Steady snowfall buries Cascade locations

By Tom Paulu / The Daily News | Posted: Thursday, March 31, 2011 9:00 pm

After snowshoeing for a couple of hours through a blizzard last Sunday, I finally trudged into the June Lake basin.

But something looked odd. I remembered the little pond on the southern side of Mount St. Helens to be rimmed by scrappy trees last summer, but none was visible.

I figured out that the foliage was buried. The official snow depth at June Lake was almost 11 feet that day, though a few inches have melted since then.

A lot more will have to melt before trails and roads in the Gifford Pinchot National Forest are clear.

Recent heavy precipitation combined with chilly temperatures has brought steady snowfall to the Cascades.

The snow depth in the lower Columbia River basin is 28 percent above normal for this time of year, according to Melissa Webb of the U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service. At June Lake, the snow accumulation is 71 percent above average, she said.

At White Pass, almost 9 feet of snow covers the ground. There's more than 14 feet of white stuff at the top of the White Pass Ski Area's lifts.

But one needn't go any further than the Mount St. Helens area to find snow.

On Sunday, a band of intrepid snowshoers drove up Forest Service Road 83 in a couple of four-wheel-drives, spinning through snow for the last couple of miles before the Marble Mountain Sno-Park. One rig pulling a snowmobile trailer blocked us for 20 minutes while the driver put on chains. There wasn't room to pass.

The state has run out of money to plow the 83 Road, according to Ken Sandusky, a spokesman for the Gifford Pinchot National Forest. At mid-week, the road had about 8 inches of rutted snow on it.

Because of the cessation of plowing, Sno-Park permits are no longer required for the season (they're usually required until April 15.)

The 83 Road remains officially open, but fun-seekers are cautioned to be ready for the elements. The Marble Mountain Sno-Park had 7 feet of snow earlier this week. Since then, it's been raining at that 2,900-foot level, but more snow is forecast for Saturday and Sunday.

Sandusky said the snowmobile groomer will continue to operate this weekend.

A few miles lower on Road 83, the Cougar Sno-Park has 4 feet of snow.

Road 8303, which heads about one mile toward Ape Cave, hasn't been plowed. Last weekend, for the second time this season, a rescue team had to help people who walked up to the cave but couldn't make it out.

Road 8303 makes a good outing for properly dressed people with snowshoes or cross-country skis, though it gets steep for a stretch just after the cave. Snowmobilers are not allowed on 8303.

Snow doesn't accumulate as deeply near Spirit Lake Memorial Highway because there isn't as much vegetation to prevent melting.

However, there's still plenty of white stuff if you travel high enough.

Earlier this week, it was snowing near Elk Rock, where the highway reaches 3,800 feet.
About 1 foot of snow covered the base of Weyerhaeuser Road 3344 near Bear Creek, where sledders sometimes congregate. But the snow deepened quickly as I skied uphill, with about 4 feet of snow atop Elk Rock, which rises to 4,200 feet.

A few miles to the west, the runaway truck ramp that's sometimes popular with sledders was melted clear, however.

At Spirit Lake, there's 15 inches of snow, about three times the average for this time of year.

Elsewhere on the Gifford Pinchot, the Upper Wind River Road and Sno-Parks along it were plowed on Monday. Skamania County will continue to plow the road but not the Sno-Parks. Chains or snow tires are recommended.

The Upper Wind River trails for skiers and snowmobilers have 3 to 4 feet of snow.

Near Randle, there's about 12 inches of snow on Road 25 beyond Benham Creek, where plowing stops. It's another 4 1/2 miles to the Wakepish Sno-Park.

With all the spring-time blizzards, hiking trails and higher level roads won't melt off until early summer.

The Forest Service still plans to open the Johnston Ridge Observatory at the upper end of Spirit Lake Memorial Highway in time for the "It's a Blast" events on May 14. "Sometimes we do have to go up and break through some drifts to provide access," Sandusky said.

It may be July before Road 99 is open all the way to Windy Ridge, Sandusky said.

The good news is that Gifford Pinchot forest roads apparently made it through winter without major damage from slides, he said.

Hikers thinking ahead to summer might consider going to the Central Cascades, where the snowpack is average. But late snow drifts are more likely in the Olympics, which have 80 percent more snow than average, said assistant state climatologist Karin Bumbaco.

Just when the snow melts can be tricky to predict.

"If we have a cool spring the snowpack will stick around," Bumbaco said. "If we warm up, we can get rid of it."