A Winter Challenge

Ferocious storms, white-out conditions, towering snow drifts and avalanche risk aren’t common in most of our lives. But for Olympic National Park’s road crew, it’s all part of the job. Every winter morning, plow and sand truck operators get up before dawn and head up the Hurricane Ridge Road to confront whatever the overnight weather delivered. When you drive the cleared, sanded road hours later, it can be hard to imagine their task.

Jekyll and Hyde Mornings
Checking satellite images and avalanche forecasts helps the crew know what to expect and if it’s safe to plow that day. If Port Angeles is snowy, it means a lot of plowing just to get to the lower slopes. But a calm, starry night might brighten to a clear, sparkling morning.

“When you’re up there by yourself in the still and quiet with fresh snow, it’s beautiful,” said Les Peterson, a park heavy equipment operator who has been plowing here for 12 years.

On the other hand, “When it’s pitch black out and snowing heavily, it can be hypnotizing,” he added. Blizzards create white-out conditions, adding stress as crews concentrate to stay on the road. Peterson recalled a sudden storm with visibility so bad a ranger walked in front of his plow to guide it down to safety.

Other days, plowing off the fresh snow reveals a sheet of ice. “It’s like you’re on a skating rink,” Peterson explained. Even a 40,000 pound plow with chains can slide.

With moderate snow and little wind, the 3-person crew with two huge rotary blowers, a grader and a sand truck can clear the upper road in three to four hours. If Hurricane Ridge lives up to its name, creating 20-foot drifts overnight, it can take four to five hours to plow a half mile (see March 2011 photo above).

Wear and Tear
Grinding through huge drifts burns fuel—up to 500 gallons on a challenging day—and takes a toll on equipment. Shear pins anchoring rotating plow blades break, hydraulic hoses fail, sluggish diesel engines fail to start, and the sand truck’s spreader freezes.

But if all goes well, the crew can feel a sense of accomplishment in clearing the snow, laying down the sand and preparing the road for the snowshoers, skiers and boarders anxious to safely start their day high up in the Olympic Mountains.

Underwater Drama at the Hoh
Spring-fed Taft Creek braids around the Hoh Rain Forest Visitor Center. For centuries migrating salmon have left the sea and returned to the Hoh River and tributaries like Taft Creek to mate, lay eggs, then die. Myriad creatures—from mice to bears—feed on the carcasses. The salmon deliver life-critical nutrients from the ocean to nourish wildlife, and even the forest.

Road construction affected this ageless journey, but a more fish-friendly culvert installed in the early 1990s helped Taft Creek. Some years, over 2,000 coho complete their life cycle in this small creek. Tracking 2010 returns, Hoh tribal fisheries biologist Mario Reyes said, “There are so many fish, at this point I can’t keep count anymore, and I think that’s good news for everybody.”

If you visit the Hoh Rain Forest from mid-December into January, quietly peer into Taft Creek. You could be rewarded with more than a reflection of the rare temperate rain forest, its towering trees dripping with mosses. You might spot red-flanked coho jostling in the stream or river otters struggling to snag large salmon. Splashing from these aquatic battles can guide you to their location. Perhaps you’ll witness who wins. But for all of your winter experiences in the Hoh, be sure to bring a raincoat!
Services and Facilities

A winter visit to Olympic National Park’s mountains, coast and forest can be magical, but it takes planning as fewer services and facilities are available. Roads and facilities normally open by November 1, and may temporarily close due to snow or reduced staffing. Call (360) 565-3131 for road and weather updates or see road status at www.nps.gov/olymp/planyourvisit/current-conditions.htm.

Emergencies

Dial 911 in an emergency or to report non-emergency help (call (360) 565-3000 ext. 0) between 7 a.m. and 5:30 p.m. or (360) 417-2459 after hours.

Entrance and other Recreation Fees

Entrance fees apply for visitors aged 15 and older. Dogs are allowed in national park, NPS run campgrounds and on Dosewallips River Road. Dogs walking on leashes or in backpacks are allowed in Olympic National Park/Forest Recreation Information Center in Forks and Kalaloch Campground but not in visitor centers. Do not approach or pet dogs in parking areas or campgrounds. Please do not approach or tempt skiers using the ski area.”

To improve public safety, all vehicles (including 4WD) traveling above 5,000 feet are required to have tire chains. For park information see the park website: www.nps.gov/olym and www.hurricaneridge.com.

