

JURA WINTER MEET

SNOWSHOE HEAVEN

14 - 20 January
Leader - Mick Borroff

Introduction

The Haut Jura straddles the Franco-Swiss border to the north of Geneva and is characterised by long parallel limestone ridges and valleys along a northeast-southwest axis. Moving SW along this ridge from the north, the principal summits include Le Chasseron (1607m), Mt d'Or (1462m), Dent de Vaulion (1483m), Mt Tendre (1679m), Mt Sala (1511m), Le Noirmont (1567m), La Dole (1677m), Columby de Gex (1689m), Cret de la Neige (1717m) and Le Reculet (1718m). The panoramic view from these Jura summits across to the main alpine chain is magnificent, ranging from the Bernese Oberland to the Ecrins. The excellent PeakFinder website will give you a good idea of what is to be seen from many individual summits.

Participants

Mick Borroff , President
John Brown
Ros Brown (guest)
Ann Chadwick (guest)
Peter Chadwick
Tim Josephy
Rory Newman

Helen Smith
Michael Smith
Gail Taylor (guest)
Richard Taylor
Hilary Tearle (guest)
Sue Thomason (guest)

We had been checking the snow reports and webcams for the Jura for a couple of weeks before and like much of the Alps, there was little snow to be seen.

The weekend before we left it had snowed but Paul Everett, our chief Guest from the 2015 dinner who lives in Geneva, had been up Mont Sala near Les Rousses and had carried his snowshoes the whole way. Fortunately, a reasonable dump of snow had fallen late in the intervening week and all we had to do was get there!

Sat 14th

The party used a mixture of fly-drive, rail-drive and ferry-drive to get to Les Rousses on the French side of the border. The Smiths and Browns arrived first having crossed a very snowy Col de la Faucille thankful their car was fitted with winter tyres and had snow chains in the boot, as they wound around several slewed vehicles.

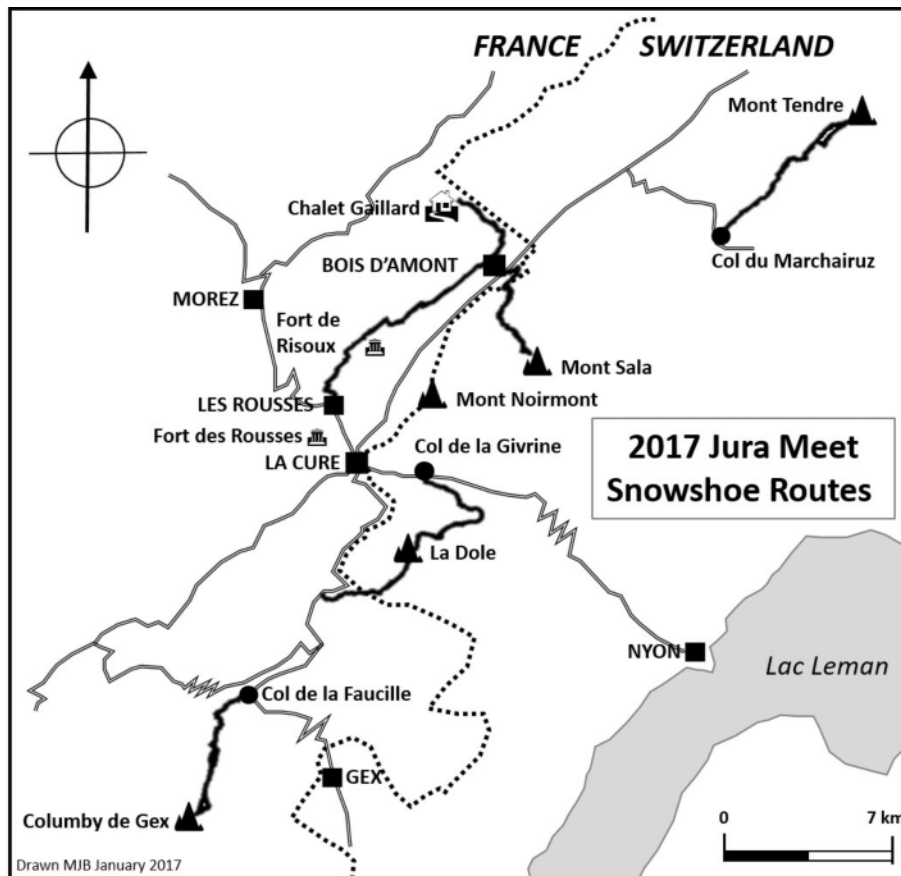
The Taylors and Chadwicks were next from Geneva and Richard put his negotiating skills to the test in the snowshoe hire shop securing a 20% group discount for pairs of *raquettes* and poles.

