



The Snow Whisperer

Legend of the misanthrope

IT'S A BRIGHT, STILL AFTERNOON UP MILLCREEK CANYON with the kind of sky that looks like someone has taken an eraser and smudged the color to a flatland of whitish grey. Not that this matters to Bob Athey. He doesn't care about a threatening sky or, for that matter, a snow hazard rating. He'll ski this day and any day during the winter months because he's insane for the snow: More insane than your typical East Coasters who froth delirious throughout their first season in the Wasatch Mountains; even more than your Alta Lodge ski bums who wash dishes in return for 100-plus potential powder days a year. Athey's in a category of his own.

He's cracked out of his mind on snow, blind as a lover at the foot of the Wasatch, and his ardor isn't abating. It won't. Snow's the thing for him—the alpha and the omega, the *raison d'être*. It gives him that wild, troubadour instinct. And this is the kind of love that has built him into a legend.

More than a decade ago, Tom Kimbrough, a now-retired avalanche forecaster, called Athey the Wizard of the Wasatch and, after an article about Athey with that heading appeared in the *Salt Lake Tribune*, the name stuck.

Athey explains it this way: "They figured that I go skiing everyday for years and I'm not dead yet so I must be a wizard." The man's become an icon in the backcountry. But truth be told, he's more than that. After 30 years of traversing nearly every inch of the snow-bound Wasatch, in love with its every drift and hue—the faceted hoarfrost that can crystallize the landscape into C.S. Lewis's Narnia, the layers that crust and spill, even the rot that can come when the sky dumps and then turns its back for days or weeks at a time—Athey has entered the realm of the snow whisperer. It's love, luck, and some kind of crazy intuition that keep him magically away from the heavy trick of the avalanche. The guy knows

This wire-haired curmudgeon has probably spent more days in the Wasatch observing snow than anyone else alive.

so much about the cold stuff and its moods that he seems to exist beyond the realm of the intuitive, nearly inside the snow itself.

"I'm never going to grow up. It just ain't gonna happen."

—Bob Athey

Today, Athey's hitched a ride up Millcreek because his truck's engine is blown. He holds his Voile splitboard (a snowboard that can split into two parts for huffing up hills in the backcountry), and leans casually against the snowbank that's piled in front of Porter's Fork trailhead. Athey suggested we meet here because the trail's easy and we can talk snow. We walk over the bridge and Athey throws down his pack. He wrestles with the splitboard and, after a minute, grunts out, "I have issues." I don't know if he's talking about himself or the gear until he tells me that he's tested equipment for Voile for the past 25 years. He says they've got a relationship. He tells them what equipment is crap and what's not. Voile tells him that he's always complaining.

Athey was raised in Granger, what's now called West Valley City. He grew up next to his grandparents' farm, chasing wild turkeys with his twin brother, William. Athey remembers the culture shock when he got older and his family subbed out the farming and parceled out the land. It's the only thing he tells me about his childhood—the farm, the parceling, the development. Neither of his parents was into skiing and, he says, his two brothers and one sister didn't quite get his "obsession." They used to imagine that he'd use his college degree (Athey earned a sociology degree in 1981) and settle into a real job instead of spending the summers installing aluminum siding so he could ski in the winter. But, now that he's in his 50s, they've stopped telling him to grow up. "I've grown past that," Athey says. "I'm never going to grow up. It just ain't gonna happen."

Athey bears a resemblance to Nick Nolte if Nolte had gone into the wild for several months. He's got that half-feral look: long, lion hair the color of wheat and sunbaked strawberries;

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an ever-present ball cap; eyes the stark blue of glaciers. His beard's the same wheat color as his hair, has the same lost-in-the-woods wooliness. And he's thin—sinewy muscles built from decades of skiing every inch of the Wasatch.

He's the kind of man that you could imagine actually making a tea of pine needles, say, or cracking a rabbit's neck with his thumb and forefinger if he got lost in the back-country. Not that he's done these things. It's simply that his single-minded love recalls a focused idealism and austerity that's typically found in youth. In later years, we point to this refusal to join civilization and its discontents and say either 'misanthrope' or 'legend.' With Athey, it's both.

Though he started skiing in junior high, the obsession didn't take over until he was in his 20s. The woman Athey calls his ex-wife (they lived together for 20 years but never actually married) introduced him to ski touring. This was in the mid-1970s. After sporadic attendance at the University of Utah, his growing hunger for snow quickly eclipsed most everything. Athey took a job. It didn't last. He got laid off, and for that entire winter, he says proudly, he was part of the state ski team. He collected unemployment, skied every day, and nourished the obsession that would become the defining factor in his life.

IT'S LIKE PLAYING A DANGEROUS GAME," Athey says. "I like to see if I can make it—find good skiing without triggering an avalanche. There's the fascination with snow, but the fascination with unstable snow and getting away with it day after day ... that's the game. Life and death. That's it."

