LOST SIERRA
RECREATION GUIDE

A historical guide to outdoor adventure in the Lost Sierra.
THE LOST SIERRA

The place that connects the tribe.

Legend has it that the somewhat overlooked area of California’s northern Sierra between Lake Tahoe and Mt Lassen was named the Lost Sierra by Pony Express mail carriers back in the 19th century. It’s a uniquely beautiful and peaceful place. Though somewhat overshadowed by the more popular Sierra attractions of Lake Tahoe and Mammoth Lakes, the Lost Sierra is one of those places that can take a hold of you and not let go.

Whether, you are lucky enough to live here, or just make it the place to come to reconnect with the outdoors, it’s a place that inspires passion. Roughly 80% of the Lost Sierra is public lands in need of love and care, and once you experience it, you understand.

The centerpiece is the Sierra Buttes, a 8500’ extinct volcano that overlooks the entire region that includes hundreds of alpine lakes, thousands of miles of multi-use trails and roads and more recreational opportunities than you can attempt to experience in a lifetime — hiking, biking, moto, 4-wheeling, fishing, hunting, horseback riding, winter backcountry skiing and snowmobiling, it’s all here and it’s world-class.

You don’t have to just take my word for it, it’s right here, waiting for you. Experience it for yourself, but be careful, and I speak from experience here, the place can suck you in.

Enjoy!

Chris Feucht, Managing Director
Sierra Buttes Trail Stewardship

Sierra Buttes Trail Stewardship is a non-profit organization that builds and maintains multiuse trails in the Sierra Buttes, Tahoe, Plumas and Lassen National Forests.

Our mission is building sustainable recreation-based communities through stewardship, job creation and world-class events. Providing quality outdoor experiences through trail construction and maintenance in the Lost Sierra.

You can find more information at SierraTrails.org

Cover photo: “Sierra Traditions” by Dan McCall

THE BUSINESS OF LIFE IS TO ACQUIRE AS MANY FRIENDS AND MAKE AS MANY MEMORIES, HAVE AS MANY ADVENTURES AND REAL LIFE EXPERIENCES AS POSSIBLE.”

— Uncle Coz, SBTS pioneer

CONTENT

Inside you will find an outdoor recreation guide to the Lost Sierra: Lakes Basin, Graeagle, Downieville and Quincy. An uncrowded, unpretentious, playground. Get exploring!

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The Sierra Buttes rise above Lower Sardine Lake
The focal point of the Lost Sierra, the Sierra Buttes majestically tower over the Lakes Basin. Kurt Gensheimer tells the history of the spectacular lookout tower on page 4.

— Uncle Coz, SBTS pioneer
Towerimg high above the Lost Sierra is the Sierra Buttes, a majestic and powerful place that rewards everyone who makes the strenuous trek to the top with incredible views and evidence of man’s ingenuity; the Sierra Buttes Lookout. Perched on the edge of a cliff at 8,590 feet elevation, the Sierra Buttes Lookout is a fire tower constructed in the early 1960s that now sits vacant. The history of the lookout goes back to 1915, with a photograph of the original tower on file at the Tahoe National Forest Supervisor’s Office.

By the 1930s, fire detection became a priority for the Forest Service, and the Civilian Conservation Corps built thousands of towers across the American West, allowing for viewable distances of 30 miles between lookouts. After the 1941 attack
Construction of the tower in the 1960s Building the tower on top of a mountain and on the edge of a high cliff was both treacherous and an engineering challenge.

Sierra Buttes tower stairs engineer and builder, Richard Eacobacci

Construction of the tower in the 1960s Building the tower on top of a mountain and on the edge of a high cliff was both treacherous and an engineering challenge.

Sierra Buttes tower stairs engineer and builder, Richard Eacobacci

on Pearl Harbor, lookouts across the west became part of the Aircraft Warning Service, requiring two spotters per tower.

After World War II, many of the towers began to close down, but in 1964, the Mountain Messenger ran a photo and story about the newly constructed Sierra Buttes Lookout, the third iteration of lookout on top of the Buttes. Featuring a concrete foundation and two-story construction, the new lookout was 14’x14’ and much more sturdy than its wooden predecessors. The previous lookouts also had a very rickety ladder with ropes, making it dangerous to climb. Furthermore, the ladder partly blew apart in the heavy winds often experienced on the Buttes, so in order to make accessing the new tower safer, an entirely new set of stairs was engineered.

