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HOME NEWS SNAPSHOT

Winter birds

BY VICTORIA DAVIS

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VICTORIA DAVIS

David Fish, snowkiting fleet captain for the Wisconsin Hoofers, watches as Michael Rosplock prepares to set sail.

Six inches of ice, six inches of snow and winds of at least 10 mph. For David Fish, this means it's time to hoist the sails — or, in this case, the kites.

“Snowkiting is how we get rid of our cabin fever,” says Fish, kiting fleet captain at Wisconsin Hoofers, a UW-Madison outdoor club. While most people might elect to stay inside on a windy, blizzardy day, Fish locks his boots into downhill skis, hooks himself into a size 10 wind kite and speeds around Lake Mendota.

“We usually top out at 30 miles per hour because, you know, we don't want to die,” says Fish, who has been snowkiting since 2014 and now teaches lessons with Hoofers. “We also prefer to have enough snow on the lake so that, if you fall, it doesn't hurt.”

It takes roughly 30 minutes for Fish, along with UW student Michael Rosplock and Hoofers snowkiting instructor Lucas Morton, to gear up with snow suits, life jackets, helmets, wind goggles, walkie talkies and ice picks. Then the team hauls their kites, skis and snowboards onto Mendota's frozen expanse.

“We're basically preparing to swim, ski and fly,” says Morton as he untangles the lines on his kite.

While it's debated whether snowkiting originated in the U.S. or abroad, Fish says the sport has been growing locally in the last decade, with events like the World Ice and Snow Sailing Association competition popping up in Fond du Lac.

Considered an extreme sport, snowkiters face more dangerous obstacles than windsurfers do. They risk falling through the ice, and running into cross country skiers or fishing shacks.

“We're lucky, though, because there doesn't seem to be good fishing off of [the Memorial Union], so there's not many fisherman to worry about,” says Fish.

Bob Cook, founder of Madison's Kiteriders LLC, has been snowkiting for 20 years on Mendota and, earlier this month, competed against kites from Russia, Germany, Sweden and Switzerland. Speed kiting is his specialty, racing on snow-free ice and practicing jumps up to 10 feet in the air.

"Extreme sports are a little bit of a misnomer because it's more about the personality of the rider than the sport itself," says Cook, who has gone up to 60 mph while ice kiting on his skis. "That being said, if something goes wrong with that kite, and you're taking that sport to the extreme, you're still hooked in."

In 2009, Cook was ice kiting with a friend at Olin Park, practicing jumps on a "particularly blustery day." On his last jump of the day, Cook launched into the air, but instead of going up 10 feet, the wind caught his kite and he jumped 20 feet. The kite was then pushed out of position and Cook crashed on the ice — hard.

"I dropped like a rock and snapped my femur bone right in half," Cook remembers. "Man, was that painful. But two months later, I was back on the ice."

Snowkiting, for better or worse, is a sport that relies, almost entirely, on the cooperation of Mother Nature. And while Cook and Fish both say the winters have gotten noticeably warmer, there are still days where skiers and snowboarders alike will take to the ice to kick those winter blues.

"I was getting the feeling I wasn't going to get on the ice at all this whole winter," says Rosplock, as he gripped the kit's handle and got ready for his first ride. "I actually left work early today to be here." Twenty minutes later, Rosplock is gliding across the snow with Morton.

As the winds pick up and the snow falls, it becomes harder to see the skiers and snowboarders as they disappear into the white horizon. But passersby stop to stare at the still visible and vibrant kites, twirling their riders around the ice like a dance.

Hoofers snowkiting lessons: 15 hours of training over two days, and a third day of riding.

Bob Cook: “It’s a lot easier to learn how to kite on the ice than in the water. It can take a good five to seven hours, minimum, to get up and riding on the water, but this past Sunday we had new riders up and going within two or three hours.”

Riding season: Generally early January to late March.

David Fish: “The warmer winters here have been a challenge. I’m not a climatologist or anything but we do get noticeable shifts and there has been a lot more February thaws.”

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