ROSS-COUNTRY SKIING BURNS AN AVERAGE OF 650 CALORIES PER HOUR—MORE THAN DOWNHILL SKIING, WALKING, OR CYCLING. AFTER AN AFTERNOON ON SKINNY SKIS, YOU CAN EAT A BIG, GOOEY CARAMEL ROLL THE NEXT MORNING GUILT FREE. HECK, HAVE SECONDS.

THAT GREAT CARDIO WORKOUT, ALONG WITH THE APPEAL OF GLIDING ACROSS SNOW THROUGH SILENT, SNOWY FORESTS, IS LURING MORE AND MORE PEOPLE INTO CROSS-COUNTRY (ALSO KNOWN AS NORDIC) SKIING EACH YEAR. TWO DECADES AGO, MY FELLOW NORDIC SKIERS AND I COULD FIND ONLY A FEW SITES CONTAINING GROOMED TRAILS; TODAY WE HAVE MORE THAN A DOZEN TO CHOOSE FROM.

RESPONDING TO NORDIC SKIING’S GROWING POPULARITY, MANY WESTERN MONTANA RESORTS, BUSINESSES, AND COMMUNITIES HAVE BUILT OR ADDED TRAILS, OFTEN “GROOMED” DAILY WITH SPECIAL EQUIPMENT THAT PACKS AND TRACKS NEW SNOW AND RENOVATES OLD SNOW TO CREATE THE BEST POSSIBLE CROSS-COUNTRY SKIING CONDITIONS.

MOST SKI CENTERS CATER TO BOTH STYLES OF NORDIC SKIING: TRADITIONAL (ALSO KNOWN AS CLASSIC OR DIAGONAL STRIDE) AND SKATE SKIING. YOU CAN ENJOY TRADITIONAL CROSS-COUNTRY SKIING IN A PASTURE, ON A U.S. FOREST SERVICE ROAD OR BACKCOUNTRY TRAIL, OR ON A GROOMED TWO-LANE TRACK. THESE SKIS HAVE A STICKY “KICK” ZONE ON THE UNDERSIDE OF THE MID-SECTION AND “GLIDE” AREAS IN THE FRONT AND BACK. THE KICK ZONE GETS ITS TRACTION FROM EITHER A FISH-SCALE PATTERN CARVED INTO THE SKI BOTTOM OR SPECIAL WAXES RUBBED IN TO CREATE FRICTION AGAINST THE SNOW. SKIERS PUSH DOWN ON THE SKI WITH THE BALL OF THEIR FOOT TO PROPEL THEM FORWARD INTO A GLIDE.

SKATE (OR FREESTYLE) SKIING WAS FIRST DEVELOPED IN THE LATE 1970S BY EUROPEANS AND CATCHED ON IN THE UNITED STATES AFTER BILL KOCH USED THE TECHNIQUE TO MEDAL IN THE 1982 NORDIC WORLD SKI CHAMPIONSHIP. SKATE SKIS, ABOUT TWO-THIRDS THE LENGTH OF TRADITIONAL NORDIC SKIS, HAVE NO GRIP. THE SKIER PROPELS FORWARD BY DIGGING THE SHARP INSIDE EDGE OF EACH SKI INTO THE SNOW AND PUSHING OFF LIKE A SPEED SKATER, ROCKING SIDE TO SIDE FROM ONE SKI TO THE OTHER, CREATING A V PATTERN IN THE SNOW. THIS TECHNIQUE ALSO MAKES USE OF EXTRA-LONG, LIGHTWEIGHT POLES FOR ADDITIONAL PROPULSION. SKATE SKIERS CAN TRaverse FROZEN LAKES AND OPEN AREAS OF PACKED SNOW, BUT THEY GENERALLY NEED WIDE, GROOMED TRAILS WHERE THE SNOW HAS BEEN PACKED DOWN AND THEN RAKED TO CREATE A CORDUROY TEXTURE THAT PROVIDES SOME TRACTION.

WHEN YOU VISIT A NORDIC SKI CENTER AND SEE A TRAIL OF PARALLEL GROOVES IN THE SNOW, THAT’S FOR TRADITIONAL SKIERS. THE ADJACENT 8-FOOT-WIDE FLAT SWATH IS FOR SKATERS, WHO ARE OFTEN CLAD IN BRIGHT, TIGHT-FITTING SPANDEX RACING SUITS (EVEN IF THEY’VE NEVER RACED A DAY IN THEIR LIFE, BECAUSE IT JUST FEELS GOOD TO EXERCISE IN SKIN-TIGHT OUTFITS).

