

Discover More Mammoth

By Dana Nichols
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Mammoth is beautiful, didn't you notice? Use your chairlift ride to take in your surroundings.

I was grabbing an early lunch at the Mill Cafe when I noticed a sign near Gold Rush Express: Naturalist Tours Meet Here. There was a tall man in a green jacket standing beside it on his skis. He is Jim Gilbreath, a volunteer for the Forest Service who has lived in Mammoth for a couple of decades. I figured he had a good idea of what's going on, so I joined his tour.

Now, I am not a nature expert in any way. My knowledge of the foliage and nature surrounding my beloved Mammoth slopes previously consisted of "tall tree", "twig of tree that just caught an edge on", and "rock". Various forms of rock were, "rock that is small enough to carve a line in the bottom of my snowboard" and "rock that is big enough to create a ledge to jump off of."

Little did I know that a whole world exists on the mountain that is capable of carrying on with or without snowboarding and skiing. I was to learn that the mountain doesn't wholly exist for us winter sport enthusiasts. There's so much more alive than the humans who inhabit the slopes during daylight hours, dressed in funny hats with long boards strapped onto their feet.

There are the trees. There are lodgepole pines, red firs, western white pines, Jeffrey pines, white firs, and now, thanks to Jim's tour, I can identify each one. Jeffrey pines have large pinecones and long needles. Lodgepole pines are tall and straight and have tops like Christmas trees. Western white pines have branches that flare out at the top. Red firs have flaky bark that is often, but not always, red. The Mountain Hemlock droops over at the top and was John Muir's favorite tree. See how much I've learned! And that's just off the top of my head.

Then there are the rocks. Mammoth is such a geologically interesting place, and it's easy to ski it without realizing that the history of it involves ice ages, volcanic eruptions, etc., etc. Now the evidence that remains is the fumaroles spewing sulfur beneath Face Lift Express (you can often smell the stench from the lift) and the pumice rock that lies all over the mountain. That was what the volcano spit out when it last blew 50,000 years ago. You are likely much better acquainted with what is underneath all that snow if you mountain bike here in the summer. Obsidian can also be found in this area: it's heavier and denser than pumice, but comes from the same source.

When you have just a little bit more knowledge about your surroundings it's surprising how much more you begin to notice. As a Mammoth resident it has only now occurred to me how easy it is to take for granted that I live in one of the most beautiful places on earth. I could see the beauty and smell it, but I didn't know anything about it. My advice for the day is to take in some of the things you're seeing from the chairlifts. I used to see them but I looked through them to check out the snow. Dig a little deeper and Mammoth becomes more than just a place to play. [Tour info.](#)