

READY FOR THE RIDGE?

How to prepare for your first hike to the top of the ski hill

IT'S UNUSUAL FOR A SKI AREA to not have a lift that conveniently deposits skiers onto its summit. Bridger Bowl has made a choice to leave the uppermost skiing only to those with the willingness and skill to hike for it. I think this is one of the most delightful things about Bridger Bowl, as the Ridge offers an alluring goal that persistently reminds us that there is still more to be accomplished. The Ridge offers an incredible experience that is unlike anything you'll find skiing under the lifts. The challenge of the hike, the beauty of the ridgetop scenery and the exhilaration of the dramatic runs all add up to genuinely unforgettable skiing.

There are several facets to a successful Ridge experience — hiking up, navigating to a safe and appropriate run, and putting in a solid run down (and then posting your GoPro footage all over Facebook). Add to that on any given day the variables such as snow conditions, weather, visibility, your energy level and that of your ski partners, and there are many factors that contribute to shape the outcome. Part of the fun of skiing wild places is the variability and untamed nature of it. But on the other hand it's prudent to stack the odds in your favor. So, how do you get ready for successful Ridge skiing? Here is a breakdown of the key elements.

FITNESS

The first step, quite literally, of any of Bridger's hiking terrain is the fitness to haul yourself up the bootpack. Upon arriving at the top, you are most likely not done yet. You can continue to hike, glide and side-step to any number of locations. The total amount of time spent exerting yourself, depending on how fast you hike and where you go, can range from 15 minutes to 45 minutes or more. And then you need to rally your energy for the ski down, which is why you did all that work in the first place. So, the take-away message is that you will need energy not just for the hike up but for all the other elements of the experience. The last thing you want to do is to arrive at the top of the run exhausted, which would not bode well for the trip down.

There are lots of ways to build fitness.



BY KARIN KIRK

The hike up to the M, via the steep route, does a fine job of replicating the Ridge hike. It is of similar duration and intensity. So if you are wondering what it feels like to do the full Ridge hike, give that one a try. To round out your workout you can jog down the gentle trail from the M, which requires balance, timing and precise placement of your feet. Not unlike skiing, eh? So there you have my favorite recipe for pre-season Ridge prep.

The hike up the Ridge from the top of Bridger lift is about 450 vertical feet and resembles a very long flight of stairs. It takes most people somewhere between 8 minutes and 30 minutes. The bootpack is well established and you don't really have a choice where you put your feet. You have to walk where the

steps are. I think the person who sets the bootpack is 7 feet 4 inches tall. At least that what it feels like as you navigate some of the big steps. If you're tall, the spacing of the steps will feel natural for you. If not, you might want to add John Coltrane's "Giant Steps" to your playlist for the journey up.

Partway up the hike you'll really wish you had taken off your neck gaiter and opened all your vents, so do that before you depart. Set a pace that you can maintain for 15 or 20 minutes, rather than doing intervals and having to stop repeatedly to catch your breath. There are several places to step off the trail to allow 20-year olds to pass you. It's good karma to avail yourself of these pullouts, but try not to wander off the beaten path otherwise you'll immediately sink up to your knees.

NAVIGATION

It doesn't take much imagination to gaze up at the Ridge and think of all the places you really, really do not want to end up. Of course we generally look at the Ridge from the bottom up. How will it look from the top down? Will you really recognize that clump of spruce trees next to that gray rock? By far the best way to learn routes is to go with someone who knows their way around solidly and who promises to not give in to the temptation of trying out a new line with you as the guinea pig. There are several tried and true routes and they are popular for good



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reason. I'd strongly recommend sticking to those on your first forays. Oh, and the notion that if there are tracks then it must be an OK way to go? No. Don't fall for that one. Make a plan and stick to it.

Traversing is part of many Ridge routes. Many traverses are a piece of cake and some are a bit tense. Negotiating traverses is a skill just like any other. You can practice the art of traversing in places like High Traverse or Mundy's Bowl. Part of good Ridge etiquette is to be aware of traffic flow on traverses, especially when the terrain is uneven. Don't swoop down into a dip until the landing spot is clear. And don't linger in the landing spot because that is just inviting trouble. Lastly, be mindful of impeding snowboarders on traverses. If they have to stop it's a big pain to get going again, and taking a foot out of the binding is potentially risky in addition to being cumbersome. So keep an eye over your shoulder and allow others to maintain their flow over hill and dale.

SKIING

Well, you've hiked up, found your way to the top of a run and buckled your boots tight. What's next? If you are anything like most humans, you might find yourself a little apprehensive at this particular moment. The snow up on the Ridge gets relatively little skier traffic. That is part of the allure, of course. But it also can have an unconsolidated, uncertain feel to it. The snow can also be weather-beaten at times, with stiff wind slab or grabby sun cups. There aren't conveniences like moguls which are ever so handy for timing your turns. This can leave some skiers searching for the right moves. When I teach on the Ridge, ski technique gets boiled down into one very simple priority: end every turn

in balance. Every turn. That means you'll want to ski a touch more conservatively than usual and make sure that by the end of each turn you've got both hands in front of you and your ankles and knees flexed so you are right over your feet. Because the snow is unconsolidated, you'll want to use strong gradual moves to get your skis around, rather than hoppy, stabby moves. (You did read last month's article on powder skiing, right? If so, that ought to sound familiar.) Strong and balanced — that's the recipe you want. Who cares if they are not the prettiest or boldest turns of your life, there's time for that later. Plus, you can embellish the story down in Jimmy B's at the end of the day.

To prepare for Ridge-type snow conditions, try ski runs that don't necessarily have the best snow. Get yourself comfortable with a variety of snow conditions and practice the strong and balanced technique. Try the Whirlpools or High Traverse to Avalanche Gulch for some places that offer steep, ungroomed runs.

EQUIPMENT

An avalanche beacon is required to access any of Bridger's hiking spots. The BCA beacon parks at the bottom of South Bowl and in Beall Park are the perfect places to practice and learn how transceivers work. In addition to the beacon it's also strongly recommended that you have a backpack, probe and shovel. Although many people skip the backpack and shoulder their skis up the hike, you'll find a backpack to be a lot easier to manage. Plus you can carry a lot more chocolate and Red Bull that way.

START WITH THE FINGERS

The Fingers area is the best introduction to hiking for turns. The hike is less steep than the Ridge and can be as short as 5 minutes to access the 1st Finger. The skiing is straightforward and you can usually see all or most of the run from the top. There are no traverses and it's remarkably hard to get lost (but don't test me on that — go with someone who knows where to go).

OK, so do you feel ready to go hiking now? If so, great! If not quite, I encourage you to keep working at it and aim high — Ridge hiking is an amazing opportunity that we all have available right in our backyard. I will keep an eye out for you up there and if your backpack is too heavy due to an excess of chocolate, I'd be happy to take some off your hands. ♦

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