GRANT GUNDERSON


"EVERY DAY I GET IN THE QUEUE, TO GET ON THE BUS THAT TAKES ME TO YOU." SKIER: JAMES HEIM, MOUNT BAKER.

# HOPE ON THE BUS

## BAKER'S WINTER RIDE PROGRAM BRINGS SKIING TO THE PROLETARIAT

LIKE MANY FUTURE ADDICTS, MY FIRST RELIABLE LIFT TO THE MOUNTAIN was on the ski bus. Friday nights in high school meant riding a coach powered by raw adolescent energy up to the hill. Boom boxes, girlfriends in long johns and fogged windows were part of the ride. At the collegiate level, the role of the bus shifted to include cheap kegs on Carnival Night. Even reveling in post-baccalaureate poverty at Mount Bachelor, the morning shuttle picked up the slack when the tank was empty or my AMC Eagle was in the shop. The bus was always there.

Yet as corporate ski resorts increasingly–and exclusively–court the SUV crowd, the ski bus is falling out of favor. Grassroots programs that stimulate involvement and introduce new generations to the hill have been sunset in favor of initiatives aimed at maximizing revenue per skier visit. School buses have been increasingly relegated to the back of the lot, and daily shuttles are in constant danger of being cut from the budget. At many areas, the brown-bag ethic found on the bus–which brings diversity directly to our slopes–is no longer greeted with warmth, leaving many future skiers no affordable place to start.

But at Mount Baker, the buses are treated as a high priority. At the top of the list is the Winter Ride Program, which delivers 1,400 kids per Saturday to the hill. Representing 22 school districts spread across five local counties (Whatcom, Skagit, Island, San Juan, and Snohomish) the program brings 44 buses packed with middle and high school kids to Baker for eight weeks each winter. The annual cost per student averages $400 and includes weekly lessons, a reduced-price season pass and eight round-trip rides. And while other school bus programs are shunned or shrinking, Baker's incarnation has doubled in size during the last seven seasons.

Participation in the Winter Ride mirrors a cross-section of the community thanks to an emphasis on ski swaps and sack lunches. All income levels are represented and a scholarship effort–where coordinators, chaperones and teachers identify kids who need extra assistance–subsidizes the cost for 50 kids on average per season. Winter Ride coordinator Pat Hammell–who was first drawn to the program 30 years ago through her husband's involvement and took on an expanded role after his untimely death–sees accessibility as a core value of the Winter Ride. "I originally said the reason I was doing it was because of my husband, who died very young," she says. "His motto was every child who could see the mountain should have an opportunity to try skiing or boarding. I took this on to keep that going."

Hammell–who counts her own kids and grandkids as ski bus alums–says a volunteer-based effort is critical. "Many of our kids are from homes where the parents do not ski or board or have any knowledge of it," she says. "So we make a real effort to meet with the parents and give them a view into this mystery. We show them what they need and help them try to keep the price down. That's the beauty of it: introducing it to kids who would not have a way to get up to the mountain otherwise."

The program receives special treatment from Mount Baker management, including prime slopeside parking, close contact with the ski school and reserved rental equipment. Baker's website dedicates a section to them for posting their digital ski and snowboard pics, which is hosted by ski-area intern and Winter Ride graduate Nina Olinger.

As a result, participants often develop a lasting connection to the mountain. Paula Hlady, a longtime Baker employee who helped grow the Winter Ride, says the long-term impact is easy to see in the adult skiers created by this introduction. "We see a lot of individuals who have gone through the bus program become either instructors or employees at the mountain," she confirms.

Hammell–who volunteers hundreds of hours a year to the program–best summarizes the Winter Ride's successful philosophy of inclusion: "I think in an area like Whatcom County, where we put so much emphasis on outdoor activities, it's just logical to give every child a chance to be up there," she says. "Long after I'm gone, the children and grandchildren of these people are going to remember the experience they had at Mount Baker."

