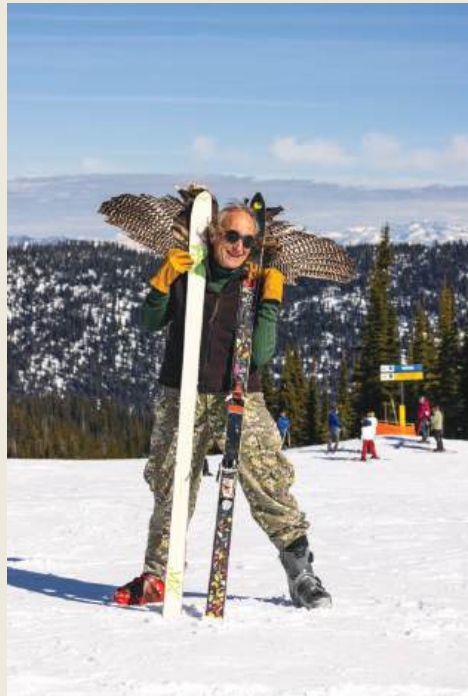


TURKEY TOM AND THE SNOW GHOSTS



Whitefish has eschewed the mega pass, and in the process kept its character intact

By David Goodman
Photography by Craig Moore



SKIER: Townsend Reed



I stood on top of Whitefish Mountain Resort surveying the goods. The jagged skyline of Glacier National Park was framed by an azure sky. The vivid white and blue backdrop resembled a movie set. Below me, a forest encrusted in thick rime ice beckoned. Locals call these encased trees “snow ghosts.” They form because of the near daily fog that hangs low over the mountain, leaving everything below frosted.



My partner warned me not to ski too close to the snow ghosts—they looked soft and magical but were actually rock-hard blocks of ice. I pushed off into this troll forest. My legs hummed with anticipation.

Suddenly, I was buzzed by a large bird. I whipped around to see something with fully extended wings blow by me. It let out a bird-like CAAAW.

“What the...” I blurted.

Craig Moore, a local photographer I was skiing with, was unphased. “Oh that was Turkey Tom,” he said.

Here in the Montana outback, I guess I should not have been surprised to find a skiing turkey.

“Wanna catch him?” said Moore, motioning to where he thought the turkey landed. We arced down the sunny corduroy, rounded a blind corner, and came upon the half man, half bird twirling pirouettes in the middle of the trail.

Pow not crowds

I came to northwest Montana in search of an endangered habitat. Not of skiing turkeys, but of independent ski areas. As nearly every major ski area in the U.S. participates with at least one of the major multi-resort passes—Epic, Ikon, Mountain Collective, and Indy—Whitefish is the last holdout. With 3,000 skiable acres, 300 inches of snow and a half million skiers visiting annually, Whitefish is the biggest ski area in the country that has stubbornly remained single.

What difference does it make? For starters, Whitefish skiers have mostly been spared the colossal lift lines and traffic jams that have become part of the mega pass resort scene. And they’ve done this while keeping prices down: Whitefish has kept day lift tickets around \$100, about one-third the cost of a day ticket at Vail. Season passes bought before October are less than \$800.

As skiing goes mass market, Whitefish’s throwback move just might be the future of skiing.

Whitefish Mountain Resort president Nick Polumbus mused about the meaning of independence as we rode up the Snow Ghost

Whitefish provides a unique product at a reasonable price, which in 2025 makes it an outlier.

SKIERS: Anders Soyland airs one of the diving boards in the Picture Chutes area of the Hellroaring Basin; Antonio Angel rides on a custom pair of stilt skis during the unofficial 6-6-6 event.



Express. He acknowledged that the megapass companies have courted Whitefish, but the Montana resort has swiped left. Staying independent “allows us to retain a certain sense of character that maybe has been stripped away a little bit from the rest of the industry,” he said as we watched skiers navigating the vast bowl beneath us.

It has also allowed the resort to stay financially viable. Polumbus credits “a supportive majority owner, which means that as we have success we can reinvest and create more success.” That owner is billionaire Bill Foley, who lives in Whitefish part of each year and also owns the Vegas Golden Knights, the 2023 Stanley Cup Champions, as well as restaurants, ranches, and a financial services company. Last year, the gleaming Stanley Cup trophy made a surprise appearance at the summit of Whitefish.

This isn’t the case of a sugar daddy pumping money into a vanity project. Sure, Whitefish—then known as Big Mountain—was a money pit when Foley, now 79, purchased a controlling stake in 2006. Within a decade, though, he had the resort out of debt and turning a profit, and has reinvested millions into high speed lifts and new lodges. Part of that playbook is preserving Whitefish’s culture. “It’s a blue-collar mountain,” Foley told a local magazine in 2016. “It’s not expensive.”

