

Bear Gulch-Mesa Falls Cross-Country Ski Trails

Parking for the Bear Gulch-Mesa Falls Trail system is located at the end of the plowed section of the Mesa Falls Scenic Byway (route 47), 12 miles northeast of Ashton, Idaho, near the old Bear Gulch alpine ski area. The parking lot is also a trailhead for snowmobiles heading into Island Park and includes a restroom. Idaho Park N' Ski permits are required for skiers and permits can be obtained at any Forest Service office, Harriman State Park and Island Park businesses. Skiers and snowmobiles share the trailhead and unplowed Byway for the first 0.4 miles. The trail system consists of 2 loops and a spur in the Caribou-Targhee National Forest totaling 6.8 miles. Trail maps are posted at the numbered trail intersections. Depending on snow conditions the trail system is usually groomed weekly by Forest Service personnel.

Wildlife such as bald eagles, ravens, osprey, moose, ermine and porcupine are occasionally seen along the trails. The trails provide excellent views of the Henrys Fork Canyon, and Upper and Lower Mesa Falls. The Mesa Falls are the only major undisturbed waterfalls in the Columbia River system and as such maintain a natural look and feel. At 110 feet and 65 feet, respectively, Upper and Lower Mesa Falls offer equally spectacular views in a beautiful forest setting. A series of icy walkways provide access for viewing the upper falls.

Loop 1 - 3.9 miles or 6.3 km (Round trip from the trailhead)

The trail to Loop 1 runs up the road (a groomed snowmobile trail) for 0.4 miles to intersection 2, then west and along the scenic rim of the canyon for 1.8 miles. At intersection 3, the loop branches to the right and parallels the snowmobile road back to the trailhead. On a clear day, the return portion of Loop 1 provides an excellent view of the Teton Range, thirty miles to the southeast.

Difficulty level – More Difficult

Loop 2 - 5.9 miles or 9.5 km (Loops 1 & 2, round trip from the trailhead)

At intersection 3, Loop 2 drops to a slightly lower plateau, returns to the canyon rim, and continues to the Grandview Overlook of Lower Mesa Falls. From there the loop (as of 2005/2006) goes through the campground and wanders through the forest to link back on itself and then to loop 1.

Difficulty level – More Difficult

Grandview Overlook was built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930's. Young men came west from all over the country during the harsh days of the depression. They lived in camps and spent long hours working on Forest Service and other government projects. Snowmobiles share the overlook with skiers. The restroom is open in the winter.

Upper Falls Spur - 9.1 miles or 14.7 km (Loops 1 & 2 plus spur, round trip from the trailhead)

The trail, revised for 2007, crosses the snowmobile road at the lower falls entrance sign and parallels the snowmobile route on the east side for 1 mile to the entrance sign for the upper falls. While the trail is marked, neither end is marked help hide the trail from snowmobilers. The trail crosses the snowmobile road again and joins a snowmobile trail for the 200-foot descent to Upper Mesa Falls. The restroom at the falls is open in winter.

Difficulty level – Most Difficult due to length and hill

The Big Falls Inn is adjacent to the Upper Falls. It was built as headquarters for a power company but the power dam was never built. In the past, Big Falls Inn has been a hotel, stage stop, café, saloon, dance hall, employee retreat, Boy Scout camp, and a police lodge. The Inn has been renovated and is now operated by the Forest Service and the Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation as a gift shop and interpretive center. The Inn is open on weekends from January 6 thru March 11, 2007 as a snowmobiler warming station.