### THE BOB

At the other end of the spectrum is Baker's over-21 bus–known as the BOB–which gives adults an opportunity to get back on the bus. Two years after its inception, the eight-week program, which brings together weekday skiers who would otherwise be riding single, is regularly packed to its 56-seat capacity with a diverse mix of semi-retired regulars, class-cutting students and tourists. Ride-home wine tastings and lunchtime seminars ranging from gear selection to ski-area history have evolved the adult-only ride into more than just a standard shuttle, but an extension of earlier positive experiences on the ski bus.

Paula Hlady, who pioneered this of-age transportation alternative, explains the allure of the ride, "Because of the love of skiing and camaraderie that comes through skiing, people have happy memories of the bus program, and it is something that they want to do again." She points to George Jones, an 84-year-old skier and regular BOB rider from Sedro-Woolley who took the bus to Baker when he was in school, as a prime example of this lifelong attraction. She sums up the idea of the BOB, saying, "Anytime we can get people up to the mountain where it is beautiful and there is great snow, it is wonderful. We don't make money on this bus, it's just getting people up to the place that they love to be."


# TREE HOUSE TONY

## TONY DETMER, WASHINGTON EWOK

**Tucked up into the canopy just east of Stevens Pass Ski Area lives a growing example of dirt-bag ingenuity and extreme arborism.** Seventy-five feet back from the bank of Highway 2 and suspended 50 feet up in the pines is the domicile of Tony Detmer.

Known as "Tree House Tony," Detmer built his dwelling seven years ago to escape substandard ski-area employee housing. Slowly he added a second and then a third story, installed a composting toilet, swapped the woodstove for propane heat, and perfected the fulcrum on a precarious 50-foot rope swing that launches from the deck. Crammed inside the plywood walls are a two-burner cookstove, hanging couch, second-story smoking lounge and lofted turret-style bedroom, which is reached via a step-by-step ascent of the interior furniture. All is linked to eight fir trees (ranging in height from 120-150 feet) by 'biner and girth-hitched webbing, which needs regular tightening to combat sag.

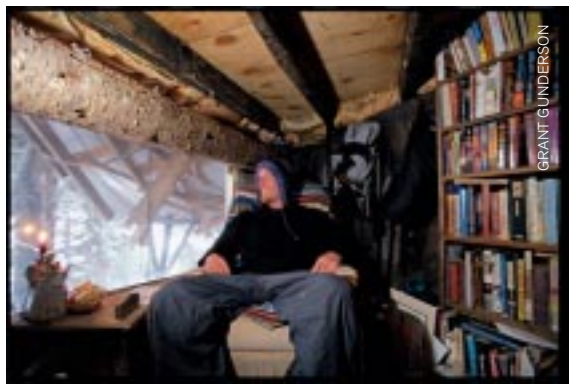
Tony salvaged most of the construction materials from a demolished Department of Transportation sand shed. His total six-year cash outlay–including all added amenities–is less than $3,000. Last February, Tony kicked down and turned from squatter to landowner with the joint purchase of the surrounding three-and-a-half acres. His dream of creating an Ewok Village is moving forward, with three new arrivals constructing their own tree houses and his neighbor returning to the teepee next door.

Even considering the huge financial benefit, Tony, who works as Tube City manager at Stevens Pass, says living this Spartan lifestyle can prove taxing. His biggest headache is the constant shoveling of the massive Cascadian snowfall. After a big dump, a minimum of three hours is required to shovel the path, the deck and all the fort's flat surfaces. "I shoveled way too much last winter," he says emphatically. "I'm putting on a new roof so I can spend less time shoveling and more time making turns."

Wildlife encounters are another hassle. Bear and marten visit at regular intervals, but Tony says keeping the resident rodent population at bay is his biggest day-to-day struggle. Tony also mourns two casualties brought about by the cougar: a pet cat that became a midnight snack and a skittish girlfriend. His current routine is marked by an excess of solitary confinement, which is warded off by a steady supply of paperbacks–including the entire *Star Wars* lineage–stacked on his shelves.

Other treetop challenges include withstanding strong alpine winds slowly shaking the structure loose, chainsaw pruning duty on the slick roof, and high propane consumption–which requires a two-tank-per-week haul for regular heating and cooking. Then there is the composting toilet, which functions poorly in cold weather and forces business to be done on the clock at the ski area.