Hurricane Ridge Road

Railway Ave. at 9:00 a.m. and 12:30 p.m. (with a pickup at the Vern Burton Center, 308 E. Fourth) and return at 11:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. Reservations are required. For more information call the Olympic National Park Visitor Center or check www.hurricaneridge.com.

Hurricane Ridge Area

Hurricane Ridge Visitor Center: Usually open 9-5:00 when the road is open, with restrooms, exhibits, movie and warming area. For wheelchair users more information call (360) 565-3131. (no phone) 32/day w/ helmet 22 w/poles

Hurricane Ridge Snack Bar & Rental Shop: December 17, 2011 to March 25, 2012, food and ski/snowboard rentals are available 10-4 weekends from December 3, 2011 through April 1, 2012 (except Christmas).

Hurricane Ridge Downhill Ski Area: Typically open 10-4 weekends from December 3, 2011 through April 1, 2012 (except Christmas).

Hurricane Ridge Snowshoe Hike Rental: November 24, 2011 through April 1, 2012.

Snowshoe Hike Rental:

To reserve your snowshoe equipment, call the Hurricane Ridge Visitor Center at (360) 565-3131 for current conditions. Snowshoe hikes start at the Hurricane Ridge information desk 30 minutes before the hike starts.

Snow permitting, this easy to moderate walk is offered at 2:00 p.m. on Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays and holiday Mondays, and December 26 to January 2. Closed Christmas.

Participants should be prepared for winter weather including cold, snow, wind or even rain. Dress in layers, wear waterproof, windproof and breathable outer layers. If the road is closed, please do not attempt to drive on the road. Snowshoeing is not recommended for pets.

Snowshoe Walks: Snowshoe rental, this easy to moderate walk is offered 2:00 p.m. on Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays and holiday Mondays, and December 26 to January 2. Closed Christmas.

Snowshoe Walks for Community Groups: Clubs, youth groups or schools can schedule a reserved snowshoe walk and must pay a reservation fee of $7 to $30 per person. Groups of 7 to 30 people are offered at 10:30 a.m. on Saturdays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays, Fridays, Sundays, Saturdays and holiday Mondays (no phone) 32/day w/ helmet 22 w/poles

Dosewallips Road

Closed in winter. Some campgrounds may be open for winter camping with toilets, no running water and no fees. Most campgrounds fully open in April (see www.nps.gov/olym/winter for specific hours). For most campgrounds with facilities at the Ozette, Kalaloch and Quinault, additional camping fees will be used to replace the bridge on the Staircase Rapids Loop Trail. Your Northwest. Programs are 7 p.m. the second Tuesday of the month at the Olympic National Park Visitor Center, 308 Mora. Lodging and food service open all year, (360) 962-2271, www.olympicpeninsula.org.

Other Park Facilities

Grocery Stores Outside the Park

Community markets are closed beyond Altair Campground for Glines Canyon Dam construction. The highway to the park is closed 2 miles north of the park boundary.

Other Park Facilities


Snowshoe with a Ranger

Join a park ranger at Hurricane Ridge to experience the wonders of winter on snowshoes. If you can walk, you can snowshoe! The National Park Service provides snowshoes and instruction on this led by a ranger.

Join Olympic National Park on a 1.5-hour guided snowshoe hike on a trail near you and learn about the winter environment. This program is free with a park pass.

Pruitment: $5 per participant helps the park provide these snowshoe walks and funds snowshoe repair and replacement.

Pervations: Participants should be prepared for winter weather including cold, snow, wind or even rain. Dress in layers, wear waterproof, windproof and breathable outer layers. If the road is closed, please do not attempt to drive on the road. Snowshoeing is not recommended for pets.

Purities: Snowshoe Walks: Snowshoe rental, this easy to moderate walk is offered 2:00 p.m. on Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays and holiday Mondays, and December 26 to January 2. Closed Christmas.

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Before heading out, check at the Hurricane Ridge Visitor Center for current avalanche conditions. Wear avalanche beacons, carry a probe, snow shovel and the 10 essentials (see page 8), and avoid avalanche terrain such as cornices, gullies and steep lee slopes.
Cross-Country Skiing & Snowshoeing

With its easy access and 15 to 20 miles of routes, Hurricane Ridge is the focus of cross-country skiing and snowshoeing in Olympic National Park. Though winter explorers of all abilities can enjoy the area, flat, easy beginner ski terrain is limited to the meadows above the Hurricane Ridge Visitor Center. Backcountry skiers can explore several slopes and bowls in the area. No trails are groomed or marked; however, two routes use unplowed roads which can usually be navigated.

