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Deeper, My God, To Thee

by [Andrew Slough](#)

On the night of Feb. 24, 2000, the heavens opened above Grand Targhee, Wyo., and the world closed down to a shimmering curtain of flakes. Forty-three inches of "cold smoke" powder fell in 14 hours, and the following morning—as the clouds retreated across the Tetons and plows fought their way up from

Driggs, Idaho—it appeared as if a seam had been ripped out of an enormous pillow, dumping a million tons of prime goose down on Targhee's glades, bowls, gullies and backcountry.

From that day forward, this late-February tempest has been referred to simply as "The Storm." Those skiers lucky enough to reach the 10,200-foot summit of Fred's Mountain, Targhee's highest peak, learned that day what it means to live in The White Room. In 43 inches of crystalline powder, the differences between up and down, left and right or any of the other directions that hold you upright and centered, blurred in the cold white light of the Wyoming morning. The powder choked noses and throats, clouded goggles and formed swirling, sparkling contrails on Arrowhead, The Headwall and Crazy Horse.

Every life contains a single universal truth. Mine is simple: I have never skied Grand Targhee when it didn't dump. During roughly two dozen days, storms did not simply sprinkle flakes across the runs; they raged, dumped and obliterated all visibility until my skis became more important than my eyes in sorting out the bumps, drops and pitch changes that lay hidden by white.

The sun doesn't always shine at Targhee—affectionately known as Grand Foggee. But when it does, the west face of Grand Teton towers above the resort's four lifts, 2,200 vertical feet and 2,000 skiable acres. In addition to inbounds terrain, there are 1,000 acres reserved for cat skiing on Peaked Mountain, plus the surrounding backcountry, where expert skiers follow alternating glades, meadows and chutes down to the access road. This year, a new lift, the Sacajawea high-speed quad, opens up 500 acres of the Peaked Mountain terrain once accessible only by snowcat or on foot.

Meteorologist Jim Woodmencey has lived in nearby Jackson since 1982. He notes that while Grand Targhee will receive 500 inches in an average winter, only 330 inches of that comes during ski season—Dec. 1 to April 1. While that figure sounds less impressive, it still amounts 28 12-inch storms, or roughly a one-foot dump every four days. Storms impale themselves on the Tetons, spinning around Mt. Moran,



Targhee: Powder pigs at the trough, feasting on the fine Teton fluff. credit: [Jonathan Selkowitz](#)

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Mt. Owen and the Grand's 12,000-foot summits and spilling their moisture on Targhee.



credit: [Andrew Slough](#)

Targhee is named after the last warrior chief of the Blackfoot Indians. It sits on the Idaho/Wyoming border just outside Grand Teton National Park.

Woodmencey, a part-time heliski guide, says, "Because Grand Targhee is located on the west slope of the Tetons, it receives greater precipitation than

Jackson." Case in point: The Storm. While Targhee received 43 inches, Jackson—just 40 miles southeast—got less than a foot.

A moist westerly flow and arctic temperatures provide the power behind Targhee's prodigious annual precipitation. When moist Pacific air flows upward over a mountain range, the orographic effect causes cooling water vapor to condense into snow. The greatest orographic effect occurs when mountains sit perpendicular to the flow. If you look at a map of the western United States, you will see that between Oregon's Cascade Mountains and the Tetons, few if any ranges rise to rake the moisture from passing low-pressure systems. In Targhee's case, because the Tetons are oriented slightly northeast to southwest, the resort benefits most from a west to slight northwest storm.

It's a matter of a few miles, not thousands. "If The Storm's flow had shifted 30 miles to the west, it would have missed Targhee," says Woodmencey.

The town of Driggs, 13 miles down the canyon and across the state line, is Targhee's economic base. It isn't much of a resort town. You can get a good burger and pizza at O'Rourke's, a stiff drink at the Knotty Pine in Victor, a clean room and warm quilts at the Pines Motel and the most unusual dining experience in the Lower Forty-Eight at Chuck and Shigeko Irwin's Lost Horizons, on the road to the resort. And yet, from the local Spud Drive-In to the Teton Tepee, Driggs is primarily a farm town, where any display of conspicuous consumption draws long stares from Teton County potato farmers and hay growers.

Targhee runs a daily bus from Jackson, but the big storms consistently close Teton Pass, preserving the resort's untracked for locals. Though weekend dumps tend to get skied out by pass holders, from Monday through Friday, untracked pockets persist in the glades and below Mary's Nipple. And you can always find powder if you're willing to hike.

The truth is, you don't need a 43-inch storm to fall in love with Targhee. Arrive during one of February's 12-inchers, when the visibility varies between 20 feet and white-out and the snow curls over your head, and you'll think you've discovered paradise. In this case, you'll be right.

Grand Targhee, Wyo.

Getting There From Idaho Falls: Take Highway 26 to 31 to 33 (90 minutes). From Jackson: Highway 22 to 33 across Teton Pass (45 minutes).

Average Annual Snowfall 500 inches.

Record Season 659 inches, 1996-97. (In deep-snow years, local skiers find decent cover in June, when lifts reopen for summer sight-seeing.)

Biggest Dump In Recent Memory 43 inches, Feb. 24, 2000.

Best Time For Powder January-February.

Length Of Season Mid-November to Mid-April.

Price Of A Lift Ticket \$47.

Skiable Acres 2,000 inbounds; 1,000 via snowcat on Peaked Peak; thousands more out-of-bounds.

Information 800-827-4433, www.grandtarghee.com

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[^ top of page](#)



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