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TRAVEL INSIDER

Measuring snowfall is part art, part science

Ski resorts vary in how they gauge it. Skiers should look at certain factors to get the best idea of what they'll find.

By Jane Engle
Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
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SKI resorts can build all the fancy shops, cafes and condos they like. What skiers and snowboarders really want is the white stuff.

"It's the snow, stupid," joked Susie Barnett-Bushong, marketing director for Grand Targhee resort in Wyoming. "There's a magic number when they will drop everything and come up. It's usually 10 to 12 inches" of new snow.

The problem, industry insiders say, is there's no perfect way to measure Mother Nature's bounty.

"We've tried a million different things," Barnett-Bushong said, including — in years' past — eyeballing whether a snowy mound reached a basketball hoop 10 feet above ground.

These days, Grand Targhee, like many resorts, uses sonar and other devices to gauge recent snowfall, settled depth (also called "base") and the season's snow total.

But even with this science, daily snow statistics on resort websites sometimes hardly resemble what skiers find on the slopes. The reality can be a joyful surprise or a cold shock.

Many factors, natural and artificial, may cause this discrepancy: where and how snowfall is recorded, wind, sunshine, skier traffic and how much time has passed since the measurement was taken.

Disappointed visitors may suspect deception. But resorts deny that they deliberately inflate snow figures.

"There is no fabrication of snow reporting here," said Anna Olson, spokeswoman for Jackson Hole Mountain Resort, about 45 miles from Grand Targhee. "We have a reputation, if anything, for underreporting."

Tom Cottrill, president of SnoCountry Mountain Reports, a nonprofit trade association based in Lebanon, N.H., thinks most resorts try to get accurate numbers.

"The worst thing a ski area can do is oversell its snowfall or its amenities," which angers customers, said Cottrill, whose group supplies statistics on ski conditions from hundreds of resorts to Associated Press and other media.

Jim Woodmencey, a private meteorologist who works for radio stations in Jackson Hole, Wyo., is more skeptical.

He thinks some ski areas may round statistics upward or place gauges in especially snowy areas. But, he added, "I don't think they out-and-out lie to you."

But they do all measure differently, Cottrill said. Here's a closer look at the vagaries of snow reporting:

Where: The most accurate spot for a snow gauge is right on a ski trail, but for obvious reasons, that can't be done. Anywhere else is a compromise.

"Mountains have micro-mini weather systems," said Jackson Hole's Olson. Snow accumulation can vary wildly by elevation, wind direction and terrain.

A popular place for gauges is in a wide clearing within a wooded area off a ski run. Trees here block the wind, so the flakes are more likely to fall straight down. The problem is that ski runs aren't shielded this way, so snow may blow away or drift.

At Mammoth Mountain in California, snowfall is measured near the main lodge, at about 9,000 feet, far below the level where most skiers and snowboarders start down the trails.

Less snow falls at 9,000 feet, but less blows away than on higher terrain, which is above the tree line, said Walter Rosenthal, the resort's snow and avalanche analyst.

By contrast, Grand Targhee, which has less wind, recently raised its gauge from the lodge level to a wooded area at mid-mountain. The earlier site underreported snowfall, Barnett-Bushong said.

Jackson Hole measures snow at three points, from 6,510 feet to 9,360 feet in elevation, but, like most resorts, it skips the summit, where winds shear off snow.

How: Small resorts may just use a stake to measure snowfall; big ones combine high and low tech.

A popular system, used at Jackson Hole, is to collect daily snowfall on a board. Above it, a sonar device sends a sound wave to the snow surface and measures how long it takes to bounce back. From that, it calculates depth. You can view the results, posted every 15 minutes, at <http://www.jhavalanche.org/stations.html>. (Look under "Teton Area-Rendezvous Mountain.")



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Staffers clean the board each day, and, as a backup, read the inches off a plastic cylinder that collects the snow, said Jim Springer, an avalanche forecaster jointly employed by the resort and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

A similar sonar device measures total snow depth. By subtracting the day's fresh snowfall, staffers can report the settled depth, or base, that has accumulated.

Grand Targhee uses sonar for daily snowfall and a stake for settled depth, said Lance LeFave, a lift mechanic who helped set up the monitors.

When: Typically, ski resort staffers read their gauges in the morning, as early as 5 a.m. Based on those readings, they post the 24-hour snowfall and snow depth.

The problem?

"If a resort reports, say, 12 inches of fresh snowfall at 8 a.m., it's not going to be 12 inches at noon if the sun's been out, the trails are tracked and maybe the wind blew it all into the trees," said SnoCountry's Cottrill.

LeFave agreed.

"That 5 a.m. reading can sometimes be deceiving," he said. "It's a Catch-22. We're still dependent on what the weather does to us."

So, skiers might find less snow than they bargained for — or more, if there's an ongoing storm — by the time they get to the mountain.

What to make of all this?

Weatherman Woodmencey recommends reading resort statistics in this order: settled snow depth, percentage of lifts and trails open, and 24-hour snowfall.

The first number tells you whether the terrain is skiable. At Rocky Mountain resorts, Woodmencey said, he looks for at least 50 inches to ensure he won't scrape over rocks. Far less snow may suffice for slopes in New England, he added.

Lifts and trails may be closed because of poor snow, maintenance needs, avalanche danger, high winds or, early and late in the season, because there's not enough staff. Whatever the reason, closures affect your experience.

"If they're charging full price, they'd better have 75% of the lifts open," Woodmencey said.

Then check the 24-hour snowfall total, or, better yet, what has fallen that day or since the lifts closed the day before. That's because snow that fell 24 hours ago may have been packed down by a full day of ski traffic — bad news for powder hounds.

You can pretty well ignore season snow totals, Woodmencey added. The big numbers don't mean much unless you know the typical total and when the season began. And besides, much of that snow is long gone.

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Jane Engle welcomes comments but can't respond individually to letters and calls. Write to Travel Insider, L.A. Times, 202 W. 1st St., L.A., CA 90012, or e-mail jane.englelatimes.com.

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