NOTE FOR SNOWSHOERS, WALKERS AND SNOWBOARDERS: Skiers, walkers, snowshoers and snowboarders can safely share this area. Snowshoers, walkers and snowboarders, please stay to one side to avoid damaging ski tracks on trails, and do not snowshoe or walk through closed snow. Before heading out on any trip remember to register at the Hurricane Ridge Visitor Center and check current avalanche conditions. Below are descriptions of routes in the Hurricane Ridge area.

**Easiest**

**The Meadows**
The meadows above the Hurricane Ridge Visitor Center offer gentle, easy terrain for everyone and excellent views in fair weather. Because the meadows are exposed to the wind, they are sometimes icy or windpacked.

**More Difficult**

**Hurricane Hill Road**
1.5 miles one way

Beginning just west of the visitor center, this trail first descends steeply, then follows the rolling, moderate ridge along the snow-covered Hurricane Hill Road. Experienced skiers on this route to trailhead (see Most Difficult), as well as several bowls for backcountry skiing. In clear weather there are good views north and south, especially at the trail's terminus at the Hurricane hilltail trail. Much of this ridge trail is sheltered by a subalpine forest, making it a good choice in windy, inclement weather or when there is elevated avalanche hazard.

**Wolf Creek Trail**
8 miles one way to Whiskey Bend

This route begins 0.6 miles west of the visitor center along the unplowed Hurricane Hill Road (see above) and descends through meadows and forests into the Elwha valley. There are several south-facing slopes near the beginning which descend to the Hurricane Ridge Road. Steppe Rock Trail follows a narrow ridge toward the south side of Hurricane Hill. This route includes several meadows and meanders through subalpine forest. Beyond Wolf Creek, it climbs steeply (see below).

**Obstruction Point Road: To Waterhole**
3.4 miles one way

Rather than descend the exposed, steep, often drift-covered and icy route of the summer Obstruction Point Road, the winter route starts at the sharp curve along the Hurricane Ridge Road, 0.5 miles below the Hurricane Ridge Visitor Center. Park in the pull-off below the curve, cross to the east side of the road and walk the snow bank back up hill to the curve. After descending a steep but short meadow, the route intersects and follows the unplowed Obstruction Point Road.

**Most Difficult**

**Hurricane Ridge Route**
1.6 miles one way

This route starts at the end of the Hurricane Hill Road and climbs 700 feet to the summit of Hurricane Hill. Because of the very steep, often icy terrain, abnormal snow conditions, strong winds or avalanches, skiers following this route will find this a challenging trip with good views and some nice slopes.

**Obstruction Point Road: Waterhole to the end**
4.3 miles one way

This route begins at the end of the unplowed and snow-covered Obstruction Point Road (see description above for the first 3.4 miles to Waterhole). After Waterhole, the route gains 900 feet, climbing steeply for 0.5 miles to open slopes on Eagle Point. In clear weather, views can be spectacular but narrow trails and icicles and exposure to storms make this a difficult trip. It is recommended only under good conditions for experienced skiers. Travel beyond Obstruction Point can entail steep terrain with high avalanche potential.

**Sunrise Ridge**
2.1 miles one way

This route begins by crossing below the intermediate slope top and climbing to the right of the ski hill (right of the trees). From the top of Alpine Hill, above the downhill ski slope, this route follows a narrow ridge toward the south side of Mount Angeles. There are several avalanche prone zones along the way. So check conditions and use caution under unstable conditions. It is especially careful to stay off cornices that form along the ridge and sidelee slopes. Several nice slopes on the east side descend to the Hurricane Ridge Road.

**Other Areas**

Depending on the snow level, skis, boots, poles and tracks in both the park and in Olympic National Forest may be snow-covered. Check at the visitor center for current snow levels. The Deer Park Road may provide skiing or snowshoeing opportunities. For safety, steep, narrow road is closed at the park boundary, 9 miles from Highway 101, at about 2,000 feet elevation. The road climbs steeply about 9 more miles from the park boundary up to Blue Mountain. If the snow level is low enough, the road is be skiable from the boundary; but users usually need to hike several miles before reaching snow.

For other routes on the Olympic Peninsula, refer to 100 Best Cross-Country Ski Trails in Washington, by Tom Kirkendall and Vicky Spring or Snowshoe Routes: Washington by Dan Nelson.