Grass Valley resident Patty Eacobacci has documented the history of the lookout’s stair construction, as her father, Richard, was a young engineer in the early 1960s for the Tahoe National Forest. Richard worked with Howard Welch to oversee construction of the 180 stairs, engineered primarily for wind load, as snow load was not as much an issue. Welch sourced old stair treads at a military surplus facility, incorporating the treads into the ladder design that you can still walk on today.

Over the summers of 1963 and 1964, the ladder and new tower were constructed. Welch, Eacobacci and four other crew members spent both summers living in an old cabin on Butcher Ranch Road. In order to pour the concrete foundations for the stairs, the men drove an old World War II 4x4 ambulance, modifying it to carry spring water up to the build site. Because the road to the Buttes was so steep and rough, each time they’d reach the top, half the water had sloshed from the back of the ambulance. They then rigged a pulley system with buckets for water transport to the treacherous work areas on the very top of the Buttes.

Ken Ingle was the last lookout on the Sierra Buttes in 1995 before the tower closed. Due to its isolated location, delivering fuel sources like propane was extremely difficult. Also, the expansive view made triangulation for fire detection difficult, and combined with reduced Forest Service funding, the tower was shut down. Since then, the tower has become a destination for adventurous visitors of all types.

The Buttes has spiritual significance for many, including local families who hold special ceremonies and exchange wedding vows high above the Lost Sierra. Years of weather and lack of maintenance have taken its toll on the Lookout and the staircase, and local efforts are underway to help raise funds to keep the staircase usable.
LOST SIERRA HOEDOWN RAISES FUNDS FOR JOHNsville SKI BOWL

By Kurt Gensheimer

Azariah Reynolds, known by his friends as Z, grew up in Blairsden and learned to ski as a child on the slopes of the Johnsville Historic Ski Bowl at Plumas-Eureka State Park. Up until the late 1990s, the ski hill was fully operational with up to three surface tow lifts. But lack of funding eventually shut the surface tows down, and Z moved on with his life, eventually ending up in Truckee where he now lives. But Z is still very involved with his childhood home and has long-term plans to return full-time. And thanks to him co-founding the Lost Sierra Hoedown, Z is on the path to helping resurrect the legendary hill where downhill ski racing was invented in the 1860s.

Now entering its sixth year, the Lost Sierra Hoedown (lostsierrahoedown.com) in September is a family-friendly gathering where the community can park the car, camp and disconnect from the modern world, listen to days of incredible music and recreate in the outdoors while helping support the Johnsville Historic Ski Bowl and its partners, the Plumas Ski Club and Plumas-Eureka State Park. But as the website says, this isn’t a music festival, it’s a hoedown, so bring some proper dancing footwear should you attend.

Not only is the word getting out that the Hoedown is one heck of a good time, but the increasing attendance is helping fix the ski hill with each passing summer. “Since we started the Hoedown six years ago, we’ve raised enough funds to help build a garage for the snow groomer, fix up the bathrooms, repair the well and do maintenance on the historic Intorf Lodge,” said Z. “And with partners like Sierra Nevada Brewing, we’re able to donate 100 percent of beer sales back to the ski hill.”

Z and the Plumas Ski Club’s eventual goal is to get the surface tow lifts turning again, but the first priority is to make sure all the infrastructure besides the lifts are in good shape.

“Ultimately we’d like to see the hill fully operational so that when there’s snow, we can run the tow lifts. And when there’s not, we can shut everything down and it won’t cost the club any money,” said Z.

With a younger generation discovering the Historic Longboard Revival Series, the dream of getting this iconic ski hill running once again is being realized one year at a time.

HISTORIC LONGBOARD REVIVAL SERIES

By Kurt Gensheimer

Held in January through March, at the Johnsville Historic Ski Bowl, the Historic Longboard Revival series is like stepping through a time portal to the 1800s when snowbound prospectors strapped 15 foot-long planks of wood to their feet and raced downhill. This downhill ski racing heritage is kept alive with the longboard races each year. And in addition to being an important fundraiser for the ski hill, it’s a visual spectacle that’s a whole lot of fun for the entire family. More information can be found at PlumasSkiClub.org.

