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A Nordic skater and his sail is reflected in the ice at Canyon Ferry on Thursday.

PHOTOS BY JODI HAUSEN/CHRONICLE

# NEED FOR SPEED

*Canyon Ferry ice offers adrenalin rush for winter enthusiasts*

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CANYON FERRY — A woodworker, a ski patroller, a househusband and a Chronicle reporter piled into a station wagon Thursday morning and headed west from Bozeman in search of adventure.

They weren't seeking fresh powder.

No, no.

The merry band was in search of ice — flat, smooth, thick lake ice.

As Christopher Spogis steered his car along Interstate 90, Ray Dombroski sat beside him, a self-styled jig on his lap upon which he sharpened their speed-skating blades.

"We have a traditional symbiotic relationship here," Spogis says. "I drive, and Ray sharpens skates."

"I'm the third man out, so I get to do nothing," says Russell Tuckerman from the back seat.

"He hands me cookies," Dombroski responds.

The trio of friends, all 50-something, "not grown up yet," Spogis says, have been venturing into the wild together for decades. Thursday was no different.

The anticipation was palpable as the car approached its destination: Canyon Ferry Lake.

"Look at the windssock at the airport," one of them says.

"It's standing straight out," another replies.

And a discussion ensues about the kite and sail tied to the roof of the car.

The three men have been Nordic ice skating, also known as ice touring, for years.

Having grown up in Ohio where his uncle owned a marina on Lake Erie, Spogis started skating when he was a "tiny, little kid."

Dombroski grew up in Bay City, Mich., where his barber, Terry McDermott, "came out of nowhere" in 1964 and won an Olympic speed skating gold medal.

"Speed skating became real popular then," Dombroski said. "Lots of people had speed skates" in the area.

Tuckerman, from New England, didn't have speed skates until college, he said. But he jumped into the sport full force — a decision he nearly rued, he said — participating in a triathlon of skiing, Nordic skating and speed skating in Vermont.

Both Tuckerman and Spogis are also ardent river paddlers.

There's sort of an affinity between paddling rivers and skating them, Spogis says. He appreciates riparian ecosystems.

"They sustain life and they're the most productive topography we have," he says. "So it's cool to be around that environment."

Out on the lake, as winds gusted to 40 mph, the group clicked the blades onto their skate-ski boots.

Then, they skated.

The long, straight blades with 90-degree edges require some getting used to for anyone accustomed to concave hockey or figure blades. And



▲ Ray Dombroski holds a kite for another skater during an ice skating excursion at Canyon Ferry, Thursday.

◀ Russ Tuckerman and Dombroski set up a sail as Christopher Spogis and Dale Livezy chat before heading out onto Canyon Ferry to enjoy the ice.

skate-ski boots aren't as supportive as typical skates.

Oh yeah, and the ice can be far from smooth.

"Potato chip ice" that crinkles beneath your blades, bumps and pressure ridges all serve to make the sport something not meant for the faint of heart.

But the challenges, including toting backpacks filled with extra clothing and ice rescue gear, only add to the adventure. Sails and kites intensify the exhilaration.

Spogis says skaters can reach speeds up to 50

mph using windpower. Without it, he's gone better than half that fast — 29.7 mph, measured with a GPS.

"I was trying to break 30," he adds.

But typically they skate about 30 miles a trip at a more leisurely pace.

"When you're la-de-da-ing along, you go between 10 and 12 mph," Spogis says. "But with a good rhythm, you can go 15, 16, 17."

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