Yet even faced with the associated hardship, Tony says he is unlikely to trade his perch for life on the ground. He sees his solution as the best method of maximizing vertical, connecting with nature and living with less. ***–Dan Kostrzewski***



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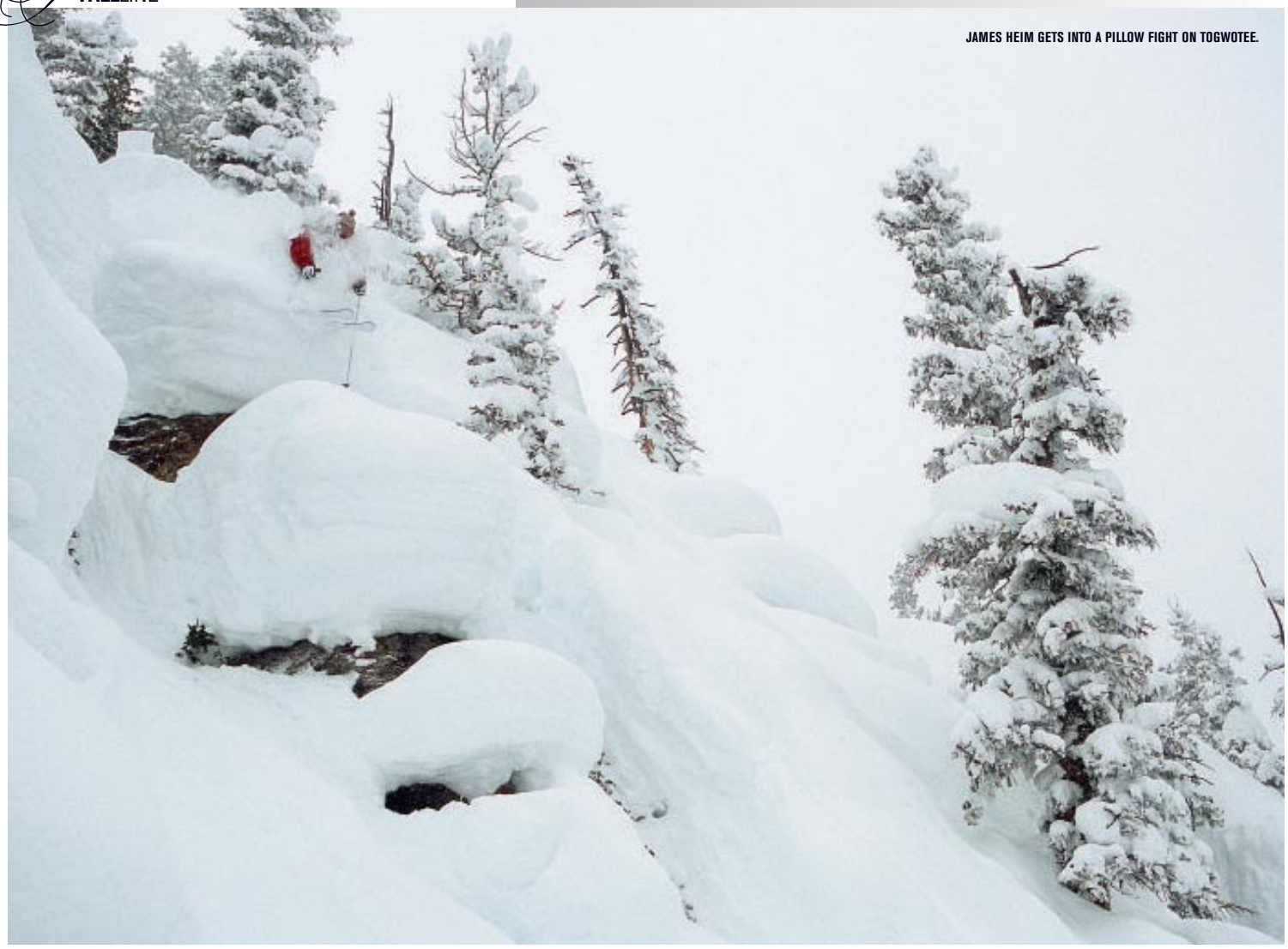

JAMES HEIM GETS INTO A PILLOW FIGHT ON TOGWOTEE.