GETTING THERE
Take Graeagle Johnsville Rd near Graeagle

VISIT THE MUSEUM
Established in 1959, the the Plumas-Eureka State Park offers ample recreation opportunities around Eureka Peak, and the beautiful Upper Jamison Creek Campground as well as featuring rich California Gold Rush history. The museum building at the park’s entrance was originally constructed as a miner bunkhouse, and now shows the natural and cultural history of one of the most prolific gold producing regions in America. Across the parking lot from the museum is the historic mining area showcasing the enormous Mohawk Stamp Mill and a wealth of mining equipment.
EVOLUTION OF AN INTERNATIONAL MOUNTAIN BIKE DESTINATION – DOWNIEVILLE, CA

Time began in the Elastomer Age - at least it did for some of us who first started riding Downieville in the early 90’s. It was the era of the Girvin yellow Twinkie rubber-baby-bumper elastomer suspension. Being on technology’s cutting edge at the time, many elastomers were blown apart by the unforgiving stone and dirt of the Downieville Downhill.

Back then, Coyote Adventure Company ran willing shuttle participants right from town’s main parking lot. There was no bike shop, no repair service, no Red Bull. Just a $0.25 photocopied trail map and a lift to the Sierra Crest from a guy named Willie in a white GMC Blazer (aka “The White Rhino”) with reverse view circle seats and a wicked exhaust leak.

Over time, mountain biking evolved into the Carbon Age and creation of the advanced, carbon fiber Santa Cruz wonderbikes that Yuba Expeditions rents and sells to willing thrill seekers today. Yuba has also evolved into a full-service bike shop and a viable business - directly supporting trail work for our 501c3 non-profit, the Sierra Buttes Trail Stewardship, fueling the local economy through recreation and even donating annually to help pay for a full-time Downieville paramedic to care for the townspeople and tourists alike.

Downieville is now an internationally known mountain bike destination drawing thousands of visitors annually - stoking-out bro and betty trips, checking off bucket lists and creating lifetime memories. Each summer, first timers come to Downieville and leave here with ear-to-ear, dirty grins. So if you haven’t ridden Downieville yet, don’t let an amazing experience on two wheels pass you by. And if you have been to Downieville, then you already know about the dirt magic of this place, and we’ll see you again soon. Yuba shuttles are being offered to Mills Peak in Graeagle and Mount Hough in Quincy as well.

Yuba Expeditions in Downieville
Shuttles, Santa Cruz demo bikes, service and trail advice can all be found here.
THE STORY OF JIM BECKWOURTH

By Kurt Gensheimer

In the history of the Lost Sierra, few characters were more intriguing than Jim Beckwourth.

Born James Beckwith at the turn of the 19th Century, Beckwourth was mixed race, born into slavery in Virginia and later freed by his father (and master). As soon as he was old enough, Beckwourth moved westward, becoming a fur trapper and explorer where he lived with the Crow Nation in Wyoming for many years. During this time with the Crow Nation, Beckwourth married the daughter of a chief and eventually became a chief himself, as during his fur trapping adventures, he was captured by the Crow and because of his mixed race, was believed to be the lost son of a Crow chief.

After several exploits in the 1830s as a volunteer U.S. Army soldier and Indian trader against the Cheyenne, Beckwourth built a trading post in Colorado, forming the community of Pueblo. In the 1840s, Beckwourth traded on the Old Spanish Trail in the Mexican-held territory of California. He served as a U.S. Army courier in the Mexican-American War and helped in the Taos Revolt.

When word of the California Gold Rush spread, Beckwourth located in both Sonoma and Sacramento before exploring a route across the Sierra Nevada now known as the Beckwourth Trail. The Beckwourth Trail roughly follows today's Highway 70 from Marysville, over Beckwourth Pass (5,221 ft. elevation) east of the Sierra Valley and on to Hallelujah Junction. The route was one of the lowest passes over the Sierra Nevada, making it more agreeable for settlers and gold seekers than trying to negotiate the deadly Donner Pass. The pass was later used by the Western Pacific Railroad, constructing the iconic Feather River railroad route across the Sierra Nevada still in use today.

