

RAPTUROUS

TAKING FLIGHT AT EAGLECREST, AK

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Steve Miller eat your heart out.

A mountainous ocean-bound island; a moisture-laden Japanese sea current; one double chairlift accessing expansive terrain, and a wide-open ski area boundary. This is Juneau, Alaska's Eaglecrest Ski Area, where the real-deal Alaskan backcountry is just a ten-minute lift ride away.

Located on Douglas Island, just across the Gastineau Channel from town (the only continental state capitol inaccessible by road), Eaglecrest is a small ski area amidst big mountains. Owned and operated by the city, it's a true local's hill, with mostly unimposing stats: 1,400 foot vertical drop, 640 acres, and two double lifts augmented by a beginner's platter. There's only one slow lift to the top, but from its unloading ramp Eaglecrest's backcountry takes off.

Chutes, spines, and wide-open screamers spill down the steep faces of Hogsback Ridge (2,800 ft.) and Mount Ben Stewart (3,365 ft.), mountains that lie just outside the boundary line. And these are just the beginning. To the east, a volley of 1,500-foot shots known cumulatively as Showboat

descend directly to the base area. Off the backside of the mountain, pillow-lines and gullies drop without pause to the ocean, 3,000 feet below where ships pass like toys in a bath. And the policy for backcountry access is simple: go for it, at your own risk.

"We've definitely had out-of-bounds avalanches," says Brian Davies, Eaglecrest Director of Mountain Safety. The ski area doesn't control anything beyond its boundaries, and if you're caught in a slide, the burden of rescue is on you. But according to locals, the coastal snowpack is typically cohesive and strong, with little deep instability. And even with a local avy attitude that Davies calls "maritime complacency," burials are few, despite heavy backcountry usage. The snow isn't Wasatch light, but there's a lot of it; the snowpack is known to surpass 200 inches, and in March 2008, 12-inch diameter trees were snapping from the load.

From the top of the lift, the most obvious OB objective is Hogsback, a craggy ridge of pillows, chutes and faces that spill onto a wide-open apron.

An easy 15-minute hike or skin puts you at the top of the ridge, where skiers and riders talk slough management and drop into lines like Shit-for-Brains. At the bottom, an easy gully glide leads back inbounds.

From the summit of Stewart, the blue tongue of Mendenhall Glacier is visible to the north, flowing down from the 1,500 square mile Juneau Icefield. Surrounded by nunataks (ice-covered mountains) and peaks up to 8,000 feet high, it's a spectacular backdrop.

Eaglecrest has its own, less aesthetic icy layers—rime. "We clean things with a baseball bat up here," said Davies. "It can get pretty thick." Coating every surface with an impenetrable armor of frothy ice, rime is a mixed blessing; skiers don't hit many rocks, but can experience rather spontaneous acceleration. For regulars, it's just part of the package.

"Some of the local guys ski here every day, no matter what," says Eaglecrest patroller Bill Forrest as he watches one of the faithful skin up on a clear-sky dawn patrol. "And we can have some *really* bad weather."

The backcountry community in Juneau is committed and diverse; a group lapping one popular OB stash included AT, tele, and splitboard riders.

There's no locals-only sentiment, just high spirits and high praise for lines well-skied. Blue skies can't be wasted on inter-disciplinary conflict. And at the end of the day, there are few things finer than sitting seaside at The Hangar back in town drinking a locally-crafted Alaskan Winter Ale, and eating buckets of fresh crab legs, with a gulls-eye view of myriad peaks, knowing that they're only as far away as Eaglecrest's open boundary.

SOURCE:

TRAVEL: www.travelalaska.com

SKI: Eaglecrest Ski Area—www.juneau.org/ecrestftp

STAY: Silverbow Inn, Juneau—www.silverbowinn.com

EAT: The Hangar on the Wharf—www.hangar.hangaronthewharf.com