# MECHANIZED TRUCE AT TOGWOTEE

## HIGH-RANGE ZONE SOLVES CONFLICT THE WYOMING WAY

IT IS NO SECRET THAT THE BACKCOUNTRY HAS DRAWN A CROWD. FROM Tahoe to the Tetons, the competition for untracked has grown more intense. Open boundaries, evolution in snowmobile technology and a proliferation of mechanized operations have decreed that once-coveted spots are stealth no more. This explosion in access has left upsurging user-groups–who all desire the same prime terrain–fighting each other for elbowroom. As a result of this recreational rivalry, conflict and contention have emerged as unfortunate byproducts in an environment where play should take priority.

Yet on Togwotee Pass—an hour removed from Jackson Hole's off-piste circus—peaceful coexistence reigns. For the past decade, high-horsepower slednecks, money-shot-seeking pros and the quiet touring crowd have kept conflict to a minimum in terrain straddling the Continental Divide. The secret, which seems plain to both immigrants and natives of the Equality State, is a homegrown approach that blends mutual respect, open-range compromise and a sheer vastness of space. This established truce has allowed a new cat-skiing operation to slide into the mix on a preexisting permit, and carve out a sweet 750-acre niche on Angle Mountain.

Adding one more mode to the milieu without disruption is a prime illustration of how this formula has successfully served to keep the peace above 8,500 feet. This multi-use reality is even more miraculous considering the volume of two-stroke visitation. Togwotee Mountain Lodge, which serves as the regional epicenter of snowmachine activity, sends out 8,000 guided snowmobilers annually from a single location. Total mechanized day-use traffic is estimated at three times that amount. Yet, with 1.2 million sled-legal acres, an adjoining NOLS-friendly wilderness and four Nordic refuges that were voluntarily ceded by snowmobile operators, use is dispersed into distinct zones without any mandated closures. At the center of this sits Togwotee Mountain Lodge, which launched the cat-skiing outfit to diversify its thriving winter resort business and has set a leading example in diffusing turf skirmishes between the vested parties.

Jeff Golightly, TML general manager, sees proactive compromise as the only reasonable way to keep access issues from boiling over. "I think the people here know that lawsuits just seem to be rampant and, if we don't make some voluntary concessions, the result is going to be involuntary closures or non-closures," he says. "It has been a more sensible approach because the alternative to not being sensible has some pretty nasty consequences."

Jamie Weeks, lead guide for the new cat op, says TML was able to reserve the slopes of Angle for cat skiers merely through dialogue with commercial guides. Weeks, who has a decade-long history in the Togwotee backcountry, was amazed by the complete absence of poached cat terrain during season one. He says, however, that this method of sensible resolution is endemic to the region. He points to a Nordic compromise, which cleared trails around Brooks Lake Lodge specifically for cross-country skiers, as setting a successful precedent. "There isn't a lot of population up here," he says. "So the people tend to know each other and they work it out themselves. I think that is Wyoming in general."

Golightly, who is proficient on both snowboard and snowmachine, agrees that an extension of this inclusive attitude is the main factor that allowed a smooth introduction for the cat in its inaugural season. Yet he has also seen cross-pollination between skiers and snowmobilers—and the mutual respect that has been earned—as playing a critical role in breaking down stereotypes during the last decade. In fact, he says the genesis of the cat-op was seeing so many pro skiers and snowboarders using sleds for access at the area. "There were tons of pro skiers up here spending a lot of time snowmobile skiing," he recalls. "They were renting our sleds and accessing the area and we realized there was something out there. They weren't just up here to sightsee."

John Layshock, one of the first lensmen to popularize the area, has been capturing pro skiers, snowboarders and slednecks in Togwotee's craggy photogenic terrain since 1996. He has seen the sports blend together and find mutual progression in the naturally integrated environment. "I don't draw a line between them so much as I just consider it all winter recreation. They are all one and the same–just with different price points," he says. "They are really mutually friendly and are all progressing in the same terrain. To me, Togwotee, with all the different things going on, is like a big, happy family."