In the mid 1850s, Beckwourth made the Sierra Valley his home, starting the settlement of Beckwourth, California and opening a ranch, trading post and hotel. One of the hotel's patrons, Thomas D. Bonner, an itinerant Justice of the Peace in California's gold camps, spent many nights at Beckwourth's establishment, and ended up writing a book about him in 1856 titled The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth. Beckwourth was a storyteller, known for hyperbole in spreading his exploits. But as the great Mark Twain said, “never let the truth get in the way of a good story.”

Although Beckwourth moved on from the Sierra Valley and returned to his life of guiding with the Crow Tribe, eventually finding his final resting place in 1866 at the Crow Indian Settlement Burial Ground in Laramie, Wyoming, Beckwourth left an invaluable mark on the legacy of the Lost Sierra region.

Beckwourth is a fascinating study for fans of local history, and his living quarters can still be seen at the Jim Beckwourth Museum, a well-preserved cabin built by Beckwourth in the 1850s. The cabin is located at 1820 Rocky Point Road, just off Highway 70 east of Portola, and the museum is open from 1-4pm on weekends between Memorial Day and Labor Day or other times by appointment by calling (530) 832-4888. Admission is free.

In 1970, Friends of Plumas Wilderness was formed. During the process of protecting beautiful places nationally, Congress received over 500 handwritten letters from the small community of Quincy advocating for the area. Almost 30 years later, the Bucks Lake Wilderness was protected by the California Wilderness Act of 1984.

Bucks Lake Wilderness protects 21,000 acres that climb from 2,000 ft in elevation to over 7,000 in elevation and encompasses the northern end of the Sierra Crest that the PCT traverses. Recreationists can hike or horseback ride to Silver Lake, Gold Lake or Three Lakes. Climbers can test their nerves on Spanish Peak and anglers test their flies for lake trout. In the winter, ice skating, snowshoeing, and skiing are great ways to explore the area.
Having thousands of miles of dirt roads to explore throughout the Lost Sierra region in the Plumas and Tahoe National forests, whether you like a nice scenic dirt road cruise or you want to get rowdy in the rocks, there is something for every 4 wheel enthusiast and there’s no better way to access the region’s fire lookouts.

Three prominent mountain peaks with fire lookouts are a ‘must do’ for the area: Saddleback Lookout north of Downieville, Sierra Buttes Lookout north of Sierra City and Mills Peak Lookout south of Graeagle.

A high clearance 4WD sport utility vehicle is recommended for these routes. Be prepared for downed trees or rocks on the road, rough and rocky surfaces, and brush or rocks on the road, rough and rocky surfaces, and brush encroaching on the roadway. Much of the route is unpaved, so a high clearance vehicle or a 4WD sport utility vehicle is recommended for these routes.

You can purchase detailed, up to date recreation maps at local businesses.

Downieville/Packer Saddle - Advanced
Take Saddleback Road (approximately 1/2 miles south of Downieville on Highway 49) for 8 miles to the Saddleback Lookout Road/Bee Tree intersection. Turn right and head up to the lookout for a spectacular view of the surrounding Sierra. From the Bee Tree continue heading north to Chimney Rock Trail and follow the ridge line trail through volcanic spires to Empire Creek Trail. Descend Empire Creek to Red Oak Road to Lavezzola Road and take First Divide Trail into Downieville.

Quincy/Mt Hough - Intermediate
Take Berry Creek Trail up from Oakland Camp to 25N14 Road. Turn left and follow the road for approximately 2 miles and turn right onto Tolgate Trail. Take Tolgate to 25N73 Road. Turn left and follow to Troy’s Trail. At the top turn right and continue to Mount Hough Trail and follow Mount Hough back to Oakland Camp. For a bonus, go to the Mount Hough Lookout and check the view into Indian Valley and Crystal Lake.

To access the Saddleback Lookout from Downieville, head west out of town on Highway 49 for approximately 1/2 mile and turn right onto Saddleback Road. Follow this dirt road for another 8 miles to the Bee Tree and take a right turn towards the Lookout. The Saddleback Lookout is another mile up the road at 6,600’ elevation. There is a spring with great water about 1/2 mile up from the Bee Tree intersection.