For skiers, the real Whitefish success story is the terrain and powder. Brian Schott motioned for me to shoulder my skis and follow him up a short booter. Brian is a longtime Whitefish skier who founded the “Whitefish Review,” the mountain town’s acclaimed literary journal.

In Whitefish, the goods include a dollop of culture.

When we reached the top, I craned to see over a horizon line.

“What’s down there?” I asked.

“Powder,” Brian smiled. He quickly vanished over the edge. My wife Sue followed and I chased. We plunged downhill like leaping dolphins, launching through the air and submerging in knee-deep fluff, turn after turn. We caught up with Brian at the bottom and admired our tracks.

It had been five days since the last storm. “How is this untracked?” I asked in amazement.

“There’s a ton of terrain,” he said, motioning his pole to the ski tracks above and below us. “There are fresh lines for everyone.”

Turkey chase

I cruised down Inspiration, a screaming wide groomer with big views of the Flathead Valley, and spotted Turkey Tom. The Whitefish legend is a sight to behold: a slight balding man wearing camo hunting pants and different colored vintage boots, sans poles or hat. His signature turkey wings are draped over his shoulders, flipping up in the breeze. Turkey Tom is a solo actor, twirling and cawing as he goes. He prefers skiing to talking, but after I bought him a slice of pizza, he opened up.

How did the turkey become his thing? “They’re



An apparition among the snow ghosts.
SKIER: Corey Seemann



Deep powder, community, and quirky culture are all part of the character Whitefish strives to preserve.



all over the road, and I'm just a cheap guy picking up junk and living off of it like a real ski bum," he told me.

No need for Patagonia when you can ski in roadkill. He says he gave the bird's body to the local food bank.

Why does he ski in circles? "Oh I just do that," he said with a shy smile. "The whole skiing thing where everyone has to stand up straight and keep their head straight," he waved his hand as if to swat away the entirety of ski instruction.

He reluctantly revealed that his real name is Tym Czacka. He's 69 and was once a water plant operator. He moved to Whitefish from Hawaii. "I can't cool off there."

Then I asked him about a rumor I'd heard. Is it true that he was on skis that he got from Ted Kaczynski, aka the Unabomber?

Kaczynski was a Harvard-trained mathematician who led a nearly two-decade long bombing spree that killed three people and injured 23. He eluded one of the FBI's longest and most expensive manhunts for 17 years.

America's most notorious domestic terrorist was finally captured in 1996 at his remote cabin in Lincoln, Montana, a couple hours from Whitefish. Kaczynski received a life sentence without parole. He died by suicide in prison in 2023 at the age of 81.

In his now infamous manifesto, Kaczynski raged against the ills of modern society and technology, but he apparently made an exception for skis. In 1995, Turkey Tom was driving toward Whitefish when he saw several pickup trucks on the side of the road. A bearded man was standing there selling beehives, a typewriter, and a sweet pair of sticks.

"You gotta take these things. I gotta get rid of all this stuff," Tom recalled the man saying as he shoved the items into Tom's car. The PRE 1200 skis had the initials "TK" on them, but Turkey Tom thought nothing of it. Six months later, he saw a newspaper photo of the Unabomber being arrested near where Tom stopped for the roadside yard sale. "Oh my God, that's him!" he exclaimed.

The Unabomber went to prison, but his skis roamed freely with Turkey Tom, who loved them in powder.

A few months later, FBI agents rolled up to Turkey Tom's place and seized his new skis. "They said it was evidence," he said glumly. His Unabomber powder rig was smoked.

Community of the snow

From downtown, it feels like I can walk up the main drag right onto a chair lift. The ski area, which is six miles away, sits atop the town like a white crown.

Whitefish was founded in 1904 as a railroad town. As the population grew, the large snowy mountain above town beckoned local residents. In 1947, a rope tow opened on Big Mountain, the comically nondescript name that locals gave the ski area. The community has literally driven this mountain: in the early days, residents bought shares and volunteered in the myriad tasks needed to run the place. In 2007, Big Mountain was renamed Whitefish Mountain Resort, in-



Nate Powell grabs a cold snack off of Inspiration Ridge



Dave Parker dropping a knee while skiing during the unofficial 6-6-6 event, where everyone skis six different disciplines, six runs, visits six bars, and six costumes.

Laid back vibes are what you get when there are freshies for everyone. Kyler Taylor, kicking it on the Big Face.



extricably connecting the identities of the town and mountain.