CROSS-COUNTRY SKIER ON THE HURRICANE RIDGE ROAD

- **How did they travel?** Hurricane Ridge receives an average of 32 feet of snow each winter. For most skiers who use the mountain, it could be buried! With such deep snow, snowshoers or cross-country skiers are essential for easy travel.
- **What happened?** Batten down the hatches! Winter storms with hurricane force winds (over 73 mph/118 km per hour) sometimes hit Hurricane Ridge. Last winter, gusts over 100 mph were recorded! Notice the cable anchoring the lookout in the photograph.
- **Who are your neighbors?** Despite what we might consider pretty tough conditions, Herb and his wife weren't alone on the mountain that winter. Look for tracks of snowshoers, horses, squirrels, weasels, coyotes and more on your visit. The snow always has stories to tell.
- **Expected dangers?** At 5,242 feet elevation, plants less atmosphere between us and the sun, so ultraviolet radiation levels can be quite high. While sunscreen didn't exist in Herb’s days, sunglasses and sunscreen are important parts of your winter survival kit!!

**Snow Play**
Snow sliding is a favorite pastime for some, but it has also been one of the most dangerous activities at Hurricane Ridge. Serious injuries, even permanent disabilities occurred when people collided with trees, other skiers, or lost control and ended up in the road. For your safety, sliding is permitted only in the Small Children’s Snowplay near the Hurricane Ridge Visitor Center where children eight and under may slide. The Sunrise snowplay area was closed in 2009 due to liability concerns associated with this site. The site’s location next to the road, which led to children and adults actually sliding into the road.

The lack of parking, which resulted in both vehicles and pedestrians using the road’s travel lanes for parking and walking, creating extremely dangerous conditions especially during the late winter and spring months.

- **Plowing** and sanding operations were impossible when people and vehicles were along or in the road.

If conditions are too icy to allow safe sliding at the Small Children’s area, that area will be closed. For the safety of participants, metal or brass plated, wooden tongs and wooden toboggans are not permitted. Compressed air for inflating inner tubes is not available. To be as safe as possible, please observe the following rules:
- **Sliding only in the designated Small Children’s Snow Play area.** Sliding is not allowed anywhere outside the Small Children’s area or along the Hurricane Ridge Road.
- **For your safety, be sure the path is clear before starting your slide.** Collisions can result in serious injuries. Watch for cross-country skiers and snowshoers crossing before the slide.
- **Descend one tube at a time and do not put more than one person on a tube.**

**Avalanche**
Olympic Mountain and weather create ideal conditions for avalanches. Before heading out, call the Northwest Avalanche Center (206) 526-6677, www.nwac.us, and check at the Hurricane Ridge Visitor Center for current conditions. Be especially careful around areas that have been snowshoed. The hazard levels range from low to extreme. Even in low hazard conditions avalanches can occur on some slopes.

With extreme conditions backcountry travel should be avoided. Certain terrain features, for example steep cliffs that form narrow, spectacularly beautiful ridgelines, can increase avalanche hazard. The survival rate for avalanche victims is extremely low. If you or a group member are caught in an avalanche, take these steps in your rescue attempt:
- Be sure you know how to rescue a buried victim
- If you have training, perform a backcountry avalanche rescue
- Search and rescue
- Be familiar with the local avalanche rescue system (see below)
- Be sure you understand the avalanche safety drills

**NOTE FOR SNOWSHOERS, WALKERS AND SNOWBOARDERS:**
- Wear bright colored clothing
- Use a ski pole
- Walk on the dew-covered crust
- Do not go off-piste
- Use a rucksack for gear, and leave the backcountry summit to others
- Do not make spontaneous descents

**Avalanche!**
Avalanche on a northeast slope along the ridge between Hurricane and Mount Angeles. NPS photo by Dave Turner.

Send an extra person for help.

Quickly search downslope from the last seen points for clues.

Keep searching! The victim could be inches away from your boots.

Stabilize an dinner path for the rescuers.

If you are caught, make swimming motions and try to keep yourself on the snow. As the snow begins to slow, push yourself away from your face to create an air pocket.

Keep a careful watch for avalanches. If a snow avalanche occurs nearby, immediately get below the surface of the snow and stay there. Do not run away from the avalanche. The best strategy is to dig a snow pit, and remain in it. Do not dig your way out. Avalanches are powerful and can change direction in a moment.

