



Silverking Basin: Winter Cabin in the Mountains

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One of the most popular summer hikes near Smithers is the Silverking Basin. Prospectors who tried to make a go of a silver lode in from the 1920s to the 1980s left us an old track that leads up to this lovely valley cut deep into the Babine Mountains. Today the Provincial Park provides horse corrals and a two-story log cabin where you can stay for \$5. Even in winter hardy travellers can go in there, on skis or showshoes, and enjoy the cabin's cozy ambiance and firewood supply.

The Joe L'Orsa Cabin is named after the man who led the campaign to create the park. Joe first proposed the park in 1973, and at that time he suggested it include all the land in the Babines above 3500' (1300m) elevation. This was the idea of the celebrated BC conservationist Ric Careless, who told Joe that it might help bring the Smithers mill PIR – which might otherwise be opposed to the designation of a park – onside, timber above this elevation not being so valuable in those days. Both mining and forestry representatives had to sign off on the park boundaries; it was in this process that the Cronin mine site and the Big Onion were removed from the planned park, and, in compensation, other areas added.

The Babine Mountains Provincial Park was approved by cabinet in April 1998 as part of the local Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP), a document that still guides much of public land use in the valley. Sadly, Joe died a year later, in April 1999, just before the park was officially designated in June. The new cabin was constructed and named for Joe, and PIR paid for a lot of it.

In summer the cabin is an 8.5 km hike from the main trailhead for the park, at the end of Driftwood Road, some 20 km from Smithers. However, in winter, the road is only plowed as far as the Park boundary, so your ski or snowshoe in to the cabin is 13.5 km. It is, admittedly, a bit of a slog, as you pull your gear behind you on a sled (expect it to take about 5 and a half hours), so go in for a couple of nights to make it worthwhile. (The big advantage of skiing in, rather than using snowshoes, is that coming out will be that much faster.) The route is very gradual, rising only 600 metres in that 13.5 km.

The way in to the cabin is not entirely free from avalanche risk. In the last 1.5 km the old road emerges from the forest and passes under some open slopes. The risk here can be easily managed, avoiding the slide paths by looping out into the meadow. However, you should be educated about avalanche terrain and managing risk while travelling in such terrain, and check avalanche conditions before you go at the Canadian Avalanche Centre (avalanche.ca). Also note that the avalanche risk in the terrain beyond the cabin gets serious in a hurry.

The cabin has a wood stove (and a copious supply of firewood in the shed out back). It sleeps up to twenty on a first-come, first-served basis. Bring your own stove and cook on the metal-covered counters. You can melt snow for water, but at times it's also possible to chop a hole in the ice of the creek out back. Smoking and alcohol are not permitted.