

OUT ON THE RANGE

9 Months of Winter, 90 Days of Mosquitoes

The delights of western Montana. Words and photos © Cynthia Baldauf.

There are only two seasons in Montana's Big Hole Valley. With rarely more than 45 days in a row above freezing, snow in August is not unheard of and a brutal 50 below is possible anytime

after November. Countless stories are told of 90-degree temperature swings in less than 24 hours. With a nod to unpredictable weather, teachers usually find it necessary to live in a teacherage adjacent



"Feeding among the willows" Mark Raymond is at the lines and hoarfrost covers every surface, adding to the beauty. His team knows its job well and even with his back to them he knows when it starts to veer off course. A single word gets the team back on the freight path in Wisdom, Montana.



“Vast and bleak” The wind slowly and steadily gives the snow its shape, changing it from a thing of beauty to one of danger.

to the valley’s two schools. No one who has ever survived a Big Hole winter would consider driving the 80 miles to Walmart without extra jackets and alternate footwear thrown in the truck regardless of the season. Sometimes double feeding the livestock is a rancher’s only choice when a blizzard is inevitable.

In spite of this, winter is magic, boundless beauty delivering moisture for the hay crop. Residents can take time to play cribbage on Monday



“Wind at my tail” Yearlings search for a windbreak.



“Skijoring with a twist” Riders pull skiers down a slalom course on Main Street. This is a timed event and the highlight of February’s Winterfest in the Big Hole Valley. Cowgirl Nicola Winter (really!) is pulling an unnamed red-bearded skier in a kilt. What was he thinking?



When Beaverhead County vet Tom Williams retired, he left his legacy license plate to another local vet, Bob Henningson. Gotta love their attitude!



“Flat-footed jump in Jackson, Montana” A moose never looks nimble until you see one jump from a standstill and clear a fence with ease, even with a belly full of hay.



“Williams Ranch in winter” On the outskirts of Wisdom, this beautiful ranch looks peaceful and serene covered in snow. But be sure and read the fine print. Just out of view, a faded wooden sign on the fence says: “No Trespassing. Violators will be shot, survivors will be shot again.”

“Blue diamond eyes in Jackson, Montana” As the snow started to cover the thick coats of the horses, one turned to look. Her eyes were like bright blue gems.

evenings at the local restaurant...to participate in skijoring...or to play hockey on Weaver’s outdoor ice rink with pregnant cows the only spectators.

Coyote hunting and snowmobiling help pass the remainder of the 270 long days of winter. Then, before you know it, it’s time for mosquitoes! ■

Photographer and writer Cynthia Baldauf wanders the West with husband, Andy. She says, “Adding 10,000 miles to the odometer is a good month.” Email cgbaldauf@tds.net or go to cynthiabaldaufimages.com.