Avalanche on a northeast slope along the ridge between Hurricane and Mount Angeles. NPS photo by Dave Turner.
Exploring Olympic in Winter

Olympic is indeed a park for all seasons. In fact, hikers can experience several seasons in one outing. But hikers ready for unpredictable weather can experience the beauty and solitude of winter.

It can get very wet here. Snow and rain can swell streams overnight, making crossings treacherous and washing out trails. Camp well above flood plains. Boardwalks and bridges are very slippery when wet. On the coast, storms push tides higher, creating huge waves (see photo of Rialto Beach to right) that easily move beach logs or trap hikers on rocks. Winter waves (see photo above) can swell streams here. Snow and rain can get the required permit, bear canisters and information on wilderness fees.

Low-Elevation Hiking

Elwha Valley: Geyser Valley Loop, West Elwha, Griff Creek, Cascade Rock trails and lower parts of the Elwha River trail.
Lake Crescent: Marymere Falls and Spruce Railroad trails.
Ozette: Cape Alava or Sand Point trails.
Mora and La Push: James Pond, Second, Third and Rialto Beaches.
Kalaloch: Short trails to beaches, beach hikes and the forest nature trail.
Hoh: Hall of Mosses and Spruce Nature trails, or lower Hoh River trail.
Quinault: Nature trails on both sides of the lake, Irelly Lake and Cascading Terraces trails, lower stretches of the North Fork and Graves Creek trails.

High Country Trips

Snow camping requires a lot of preparation and many safety precautions, but offers a glimpse into a season that few truly experience. Weather can change quickly. Places like Hurricane Ridge and Blizzard Pass earn their names, and whiteout conditions can occur anytime. Be prepared!

Hurricane Ridge offers the easiest access to winter high country. For safety, please observe the following rules:

- **Overnight campers must get a permit at the WIC, and register and check with a ranger at Hurricane Ridge for camping and parking locations.**
- **If a storm forces a road closure, you may need to install tire chains and have a shovel in case of a snowy descent. Use caution as plow operators may not see you! If you are locked in uphill from the gate, call (360) 565-3000 ext. 0 (before 5:30 p.m.) or (360) 417-2459 after hours.**
- **Because of the risk of sudden storms, winter overnight parking is not allowed at Hurricane Ridge.** You must park 3.3 miles below the Ridge at Third Peak. Check with rangers at Hurricane to see if a shuttle is available.
- **Winter camps must be 1/2 mile away from the Hurricane Ridge parking lot and out of sight of ski/snowshoe trails. Check with a ranger for suggestions.**
- **Use a camp stove. Campfires are prohibited.**
- **Share the trails—avoid walking or snowshoeing in ski tracks.**
- **In emergencies, dial 911 from the Hurricane Ridge Visitor Center foyer.**
- **Check avalanche conditions and carry beacons (see page 7).**

Restoring the Elwha

After years of planning and preparation, removal of the Elwha and Glines Canyon dams began in September 2011. Freeing the Elwha River after 100 years will allow all five kinds of Pacific salmon, steelhead, sea-run cutthroat and bull trout to return to more than 70 miles of habitat protected in Olympic National Park, carrying with them marine-derived nutrients to restore a vital link between sea, river and forest.

A free-flowing Elwha River and the salmon’s return will bring economic and cultural healing to the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe, whose members have lived along the river for generations. When the Lake Mills reservoir is drained, tribal members will also regain access to sacred sites currently underwater.

Dam removal began September 15, 2011 when an excavator-mounted hydraulic hammer operated by contractor Barnard Construction chipped the first chunks of concrete off the Glines Canyon Dam. On September 17, removal of the Elwha Dam began as the climax to a ceremony attended by Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar, Governor Chris Gregoire, Senators Murray and Cantwell, Congressman Norm Dicks and many others.

A replacement hatchery on the Lower Elwha Klallam reservation was completed last spring and is now helping to maintain existing stocks of Elwha River fish during the dam removal period.

Modifications to levees near the mouth of the river have been completed and will protect landowners and the Lower Elwha Klallam reservation from flood impacts.

For more information, frequent updates and links to six project webcams, visit Olympic National Park’s website at www.nps.gov/olym, share or interact with ‘Elwha River Restoration’ on Facebook, or pick up a brochure at a park visitor center. Take a 10-minute walk to an overlook of Elwha Dam to watch the process live. The trailhead is at the start of Lower Dam Road, on Highway 112, one-half mile from the 112 and Highway 101 junction west of Port Angeles.