

Safety—Tree Skiing

Contributed by Gene Fulkerson

Many of you may know that I LOVE TO SKI THE TREES! But I understand that tree skiing is one of those aspects of downhill skiing you either love or hate.

This is shaping up to be a very dangerous snow season in the west. With all the late and heavy snowfall we've gotten early in March (and much more promised) there is heightened danger for avalanches and tree-well deaths.

If you are open to the wild and wondrous world of tree skiing here's a few safety tips that are going to give you a better experience. Remember even if you fall into a well butt first, you'll have a hard time getting yourself out.

⇒ *Obey all Signs*

Do not duck under boundary markers. The least you will lose is your lift pass, the worst would be your life.

⇒ *Ditch the Pole Straps*

This one is a no-brainer; it's much better to have to backtrack and find your pole than to get carried off to emergency with a dislocated shoulder. Make your tree skiing safer by hanging onto your poles, don't attach them.

⇒ *Always Ski with a Buddy*

It's Standard Operating Procedure that whenever you're set to hit the slopes that you ALWAYS ski with a buddy. Not only does this make your skiing adventure more enjoyable, but you know you've got someone that can help if you run into trouble. This is especially important since tree skiing isn't exactly risk-free!

⇒ *Pre-Training Helps*

Off season, the best route to get used to the trees is to spend some time downhill mountain biking, trail running or rollerblading a course. Get used to the tree-line so you can take full advantage when you've slipped into your skis.

⇒ *Traverse Down*

Keep in mind that trees are never evenly spaced like you see in storybooks. Traverse until you see a fairly wide lane and start skiing down; when the lane starts to get narrow just traverse until you find a wider opening, and follow this line until you need to traverse again. Just know that one lane isn't going to get you all the way down the hill in one piece.

⇒ *Is there Enough Snow?*

Make sure you've got at least 6 inches of fresh snow on the top of the hill before you decide to tree ski down. Be wary of stumps and logs that may not be buried early in the season. The last thing you want to do is come flying through the trees and get your tip stuck under a half-covered log or boulder.

⇒ *Be Set for Hitting a Tree*

It's not a matter of "if" but "when" you'll smack into a tree. Don't panic. Take your skis off and use whatever you can to climb out—poles or the tree. You may even be able to roll out. If you are not hurt it's not such a big deal.

⇒ *Head for Thicker Trees*

If the snow is flying and you're having trouble seeing, head toward thicker trees. When there are more trees the extra coverage helps block more snow and improve your sight line.

⇒ *Be Set for an Emergency*

Whenever you are tree skiing make sure you have a space blanket, food, mobile phone or radio, water, extra layers, and a first-aid kit. Better safe than sorry!

Tree skiing is loads of fun. Use these practical pointers to stay safe and make your downhill skiing adventures something to remember!

⇒ *Slow Down!* ■

