



*Snowshoers and skiers at the summit of Mount St. Helens, Mount Adams in the distance. With proper gear and precautions, a winter snowshoe ascent of the volcano is possible. Go when the weather is absolutely clear.*

# Snowshoeing St. Helens

## Winter on the volcano offers solitude, but watch weather carefully

BY DAVE SCHIEFELBEIN

Mount St. Helens was once the fifth-highest peak in Washington State. Its nearly perfect cone drew comparisons to Mount Fuji. That distinction changed dramatically in May, 1980 when a massive and larger-than-anticipated eruption blew away to the upper 1,300 feet of the peak. In a state known for volcanoes, St. Helens has remained the most visibly active. Its high-profile, every-changing qualities make it a prized summit year-round. And after a recent but relatively brief climbing ban, the mountain is again open to the general public.

I'd done the obligatory trudge up the dusty slopes in the summer and shared the summit with 99 other permit-holders. That was nice, but I wasn't feeling the need to repeat the hike. But when a

friend expressed the desire to go to the top it seemed to me a different Mount St. Helens experience was called for this time around. It turns out a winter ascent was the correct thing to try.

With the right precautions, Mount St. Helens is very doable in winter. But winter can also be a fickle and even dangerous season on any of Washington's mountains: no snow, too much snow, unstable snow, rain instead of snow... conditions can sometimes seem to plot against the hardy who want to experience the views and solitude of mountains in winter. We chose to plan our climb between late winter and early spring. The days would be longer, the weather generally better, the snow still plentiful. The most popular and standard winter route on St. Helens is known as Worm Flows. The route begins at the Marble

Mountain Sno-Park on the mountain's south side. It ascends a hefty 5,500 feet from trailhead to summit. Lots of people ski the peak, but we were opting to go with snowshoes. And since traveling on snowshoes is frequently slower than skis, we thought an overnight winter backpack on the peak would be fun, and also would divide up what would otherwise be a long slog in just a single day. That plan would allow us to hike part way up the route with full gear, spend a night out on the mountain, and then have a relatively easy summit day.

The best chance for a successful winter climb is to keep a close eye on the weather and snow conditions. We waited for the all the right elements to come together: a long stretch of stable weather combined with favorable avalanche conditions. On the appointed day in March, we left

Seattle early, secured our permit and set off from the trailhead sometime in the late morning. You're on snow immediately after the parking lot and the trail begins in forest and gradually breaks out of the trees with straightforward views of the rest of the route all the way to the summit. Once we were out of the trees, the views only got better as we climbed.

Sometime in the afternoon we located a relatively flat spot to pitch our tent on the snow, being careful to set up our camp out of obvious snow-slide zones. Nearby rocks gave us a place to sit while we cooked, ate, relaxed and enjoyed the views until sunset. The chills of the evening sent us into our tent early. It was a gorgeous weekend, so we knew plenty of other people would be doing the ascent, but making the decision to take two days and camp high on the mountain ensured that we were completely alone for the night. Sunrise brought the best rewards: a clear morning above a blanket of clouds with a booming view of Mount Hood. A leisurely breakfast sipping hot drinks in our sunny camp had us watching the early-rising day-trippers start to emerge from the forest far below us. We put on our snowshoes and trudged slowly uphill to the summit. Near the summit rim the snows are steepest, reaching 30-35 degrees, but snow conditions were soft enough that we felt plenty secure with our snowshoes and ski-poles. (In hard snow conditions an ice-axe would be the preferred tool to carry.) Even with our late start and relaxed pace, we reached the summit rim long before most of the day's climbers were even halfway to the top. Along with multiple volcano views (Rainier and Adams), spring-like temperatures made soaking in the sun at the top a decadent pleasure. Descending 5,500 feet in a day is much easier than climbing the same amount, so with just a lunch stop at our camp to pack up we had no trouble making our way all the way back to our vehicle long before dark...a worthwhile winter weekend backpack to the top of an active volcano.

*Dave Schiefelbein is a WTA member from Seattle and a frequent photo contributor to Washington Trails. ♦*

## Be Prepared

Watch weather and avalanche forecasts carefully, and don't exceed your skill level for safe travel in the mountains in winter. Useful sites include the National Weather Service's regional report for Portland and vicinity: [www.wrh.noaa.gov/pqr](http://www.wrh.noaa.gov/pqr) and the Northwest Weather and Avalanche Center: [www.nwac.us](http://www.nwac.us). On the summit, beware of cornices, which can collapse without warning.

2) Bring warm clothing and proper gear for a one or two-day ascent. Some of the Forest Service's essentials include: climbing helmet, dust mask, sunglasses with sunshield, map, compass, route markers, first aid kit, knife, extra food and water, layered clothing, including warm parka, insulated underwear (top and bottom), rain shells, gloves and hat, emergency signal device, emergency shelter, flashlight, extra batteries and bulb.

3) Check the Forest Service website [www.fs.fed.us/gpnf/recreation/mount-st-helens](http://www.fs.fed.us/gpnf/recreation/mount-st-helens) for current road information and climbing and permit regulations. For more info, call the Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument at (360) 449-7800.

## Snowshoeing Near St. Helens

Even if you'd rather not summit Mount St. Helens, there are a wealth of snowshoe opportunities in the vicinity.

The **Marble Mountain** Sno-Park offers some of the best snowshoeing and cross-country skiing in the state. More than 30 kilometers of trails loop through Marble, Wapiti, June Lake, Pine Marten and Sasquatch Loops, with extraordinary views of the volcano throughout. Sno-park passes are required. The parking lot is 13 miles east of Cougar; take Lewis River Road (SR 503/FR 90) to junction of FR 83 and 8312, elevation 2,700 feet. You can also snowshoe or ski up FR 83, but note this is a shared route with snowmobilers.

Or choose the **Cougar** Sno-Park, which provides access to the 18-kilometer Kalama Ski Trail. Views here of the volcano are excellent. There is a shelter and woodstove at Kalama Horse Camp. Sno-park passes are required. Parking is 8 miles east of Cougar; take Lewis River Road (SR 503/FR 90) to junction of FR 83 and 8100.



*A camp on the volcano's south face. Winter camping allows for more solitude and a shorter summit day. Pack adequate gear and check weather carefully.*

DAVE SCHIEFELBEIN