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Illustration: Saleina Glacier Switzerland. Photo: Yves Gagneau


GOING TO THE SUN

GLACIER NATIONAL PARK AND THE FUTURE OF SKIING

TEXT AND PHOTO BY AARON TEASDALE



Skier: Greg Forfin Location: St. Mary Lake



The snow falls like it will never stop, smothering the wildlands around us in an ever-deepening blanket of white. It whips across our cheeks and breaks free from the fluted mountain faces above us, pouring over cliff bands and sending echoing rumbles into the valley below. Here, two small figures push through deepening powder along the frozen surface of 10-mile-long St. Mary Lake—Greg Fortin and I are skiing, or attempting to ski, to the Blackfoot and Jackson glaciers deep in Montana's Glacier National Park.

"Did I say we could get to the glaciers in a day?" Greg says with a wry grin as we strap on transceivers in case a slide reaches the lake. "I meant a week."

It's Montana's snowiest winter in over a decade, and even though it's screwing up our approach, I'm trying to savor every minute of it because I can't escape the feeling it may be the last, best winter of my life.

It's no secret that Glacier Park's glaciers, like those the planet over, are melting into oblivion. Of the park's original 150 slabs, only 25 remain, and Park scientists estimate those will be gone within 20 years. Which, of course, sucks. But for skiers, melting glaciers are actually less distressing than the reasons glaciers are melting—winters in Glacier are growing shorter, warmer, and less snowy. Climatologists at the University of Montana in Missoula predict an impending Montana future of early springs, and, most disastrously, increasingly warm and rainy winters. In other words, skiers can look forward to not only less snow, but more crappy snow.

"We're simply not getting as cold in the winter," says Dan Fagre, a research ecologist with the U.S. Geological Survey and the leading expert on climate change and the Park's glaciers, when he speaks with me from his office in West Glacier. "Snow line will continue to go up, and more precipitation will fall as rain."

For skiers, less snow also has other, less obvious consequences. Shorter winters open longer growing seasons, which allow trees to spread into current alpine areas. A recent Park study measured a four-percent loss of treeless alpine areas, and, according to Fagre, the trend is accelerating. Meaning the long approaches to Glacier's high, remote open slopes will grow even longer as the aspects themselves shrink.

This is not comforting news as Greg and I finally emerge from almost three days of lake and woods skiing onto an open saddle above Gunsight Lake, in the spectacularly wide-open Blackfoot-Jackson Glacier Basin. Our approach has been glorious—brimming with raw beauty, wilderness adventure, and daily storms—but we'd planned to get here much faster, and now don't have time to ski the very glaciers we'd come for. It's the cruel irony of our trip—a winter so cold and buried in snow that it's preventing us from skiing glaciers that are dying from winters without enough cold and snow.

Naysayers might point to 2008's winter-that-wouldn't-die as proof that global warming is a sham. But, as Fagre points out, future weather will be unpredictable and we may still luck out with "an occasional cold winter or late spring." More important are the long-term trends, and those, according to Fagre, are clear: "(Glacier's) annual average temperature is going up every year, there is a 50-year downward trend in our snowpacks, and spring is occurring one month earlier than it used to."

Or, for those who prefer their scientific data in amusement park terms, Fagre adds, "There may still be ups and downs, but the roller coaster is trending upwards."

Such grim thoughts are far from our minds as Greg and I stop to finally take in our first view of the wild and sprawling alpine world we've come to see. We're standing in a giant horseshoe of cirques, encircled by a half-dozen peaks nine thousand feet or higher. Fresh wolverine tracks lead past our skis and straight up the mountainside behind us.

"Whooooa," Greg says, like a surfer seeing Oahu's North Shore for the first time. "We are in heaven."

He points out where he'd originally hoped to camp, a protected shelf at the foot of Jackson Glacier, and several 3,000-foot open pitches. Here, the Jackson and Blackfoot glaciers—once a single massive glacier, now broken into remnant parts—form the largest remaining complex of ice in Glacier Park. It's hard to believe, looking at this world of snow and cold, that they will be gone in my lifetime. I don't even want to imagine a rainy January.

Glaciers in the park—and the rest of North America—achieved their greatest size in the 1850's, at the end of the 300-year Little Ice Age. Since then, they, and virtually every glacier on the planet, have been shrinking, and the ablation is picking up speed.

"The glaciers are melting at twice the rate we thought they would," says Fagre, who points out that while they're melting fastest in the Northern Rockies, almost all glaciers throughout the continental U.S. are shrinking. A handful are actually growing, due to a climate-change induced increase in precipitation. But as temperatures continue to climb, Fagre says, "Their fate is in lockstep with ours."

The environmental consequences of melting glaciers are many (reduced stream flows, fewer trout, loss of critical water for irrigation and aquifers), and the entire Jackson/Blackfoot alpine zone is projected to be forest by century's end (future skiers: SORRY), but what does it mean to us, right now, as skiers?

"We've got to reconsider our whole lifestyle," says Fagre, himself a diehard double-plunker, who now drives a hybrid and skis close to home. "Maybe don't drive a long time for one ski; go for longer times—the way it used to be in the 1950's, when you would only ski three or four times a winter, but for several days each time."

Global warming or no, it's not just future generations who won't be skiing these glaciers—on this day, our last full day in the park, neither will we. Minutes after we arrive at our viewpoint on the saddle, dark storm clouds stack and tumble over the western mountains. We quickly scamper 800 feet up a south-facing pitch above us—we can't leave without carving something—pause for a moment to take in the unruly sky and mountains on all sides, and drop in as more snow starts falling. If only it could fall forever.

Source: Greg Fortin leads single- and multi-day backcountry ski trips in Glacier Park through www.glacieradventureguides.com.

To compare current images of Glacier Park's glaciers to images taken 100 years ago, see www.nrmssc.usgs.gov/repeatphoto.

