



Sun Valley Adaptive Sports

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Features

Renovation makes backcountry accessible for all

Partnership plans to open Tornak Hut to disabled

By [JASON KAUFFMAN](#)
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It's a first-of-its kind project in the area, and it's taking shape in a tucked-away little mountain basin at 8,600 feet in the Smoky Mountains.

When construction is completed at the isolated Tornak Hut, the square-shaped, four-season temporary structure will have been transformed from just another one of Sun Valley Trekking Co.'s six remote huts into a fully wheelchair accessible backcountry getaway.

Hard at work at the site on Sawtooth National Forest land late Tuesday were Sun Valley Trekking co-owners Joe St. Onge and Scott Douglas, as well as part-time Wood River Valley resident Matt Furber. Stunning vistas stretched in nearly every direction, and it's any wonder they got any work done.

From the hut's future front porch, a mixture of open slopes and narrow bands of timber fall more than 2,000 feet into the Big Wood River valley. Rising up on the eastern side of the valley, the multi-colored Boulder Mountain front brood over the scene. To the southeast, the ragged summits of the Pioneer Mountains poke out of the rugged mountainscape into the clear blue sky.

Behind the hut a short slope covered in dense subalpine fir rises up several hundred feet to a narrow ridgeline. On the other side of the ridge is the East Fork of Baker Creek drainage.

The roughly 550-square-foot hut will provide outstanding views of the surrounding landscape through a continuous window running from one end of the wood burning stove-warmed hut to the other.



Beginning this winter, disabled winter sports enthusiasts will be able to spend the night in a remote backcountry hut because of a three-way partnership between Sun Valley Trekking Co., Sun Valley Adaptive Sports and the Arthur B. Schultz Foundation of Alta, Wyo. Work to rebuild the popular Tornak Hut as a wheelchair-accessible hut should be completed later this month.

Photo by Jason Kauffman



"They're super comfortable," St. Onge said of the Tornak and other backcountry huts.

Beginning this winter, the remote scene surrounding the Tornak Hut will become available to all, both disabled and non-disabled skiers alike. The project is a three-way partnership between Sun Valley Trekking, Ketchum-based Sun Valley Adaptive Sports and the Arthur B. Schultz Foundation of Alta, Wyo. The president of the foundation is Hailey resident Erik Schultz, and he has given a \$6,500 grant to fund the hut reconstruction costs.

Schultz is himself a wheelchair-bound athlete, and has maintained involvement in many disabled access issues in the local area.

Several local businesses have also contributed building materials or other services to the project. They include Ben Young Landscape Architects, Webb Landscape Inc. and the A.C. Houston Lumber Co. Under the three-way agreement between the project's primary sponsors, funds left over from the \$6,500 grant will be made available for Sun Valley Adaptive Sports programs.

St. Onge said the reconstruction of the preexisting Tornak Hut into a wheelchair accessible structure is just one component of a larger movement that is beginning to take shape with regard to backcountry disability skiing.

"It's kind of a new concept," he said.

The Tornak Hut was considered the perfect site to try out backcountry disability access during the winter because of its relatively easy accessibility by way of a groomed seven-mile snowmobile trail along the East Fork of Baker Creek Road.

"I see this as an experiment to see what's possible," St. Onge said.

After several rounds of leg surgery led him to a brief stint in a sit-ski, St. Onge became acutely aware of just how broad the possibilities are for disabled skiers.

"In powder it was outstanding. You could totally carve," he said. "It made me realize you could do a lot on sit-skis."

It's the flats and uphill slopes that provide disabled skiers with the greatest challenge. That's why Tornak was billed for increased accessibility. It is relatively close to the snowmobile trail.

That idea fits perfectly into the plans being formulated by Sun Valley Adaptive Sports. In the past, the nonprofit organization has provided snowmobile excursions into the backcountry, said the group's program director, Cara Barrett, during an interview in her office Wednesday. The outings were made possible because local snowmobile owners volunteered both time and equipment to take disabled recreationists out for a day, she said.

Sun Valley Adaptive Sports is already in the process of scheduling similar outings for which some of the same snowmobile owners will help transport disabled skiers to the Tornak Hut, Barrett said.

The idea to rebuild a Wood River Valley backcountry hut as a wheelchair accessible destination was first proposed by local acupuncturist Joan Scheingraber, who also works with Sun Valley Adaptive Sports, Barrett said. The idea really took off after the Arthur B. Schultz Foundation committed to funding the project.



"We were like, 'alright, let's get going,'" she said.

The Tornak Hut project will go a long way toward solidifying Schultz' vision of the Wood River Valley area as the premier area for disabled backcountry recreation.

The project will open the door for anyone wishing to access the valley's magnificent backcountry, Barrett said.

"It's so exciting," she said. "We want to make any activity possible."

The public is invited to attend the unveiling of the new Tornak Hut during a community picnic beginning at noon, Sunday, Aug. 5. For more information about the picnic and to get directions to the site, contact Cara Barrett with Sun Valley Adaptive Sports at (208) 720-7191.

