

The Big Snow is one to remember



By **Jack Haskel**, PCTA Trail Information Specialist

July 15th. Much of the Trail is covered in snow. Reports trickle in every day. Five feet near Government Meadows. Two feet at Carson Pass. Drifts over ten feet in the Evolution Group. The thru-hikers are near Tahoe, or spread far and wide after having searched for drier tread.

Sixty feet of snow fell on parts of the PCT. The trail is holding it four or more weeks later than normal.

Thru-hikers and skiers shared Mammoth over the July 4 holiday. People from all over traveled to the tread of the Hat Creek Rim. In Oregon, Washington, and Northern and Central California, the PCT was a snow hike. California did not set an outright snow record, but this year's snowpack lasted longer over more places than other years in recent memory.

Our focus naturally falls to the Sierra when we think of snow. From the annual anxiety of Forester Pass and the long plod over Muir, Pacific Crest Trail snow has a Sierran drift. It is possible that on this section of the PCT the sport of long distance, lightweight snow hiking was born. It's near certain that the sport matured here.

Of the thru-hikers, early front-runners **Wing-It** and **Don't Panic** pushed into the Sierra on June 2. While that's admittedly early in a normal year, in 2011 it was still full-blown ski season. **Jake "Don't Panic" Down**, cautioned those behind him: "This is not hiking the trail, it's a winter ice endurance event."

He'd know, having done it and the rest of the Crown already. Jake went on, "It doesn't relate to thru-hiking, for hikers who aren't into that, this won't be fun at all."

It was a tough time to be in the Sierra.

Jim Clement, owner and denizen of Vermillion Valley Resort, agreed. After hosting the season's first 20 hikers, Jim was worried. "There will be a lot of people rethinking their commitment to the Trail," he said.

It is that kind of year.

Late season snows and cold temperatures meant a slow start to the melt. VVR opened later than usual. On top of the monumental snows, May had been cold. Lows hovered in the teens, and it never went above 70 degrees. The resort received seven fresh inches the first weekend of June.

Snow in the Sierra is one naked truth of a northbound thru-hike. Our tribe has pushed the season for lightweight backpacking into the snowy wilderness. This year, winter conditions brought hikers closer to the realm of sunburned ski mountaineers. Few have walked this snowy line. It was an exciting time of exploration.

Large snow years of the past decade don't compare to 2011. Sure, they may also have received tremendous snowfall, but none persisted so late and covered the trail so completely. **Tom Banks**, the lead backcountry ranger for the Amador Ranger District, characterized





Page 22: A trail marker awaiting spring near Santiam Pass on the way to Three Fingered Jack, Mt. Washington Wilderness, Oregon, May 2011. Photo by Dave Smith. Pages 23 & 24: PCT thru-hikers brave winter conditions in summer near Rae Lakes, Kings Canyon National Park, California. Photos by Marty Maine.

it as “uncharted territory,” saying, “This amount of late season snow hasn’t been seen in about 30 years.”

Hikers didn’t just face just snowy passes. The valleys were snowbound. The creek banks were ice rinks, and the creeks were raging. The forests, Jake Down said, were “like a dirt bike course. Snow ramps up and down all of the time.”

It’s a fascinating time to be watching the trail. We added more knowledge and experience than ever before to the collective experience of snowpacking. We’ve known from past years which creeks are hard, and how Mather and Forester passes compare. More people ended up hiking snowy sections of the trail in more places.

The stubborn remnants of winter offered new lessons. Hikers learned more deeply of the challenges of Northern Yosemite, the snowy north faces of Section O, the rare experience of hiking snow in the Klamath Mountains, the long, crusted distances of Oregon and the precipitous slopes of Washington. Between the fire of the desert and the ice of the mountains, summer 2011 stands as a season to remember. 🐦