After skiing one day, I stopped at Spotted Bear Spirits, a tasting room featuring locally distilled liquors. I ordered a Montana Mule made with huckleberry vodka, a local delicacy. Hannah May was having a cocktail at the bar. She works at a local clothing store by day and as a freestyle skiing coach on weekends. She explained that she grew up skiing at Snowbird, where her parents work.

The difference between skiing in Utah versus Montana? “Egos and attitude,” she said. “Everyone in Whitefish just supports everyone. It’s all about the community here.”

That community made national news in 2016 when it stood up to Richard Spencer, a neo-Nazi and part-time resident of the town, chasing him away, refusing to serve him at restaurants, and booing him when he showed his face at the ski area. Spencer has not been seen around town in several years.

White mountains, not white supremacists, are welcome here.

Whitefish Mountain Resort celebrated its 75th birthday in 2023. The cowboys have mostly been replaced by skiers, outdoorspeople, and, especially since the pandemic, second homeowners and remote workers. That has left many locals experiencing shock and awe over soaring home prices. The median listing home price in Whitefish was \$1.3 million in July 2024, more than doubling since 2020, according to realtor.com. Log castles rise up alongside the mountain like mythical beasts.

I pulled up a stool at the Great Northern Bar & Grill, a popular watering hole in the heart of downtown. On any given night, you might find a literary reading or a blues band. The latter was playing the night I was there. There is a relaxed mix of tourists and locals, with the dress ranging from L.A. chic to Carhartt. The dance floor was packed and local beers flowed freely.

Whitefish locals are diehards. Craig Moore told me about his 17 year unbroken streak of skiing every month, all within 100 miles of Whitefish.

Why?

“It’s my passion,” he said, hoisting a Going to the Sun IPA. The blues band thumped in the background and a rowdy game of shuffleboard was going on behind us. “I moved to Montana to ski. I didn’t want to stop skiing. And just because the lifts stop running doesn’t mean that I have to stop skiing.”

In deep

The Flower Point chairlift is the gateway to the goods. From the top of the lift, other skiers curled around to slide down the groomers. Sue, Brian, and I headed straight ahead past the ski area boundary sign into the towering fir trees. This is the launching point into Whitefish’s sidecountry in an area

known as the Canyon. This is unpatrolled avalanche terrain, so I was glad to follow the lead of soft spoken Idaho native Joel Anderson, guide and owner of Whitefish Vertical Adventures.

Other backcountry skiers slipped into their own private stashes as we skinned upward. I could feel the powder fever, but the vibe out here was decidedly laid back. That happens when there is room for everyone to get fresh tracks.

At the top of a peak, we ripped off skins and surveyed the terrain. The slope fell away steeply into a well defined canyon. Joel motioned downhill. “It gets a little tight there,” he said. I squinted but could not see anything that I would call tight. As an eastern skier, this gorgeous glade looked downright roomy.

Joel dropped in on his splitboard, riding straight down the fall line. I charged down after him. I accelerated on faith that corridors would keep opening below me. Snow splattered off my parka as I laced turns down my own private glade run. Sue streaked by in another channel, wedeling through the trees.

Joel was smiling broadly when we regrouped with him. “Welcome to the best powder in Montana,” he gushed.

We skinned up for a lap in another zone. More untracked lines beckoned. This time, we descended in a powder quartet, alternating leads. Snow boiled up over my knees as we charged down through the forest.

We emerged on a snow covered road at the bottom of the canyon. Bright white walls of snow rose up all around us. I stopped to take in the scenery, but Joel told us not to dawdle. We had 30 minutes to hustle back and catch the last chair or we would have to skin up the ski area. Whitefish has a diehard community of uphill skiers but we were not planning to join them just yet. We made the last chair with 3 minutes to spare.

Back at the top of the mountain, the sun was beaming and the apres crowds milled about. We pointed our skis down Toni Matt, the showcase groomer named for the Austrian ski instructor who schussed the headwall of New Hampshire’s Tuckerman Ravine in 1939, a feat that made it into the Guinness Book of World Records in 2024. Matt went on to lead the ski school at Whitefish in its first years, firmly putting the resort on the national map. Skiing the Toni Matt trail with its big views felt like I was soaring over the Pacific Northwest.

In the middle of my skiing reverie, Turkey Tom flew by. I hardly flinched at the unusual mix of bright snow and skiing birds. Whitefish had cast its iconoclastic spell.

The bird man paused briefly, lazily twirling and cawing, then soared onwards, his feathers illuminated by the warm Montana sun. ✨