

Finding one's way in deep snow

FOR THE LAND



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It was absolutely quiet and still when we woke up in our tent — not a sound, not a breeze — which could only mean that it had snowed overnight. I stuck my head out to find a foot and a half of wet, heavy snow covering the tent and the trail we skied in on. And it was still coming down.

My friend David and I had trudged into Yosemite's back-country a couple of days earlier, under clear, sunny skies, to climb some high ridges and ski the open slopes. Now it was time to pack up our wet gear and head into a severe winter storm to try to find our way back to the car, several miles away.

Snow in the Sierra Nevada is unlike snow in New Mexico. It had obliterated any trace of

a trail and was coming down so heavy that it buried our tracks within minutes after we passed. The Park Service "trail" consisted of tiny reflective metal flags nailed to trees marking the way, but they were nearly invisible today. When we did stumble on one, it was impossible to see through the whiteout to the next.

Flowing creeks we crossed two days earlier had disappeared under the snow. Views of Yosemite's famous granite domes had vanished. Everything was gone, covered and obscured in white.

Raging winter that it was above, I knew that beneath our skis pocket gophers were busy filling tunnels of snow with the soil from their underground burrowing. Those ropes of soil would be laid gently on the surface of the ground a few months later when the snow melted. No doubt there was all kinds of activity quietly going on down there, fascinating winter adaptations at work, while we floundered through the blizzard above.

We quickly became exhausted from breaking trail

through the heavy snow, and were wet and cold and a little disoriented from borderline hypothermia. After losing the trail a few times we had to change our strategy.

I went out in a radius from the last trail marker until I found some trace of the trail, while David stayed put so we didn't lose our place. We couldn't see each other, so had to holler to stay in contact. When I found the next marker, David would follow the sound of my voice until he reached me, then I stayed at that marker while he went out on the next exploratory radius.

We painstakingly leap-frogged this way for a few miles until finally we reached the snowed-over Glacier Point road. Still a ways to go and

thoroughly exhausted and cranky, but at least we knew where we were. The adventure and the workout didn't quite end when we reached the car, because we found it buried under a heavy berm of snow from a passing snowplow. But we were back.

From Taos Land Trust, here's hoping for some snow to get lost in (and found again), snow for pocket gophers and other critters to burrow through, snow to feed our rivers and acequias and farmlands. Happy holidays.

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