

Skating on the wild side

By Kay Bjork

We spilled out of the car at the trailhead parking lot, cold air slapping us to attention after an hour-long drive in a toasty warm car.

Our high-school aged daughter Kelsey and friend Emily Ascione tugged their hats down over their ears, “Brrrrr, its cold!”

My husband Dewey made last minute additions to his pack – socks, map, ropes, sandwiches – and tossed down the last of his coffee. He threaded ice skates through a hockey stick and threw it over his shoulder.

Today a hike was just the means-to-an-end – we were hoping for clear, fast ice on Cold Lake, located two miles up the trail in the Mission Mountain Wilderness.

Temperatures had plunged in recent November nights under a star-spattered sky, perfect precedents to smooth ice on high mountain lakes. Snow would normally make it impossible to drive to the trailhead but sunny, dry weather had prevailed in recent weeks leaving the roads bare and dry and only a skiff of snow on the trail.

We weren’t the only ones scouting good ice that day. Our friend John Gangemi called that morning, recruiting hockey players for a game on Birch Lake in the Jewel Basin. It sounded tempting but smoke from prescribed burns clogging that area turned us south to clearer air.

The trail was dusted with snow and little crystal gardens sprouted from former puddles. Laughter and chatter lapsed into the rhythmic potato chip crunch of our heavy boots on the trail.

I strained to spot the lake as we made the final rise on the trail.

“Is it frozen?” I asked the group as we hoped, hoped it was.

A mosaic of snow, water and ice required a closer look to determine whether it was skateable.

The first stretch of lake was a thin sheet of smooth dark ice that shattered under the thunk of a hockey stick. Cracks revealed a mere $\frac{1}{2}$ inch ice depth.

“Whooaa!” Kelsey pointed ahead to a field of flowery hoarfrost sparkling in the sunlight. Spellbound we knelt on the ice to inspect the ice blossoms that covered about an acre of ice.

“Fat-free!” teased Kelsey as she gently plucked a crystal chip from the ice and popped it in her mouth.

Skirting the flowery winter garden we made our way to a shady bay of navy blue ice. Ca-ra-aaak.

We scattered like pool balls after the break.

Shrieks and laughter bounced off the craggy rock wall across the frozen lake.

The noisy ice was a false alarm, the ice-locked mountain lake had awakened for a brief moment as this new element was introduced. The weight of skaters caused pressure cracks to form in what we found to be over four inches of ice.

Knowing the dangers of a cold dunk in a frozen lake – especially when the car was nearly an hour away – we packed ropes and hockey sticks to facilitate a “God forbid” rescue. We also carried dry clothes and matches for a fire to offer a quick warm-up for a wet skater.

Hugging the shoreline we made our way around the lake. Our skates left ribbon-like patterns trailing behind us. The stillness was punctuated by the crisp, scrape of our skates.

"Wonder how the Birch Lake hockey game is going," Dewey commented as we slid a hockey puck back and forth between skaters. A rowdy game of hockey didn't meet the need to be conservative on a partially frozen lake with dainty patches of ice flowers.

The sun sank behind the dark mountain and we knew it was time to head out. I looked back to draw in the image one more time – knowing that no matter how hard I tried to capture its details such as the angle of the light, the smell of ice, the wonderful mix of cold air kissed by sunlight – would dim in my memory.

As we fell into line on the trail a mysterious, musical vibration rose from the lake. The melancholy ice song danced over the lake as if a gigantic cello string had been plucked." She doesn't want us to leave," I mused as we continued down the trail.

Meanwhile our friends at Birch Lake were warming up for a game of hockey. John, his wife Robin and son Fischer were joined by several friends; including Nathan and Heather Sande and their two children, and Don Bauder. They found perfect ice – so clear that they could see the bottom and shiny fish as they flitted away from the ice skaters.

John pulled out a video camera to record the fun and caught Don falling. Almost simultaneously strange sounds and movement rippled across the ice. "You broke it, Don," the group ribbed.

But then a sense of alarm rose from the skaters near the shore, "Get off, it's breaking!" they screamed at John and Don who were near the middle of the lake.

The lake began to sway and pulse. "It was like a jigsaw breaking," John said.

Nathan was sitting on the ice taking off his skates when he heard what he described, "a huge sucking sound." It was as if someone had pulled the plug and for a fleeting moment the water disappeared on the shoreline. Briefly suspended in air, the ice on the shore shattered.

John skated quickly to the shoreline snatching the gear and sneakers that were scattered on the ice's edge. The ice collapsed beneath him and he found himself on the rocky bottom in shallow water.

Then the water resurfaced, sloshing two feet above the former shoreline.

Grabbing an ice axe John headed back out on the lake to gather the remaining gear, knowing that he was headed to stronger, thicker ice.

"We knew that skating was over for the day," John said with a laugh.

Before heading back down the trail the group lingered, fascinated by the lake's strange rumblings.

On the two-mile return to their cars they offered theories for the peculiar lake behavior they had witnessed. Maybe after the ice formed the lake level dropped, leaving a gap between water and ice. And maybe the weird pulsing of the lake was caused by water displaced by the breaking, sinking ice.

The next day Heather Sande was visiting with a friend in Alaska who mentioned the violent earthquake in Denali Park. The 7.9 earthquake sent shock waves that were felt as far away as Louisiana. She shared the story with her husband Nathan, a former Alaskan resident and environmental consultant, and he flashed into the strange phenomena they had experienced at Birch Lake. After studying the data he realized that the earthquake had occurred at the same time that Birch Lake began to vibrate that afternoon.

Thinking back to the mystifying lake song we heard on our way out of Cold Lake I remembered my whimsical comment, “She doesn’t us want to leave.”

It was probably lucky we did.

Footnote

This was an extreme scenario in what could be considered an extreme sport. Not really suited to the novice, it requires a level of expertise in both the outdoors and skating to minimize the increased risks involved with the mix of aquatic elements and cold weather.

John Gangemi and his group are all accomplished outdoor sportsmen whose professional lives also depend on knowledge of and respect for the natural world. (John is Conservation Director for American Whitewater, an organization promoting river conservation, access and safety and Sande an environmental consultant)

My husband and I grew up in Minnesota (land of 10,000 lakes) and have lived and played on Swan Lake for over 20 years. Both of our college studies included science focuses so we have an innate curiosity about the way the natural world works. Even though we have nearly memorized our favorite skating “rink,” Swan Lake, we remain humble to Mother Nature, knowing that she is ever-changing.

Skating on natural ice poses new challenges not found on commercial rinks. It has its own topography with its miniature crevices, hills, valleys and knobs. The watery world underneath also creates a mysterious and sometimes dangerous playground.

The only time we take chances is in shallow water with a “We might get wet, but we won’t die,” philosophy.

I wouldn’t advise the unfamiliar and inexperienced to venture onto frozen ponds, creeks, rivers or lakes unless you with an experienced and wise friend.

Sidebar (if use photo)

Don and Colleen Scharfe, outdoors enthusiasts and owners of Rocky Mountain Outfitters in Kalispell, Montana are also members of this unofficial skating club. While she was a licensed pilot, Colleen scouted for frozen lakes from the air. A nearly annual vigil to the Banff Mountain Film Festival usually includes a memorable skating outing. Skating adventures have included Jewel Basin lakes; Johns Lake in Glacier Park; beaver dams up the North Fork of the Flathead River; and in the Lake O’Hara area near Banff, British Columbia.

Their 2002 Christmas card included a picture of their skating outing in Banff with son Kyle.