Bruce Tremper, director of the Utah Avalanche Center (UAC) since 1986, has known Athey for more than 20 years. He says Athey's snow expertise has gone past simple understanding of snowpack and the evaluation of weather and terrain.

"Experts are past the rules and partitioning. They use their intuition," Tremper says, adding, "It just becomes part of them—like the way a parent understands their child. Bob's been at this intuitive stage for many years. He doesn't dig very many snow profiles anymore. He doesn't need to."

About 15 years ago, Athey found some skiing-related

work by carving out a niche with the UAC. He became one of the UAC's first volunteer observers, scouring the Wasatch by day and sending in nightly snow reports that the center would then use for its daily avalanche projections. His information was always highly detailed and reliable: "January 5, 2005. Willow Heights to the top of West Monitor Bowl. 12 to 15 inches of light density snow over a soft base ... evidence of widespread sluffing ... some sluffs entrained quite a bit of snow with possible soft slab fractures although no crowns remained visible." But despite Athey's obvious qualifications, he never applied for a full-time position, a job that would have paid significantly more. Athey claims that he was steered away from applying, that his hair, his karma, his gravelly voice were all cited as reasons that he wouldn't get the job. Tremper disagrees, pointing to Athey's misanthropic tendencies. The guy may be brilliant with snow, but Tremper says that they both know he wasn't suited to an office job.

After a couple of years, Athey had become so valuable as a snow observer that they continued to raise his pay, despite the position being officially listed as "volunteer." Administration of the program had switched from the UAC, funded in part by the U.S. Forest Service, to the Friends of the UAC, a nonprofit designed to support, manage, and fundraise on behalf of the UAC. Athey was seen as an incredible resource, a one-man show for obtaining information about the Wasatch back-country. Paul Diegel, president of Friends of the UAC, says that Athey's, "the most creative person I know in terms of putting together different routes in the Wasatch. He's touched every skiable slope. I think it's safe to say that he's spent more days on foot in the Wasatch than anyone else alive." But there were some problems. Though many liked him and even envied his time in the Wasatch, Athey's gruffness rubbed some people the wrong way. And then there were the altercations with the helicopter.

ATHEY WAS FINGER-SALUTING the Wasatch Powderbird Guides as far back as the 1980s. The Powderbird Guides are helicopter pilots who deliver well-paying



skiers to the far reaches of the Wasatch. As part of Heli Free Wasatch, an organization bent on stopping the guides, Athey was one of three people that would unfurl a 30-by-4-foot banner in the backcountry, burning the name Heli Free Wasatch into the eyes of the guides and their clients as they buzzed their way to a summit.

Then came Athey's near arrest. He'd peaked a summit with a group of five friends just as the helicopter was readying to drop its cache of happy skiers. Athey became vocal. The guide

Bob Athey grew up near his grandparents' farm in what is now West Valley City. His family wasn't into skiing so much and for years they wondered when he was going to get a real job.

called in a Forest Service representative who became nearly hypothermic as he stood on the summit in his black pants and dress loafers. Athey was accused of planting punji sticks, spikes made of wood or bamboo that are often used to booby trap areas of combat in a war zone. Later, the Forest Service held a

few meetings complete with the Salt Lake Canyon Patrol and a few lawyers. Athey was loosely charged with an infraction, his relationship with the Forest Service soured, and he shifted his work from the UAC to Friends of the UAC.

Despite this, or perhaps because of it, Athey remained a legend. Diegel tells me about a time during a 2005 splitboard fest in Salt Lake City during which Athey's "celebrity status" was apparent. Voile brought together a handful of young, California skiers, and some Salt Lake splitboarders, including Athey. "Bob totally, totally blew them away with his appearance, age, fitness, knowledge of the area, and curmudgeonliness."

THE COMFORTABLE CARVE OF ATHEY'S LIFE shifted just last year. Friends of the UAC had to change Athey's privileged status. After watching the ranks of their volunteer observers grow to nearly 30—backcountry skiers who were willing to work for \$10 a day— Friends could no longer account for the money they spent on Athey. So, despite his crazy intuition, despite years devoted to the study of snow and becoming legendary within the Wasatch, Athey was demoted. Diegel hated the economics of the situation,

but what do you say when a deep resource of knowledge and intuition can be replaced by a mass entourage of powder hounds willing to do the work for next to nothing?

Athey didn't take the change lightly. He decided to stop his work as an observer and turn his attentions to photography—something he'd done for years but had never tried to use as a way to make money. When asked about the lack of budget for a snow whisperer, Athey answers with his typical crusty humor.

"There's no money in snow," he says.

And the truth sits like snowpack, like the pristine weight that comes after days of wild snowfall when the trees are bent like hunched animals. Athey grins. He's hopeful that his photography will take off. Maybe there will be money in pictures of snow. Until then, he's going to keep doing what he loves, money or not. He's going to keep singing that troubadour song, which means that as long as there's snow, he's going to ski. WJ

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