FIT FAMILY Cross-country (Nordic) skiing is a fun and healthy way for kids and parents (and dogs) to spend time together outdoors in winter. Groomed trails make both classic and skate skiing easier.

TOP SPOTS for Skinny Skis

Skiing the state’s best groomed cross-country trails. BY BECKY LOMAX
Anyone of any age can learn either type of skiing, though the traditional style is easier and takes less balance and leg muscle. Athletes gravitate toward skate skiing and its massive core workout, while many families stick to the classic style.

"Raising our kids on the cross-country ski helped them develop balance and coordination, and an overall love of sliding on snow," says Whiteside-area Stillwater Nordic Center co-owner Kristen Sabin, whose son started at just one and a half years old. "Plus, skiing provides another outdoor activity for all of us to do together in winter."

Just starting out? Consider taking a lesson or two. There’s a trick to cross-country skiing that few can figure out without at least some assistance. "It’s true that anyone who can walk can cross-country ski," says Theresa Leland, program director at Bohart Ranch Nordic ski area near Bozeman. "But it’s much more enjoyable to develop good technique so you can take it to another level. By learning to increase your glide, you can travel farther and with less effort."

Lessons, offered at many Montana ski centers, can also reduce frustration, cold and falling. "We teach you easy ways to maintain your balance so you can spend more time gliding across the snowy plane and less falling onto the snow," Leland says.

The Nordic ski areas listed here are the larger ones in Montana (with at least 15 kilometers of trails), and offer a wide range of fun for all abilities, are open daily December through March, and groom for both traditional and skate skiing. Fees range from $5 to $20 per day, and rental gear, where offered, costs $10 to $30 per day.

A few of these areas allow dogs, but only on certain loops. Poor picking is mandatory, and families can chug up broad Murray Mile Boulevard and cut across on Interlachen to reach Murray Lake for a giant loop around the frozen lake and its scattering of ice anglers. More daring skiers looking for steep cornices and drops can tackle Hellow Road, which is closed to traffic, started just at one and a half years old. "Plus, skiing provides another outdoor activity for all of us to do together in winter." Notes Lake Tahoe writer Becky Lomax of Whitefish is a longtime skier. "Most of our trails are generally rolling and easier to ski with the kids, but for some, it's a great option business. In addition to offering daily lessons, rentals, weekend and holiday rentals are also available. Twelve kilometers of trail are open to skiers with dogs.

The ski center offers senior and family discounts and evening rentals. A 13-kilometer route is open for skiers with dogs.

The area each year: the Seeley Lake Challenge Riathlon and the legendary OSGC (Over Seeley’s Creeks and Ridges) 50k race. Seeleylakeonadoc.org

Mount Haggin
On Mount Haggin Wildlife Management Area near Anaconda, the Mile High Nordic Ski Education Foundation maintains more than 20 kilometers of trails, as well as a warming hut on Mill Creek Road. Half the trail distance consists of routes groomed for traditional skiing, and the other half is a single trail groomed solely for classic skiing. That route offers views of the Pintler Range and a twisting downhill section known as Death Dip. It’s definitely not for beginners. The ungroomed Spire Loop contains tracks "set," or produced, by skiers after a snowfall. "We have super-dedicated staff of volunteers who groom the trails to commercial standards," says Dave Williams, president of the foundation. "Grooming usually happens Thursdays or Fridays in preparation for the weekend, but we may touch up the trails whenever we get new snowfall." The non-profit organization relies on club fees and donations to maintain and improve the trail network. The trails, which run through historic logging camps, are operated in coordination with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks.

The ski center offers senior and family discounts and evening rentals. The 90 kilometers of trails are lit up each evening and offer views of 11,166-foot Lone Peak, the ski area’s namesake. "Most of our trails are generally rolling and offer nice flat terrain in the bottom of drainages, with long climbs taking only several minutes," Chris says. Many of the trails are groomed as needed by a large double-track groomer, while narrow trails require more intricate maneuvering by a smaller groomer pulled by a snowmobile. "We have those trails for a more remote and intimate feeling," adds Axelson. "Twice each week, 2 kilometers of trail are lit for night skiing. Lessons, rentals, weekend and holiday lunches, and overnight accommodations are available. Twelve kilometers of trail are open to skiers with dogs.