To access Sierra Buttes Lookout from Sierra City, take Butte Street and head up the pavement for 1 mile towards the Transfer Station. Turn right onto the dirt FS93-2 Road. At the mile mark you will reach a place called Blue Point, which offers great views back into the North Yuba River Canyon and Sierra City. Continue on FS 90-2 for another mile to the Sierra Buttes Road intersection. Turn right towards the Lookout and follow the road for another 1.5 miles to the Lookout parking area. From here you can hike to the base of the Lookout and continue up the 180 steps the actual Lookout at 6,600’ elevation. On a very clear day, you can see Mount Diablo from this position.

To access Mills Peak from Graeagle, take Highway 89 south for 1 mile to the Gold Lake Highway intersection. Turn right and head south on Gold Lake Highway for 1 mile to the Mohawk Chapman Road FS22N68. Turn left on Mohawk Chapman Road and follow it for approximately 4.5 miles and turn right onto the FS21N27 Road heading towards Hayes Mine and Mohawk Gap. The 21N27 Road will T into the FS 28 Road. Turn right and follow it for 2 miles to the FS822 Road to Mills Peak. Turn right and the Lookout is 2 miles up the road at 7,342’ elevation. From the Lookout there are incredible views to the north of Mohawk Valley and the town of Graeagle. This is also a great spot to watch the 4th of July fireworks show in Graeagle.
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MORE THINGS TO DO IN THE LOST SIERRA

- Dinner Blackbird Inn - Clio
- Craft beer tasting - Brewing Lair
- View from Mills Peak Lookout
- Shop in Graeagle
- Christmas tree hunting
- Go jump in a lake - Lakes Basin
- Snoeshoeing
- Cocktail on the lake - Sardine Lake Lodge
- Dinner in the Frank Lloyd Wright Room - Nakoma
- Find yourself in the lost sierra

Sierra Buttes Trail Stewardship Lost Sierra Guide
LOST SIERRA EVENTS

HISTORIC LONGBOARD REVIVAL RACE SERIES
Longboarding world championships in the Lost Sierra. Historical re-enactments of 1860’s era ski racing in the Lost Sierra at Johnsville Historic Ski Bowl. See pg. 9 Johnsville - Jan, Feb, March - PlumasSkiClub.org

HIGH SIERRA MUSIC FESTIVAL
A four-day music festival featuring an eclectic mix of some of the most famous national and international names in jamband, newgrass and funk. Films and movement playshops - yoga, pilates, etc., shop for arts and crafts, or enjoy a wide variety of gourmet food and drink.
Quincy - July - HighSierraMusic.com

PORTOLA CONCERTS IN THE PARK
Free concerts held every Friday night in Portola City Park.
Portola - July through August

DONAVILLE MOUNTAIN BIKE RACE AND FESTIVAL
Race or challenge yourself to ride to the Sierra Crest and back to town. Or just come to enjoy the bike festival for the weekend. Either way, you win. River jump. Live music. Fun!
Downieville - August - DownievilleClassic.com

LOST & FOUND GRAVEL GRINDER
Three course lengths, up to 100 miles, featured in this epically beautiful bike ride. Lose yourself in the Lost Sierra and find this two-wheeled paradise. A full weekend of High Sierra fun for riders and non-riders alike. Riding. Camping. Lake. Live music. Fun!
Lake Davis and Portola - June - LostAndFoundBikeRide.com

GRINDURO
Voted “Event of the Year” by the Design and Innovation Awards committee, this unique event include two days of excellent newgrass and funk. Films and movement playshops - yoga, pilates, etc., shop for arts and crafts, or enjoy a wide variety of gourmet food and drink.
Quincy - Late September - Grinduro.com

GET INVOLVED
VOLUNTEER! Volunteers of all ages, abilities and experience are welcome. Join a Work Party; we invite you to come out any day of the week and join one of our crews in building and maintaining trail.

ATTEND A TRAIL WORK EVENT! Trail Daze and Mountain Epics are offered numerous times a year and provide good times (parties in the mountains) with a bit of volunteering mixed in.

JOIN US! Join us in supporting our efforts by becoming a member. Visit SierraTrails.org
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