



latitudes

THE CROW'S NEST

BY EMILY STIFLER
PHOTOS KRISTOFFER ERICKSON

SPLITTING THE Y COULOIR IN MONTANA'S RUGGED ABSAROKAS

It's dark at 5:45 a.m. when Alan, Pat, and I pull into Kris Erickson's driveway in Livingston, Montana. Kris emerges, silhouetted by the kitchen light, tosses his pack and skis in the back, and climbs into the tiny truck cab. We're headed to ski the Y Couloir, a north-facing chute on 10,941-foot Black Mountain, in the Northern Absaroka Range, 45 minutes southeast of Bozeman.

Dawn cracks as we enter Paradise Valley. Alan Oram and I are squashed in the jumper seats. An emergency room physician who's lived in Bozeman a decade, Alan's grinning. Kris, originally from northern Montana, is in shotgun. He looks serious. A photographer and North Face athlete standing six feet tall, he's climbed and skied peaks around the world. Pat Wolfe, a lifelong Bridger Bowl skier, is driving. It's his final day before hanging up the boards for rock climbing season.

I look through the back window toward Black, but it's blocked

by Mount Delano, another snowy peak. Fences, cattle, hay fields, and cottonwoods line the Yellowstone River on the valley floor. In a week, lush green pastures will offset snowy peaks, and Paradise Valley will live up to its name. When we reach the trailhead at 5,600 feet, we stretch skins onto skis and begin the slow ascent through forested switchbacks. The trail is patched with dirt, rocks, and snow, and the only other tracks belong to a pine marten.

In the northwest corner of the 943,626-acre Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness, Black Mountain rises almost 6,000 feet from the valley floor. Thickly treed hillsides guard steep, narrow canyons of dark metamorphic and volcanic rock, hiding glacially carved hanging basins and peaks. With some of the most remote country in the Lower 48, these mountains are home to grizzly and black bears, mountain goats, elk, mule deer, moose, bighorn sheep, and wolves.

After an hour of climbing, I stop behind Kris for a water break

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A playground of gnar, inside and out: scrappy lines, scrapper bars. Bottom photo shows descent route in the shadows.



JOSH CAGE



KENE SPERRY



below Black's sheer northwest face. He points out a narrow, cliff-lined chute, a ski mountaineering line called the Gashski. Above this are 30 meters of technical rock, a hanging couloir, and the southwest ridge. He unfolds a map and shows me the upper part of the feature. "The Absarokas are scrappy," he says.

"There are some clean features," I say. "Lots of couloir skiing."

"Sure, but they make you work harder, figure it out. Longer approaches, no published accounts, no avalanche data," Kris says. "We still have more than 4,500 vertical feet to go."

WHY THEY

Far from any major metropolitan area, the Absarokas are a remote, hard-to-access range that stretches 150 miles from north-central Wyoming to just outside of Livingston. Nearly all of it is protected within four wilderness areas and Yellowstone National Park. With serious avalanche danger, harsh weather, and inconsistent ski conditions, the

Absarokas (the native name of Crow Indians) present an interesting challenge. If you're smart, careful and willing to work for it, the inspiring ski mountaineering lines are endless.

"The AB wilderness has one of the highest concentrations of technical ski descents in the lower 48," Kris says as we walk. "Locals have been exploring in relative obscurity, and for years the ethic was not to publish. Only recently has skiing here become popular."

Doug Coombs, Scot Schmidt and Alex Lowe skied off Black as early as 1981. Coombs made the first descent of the Y Couloir's west fork in 1982, and the steeper east fork was skied in the late '80s. While these ski legends recognized the Absarokas' potential early, "popular" is still a relative term. Compared to the Tetons or the Wasatch, they're practically virgin territory.

Although Erickson never skied the Y with Coombs, Schmidt or Lowe, their collective passion to seek out the most aesthetic lines in southwest Montana set a precedent. "All three relentlessly searched



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Places of striking beauty are rarely easy to get to, or in this case, *get down*.



the corners of the backyard ranges to find the gems. Those lines that rose to the highest lofts, required the most skill, and demanded specific conditions usually held the highest levels of respect," reflects Erickson. "While the Y wouldn't be classified as the most technical, it does have a striking beauty that can't be denied and was one of the biggest lines to be ticked in our area at an early time for North American backcountry skiing."

Kris, a proud Montanan, is very connected to the Absaroka-Beartooth region. He's been skiing here since college, when he and the late Hans Saari skied big lines near Cooke City. Since moving to Livingston in 2001 with his wife, Cloe, he's made the Northern Absarokas his playground of gnar. For Kris, who's skied Black more than a dozen times, the Absarokas act as an ideal training ground for Himalayan expeditions.

We cut across to the apron of the Y. Steep switchbacks defeat our skins, so we load skis onto packs and start booting. No crampons necessary. The chalky slab is firm, and we follow the right side, then hang a left into the east fork. It's really steep in here. I stop and look back; cross-loading from the wind has sculpted parallel snakes streaking down a southeasterly snowfield. Old wet slides ripped off another peak, and roller balls are frozen below rugged chutes.

Six hours after leaving the trailhead, we're standing on the summit. I look south and east into an ocean of mountains, recognizing Emigrant Peak, the towering fortress of Mount Cowen, and the Pyramid. The Beartooths' broad, treeless plateaus stretch beyond, capped by the remote 12,799-foot Granite Peak, the highest in Montana.

We strip skins for the trip down, then slide down low-angle, icy crust. Atop the east fork of the Y, we stop and peer over the edge. One by one, we go over it. The snow is a mix of windbuff and crust, slightly grabby. We're careful, knowing a misstep is out of the question. When we reach the apron, we relax into pow turns before finally running our skis to pick up speed over the flats at the bottom that will take us back to the trailhead, and the truck, and beers. A true Montana classic. 🍷

DETAILS, DETAILS

Base/Summit Elevation: 5,659 feet/10,941 feet

Season and Conditions: April and May are typically best for consistent snowpack and ski conditions. This area has severe avalanche terrain, exposing skiers for the majority of the approach, as well as the descent.

Gearneck: Standard backcountry equipment, map and compass, lightweight crampons and axe.

Getting There: Drive south from Livingston. Turn left at the cow. No, not that cow, the other one.

Camping: If you camp at the trailhead, look out for bears. Per Wilderness law, motorized vehicles and bikes are not allowed beyond the trailhead.

Avalanche/Weather Forecast: There is no specific avalanche forecast site for this area, but the Gallatin National Avalanche Center provides detailed forecasting for much of southwest Montana. Mtavalanche.com