**Modern plastic
snowshoes m- TSL 329
Photo - Mick Borroff**



Mick and Hilary arrived at the Gai Pinson Hotel in the early evening after long but uneventful drive from Rotterdam, shortly followed by Rory, Sue and Tim, who arrived from Geneva in time for us all to finish dinner together and make plans for the week.

Based on four previous winter visits to the area, Mick had prepared a shortlist of interesting and varied snowshoe routes to choose from depending on the snow conditions and weather.



Sun 15th

Over breakfast we could see the tops wreathed in cloud which was forecast to last all day, so lower level excursions were the order of the day for the first snowshoe trips. Except for John and Ros, the remaining party of eleven now all armed with snowshoes, poles and lunch set off from Les Rousses on an introductory route through the powder snow in the lower Forêt du Risoux to Bois d'Amont where the ski-bus could return us to the hotel.



The party in Les Rousses

Photo - Richard Taylor

We donned snowshoes outside Les Rousses church and headed downhill. A short climb to a chalet led up to the snow-covered Combe de Vert car park where we had to convince the guardian of the *ski de fond* track that we were not going to cross into the forbidden winter wildlife protection zone (NB they are not used to seeing Brits on snowshoes). The track to the Fort du Risoux, constructed between 1880-1884, had a bit of a *piste* (path of compacted snow from previous snowshoe parties), but from the fort onwards, we had to break trail through the calf-deep powder snow across the silent forest.

A few blisters were repaired at our lunch stop on a fallen tree, then we made our way down to Bois d'Amont, where we were forced to take refuge in a bar for a hour to await the ski-bus

Madame bus driver was a real character and expertly showed us how to drive a coach in the snow, almost kidnapping us to Switzerland before taking us back to the hotel.



**Easier going in the Risoux Forest
Photos - M Borroff**

Meanwhile, the Browns decided to test their snowshoes by circumnavigating the Fort des Rousses. The conditions were really good with a beautiful walk through the snow-covered forest. This is France's second largest fortress built in the 19th century, with 50,000m² of vaulted rooms and kilometres of galleries, now housing more than 100,000 rounds of slowly maturing Jurafloré Comté cheese. John and Ros then crossed to La Cure on the Franco-Swiss border and back walking along the connecting very snowy side road which was free of traffic.

Mon 16th

For our first mountain day, Mick, Tim, Richard, the Smiths and the Chadwicks drove up to the Col de la Faucille and set off behind a French group along the forest path to the Le Crozet chalet, bound for the undulating ridge over the Grand Montrond to Le Columby de Gex (1688m). We were accompanied by a man carrying a hammer nailing temporary raquette route markers to trees for the navigationally challenged.

We emerged from the forest into a freezing fog which continued with fleeting blue patches as we ascended to Montrond and along the main ridge over Grand Montrond (1614m) happily following both the new French *piste* and the ice-rimed GR9 marker posts.



Photo - M Borroff

Fortunately, with wind behind us, the fog cleared as we approached the penultimate top where the French party turned back.

The blue skies and the view across to the main alpine chain were appreciated as we climbed the final slopes of scoured crispy ice and sculpted powder snow to the very heavily ice-rimed summit pylon of Le Columby de Gex.



Photo - Tim Josephy

The view across to the Alps were partially obscured by clouds but Mont Blanc and many others were picked out including the Cret de Neige, the highest French summit in the Jura, before dropping down to get out of the cold wind for lunch.

These bright conditions prevailed all the way back to the col but were accompanied by the biting wind now in our faces. We were back at the cars after about 6 hours and time for a quick hot chocolate before testing the winter tyres again back down to Les Rousses, leaving a lovely sunset behind us.



**Helen battling severe windchill
Photo - M Borroff**

Hilary drove Gail, Ros and John into Switzerland to the Col de la Givrine and they snowshoed up to the Vermeilley chalet for a pleasant lunch in front of their huge open fire.

After returning to the car, they went for a drive to Morez and up to Chapelle des Bois on the other side of the Forêt de Risoux for a late afternoon hot chocolate.

Rory and Sue gave Sue's blisters a chance to settle and walked round Fort des Rousses and then followed the GR9 to visit the ice-bedecked waterfall at Bief de la Chaille and back to Les Rousses. They saw a hare and crossbills.

Tue 17th

The weather forecasts from Meteo's France and Swiss concurred and were not promising. Low cloud and 45km/h winds gusting to 90km/h accompanied by temperatures around -8°C in the valley, meant that a lower route in the forest was required.

The Columby de Gex group decided on a drive back down the valley to Bois d'Amont and a relatively short ascent into the Forêt du Risoux and up to the the mountain refuge of the Chalet Gaillard (1232m) for lunch.



Photo - Richard Taylor

We left the the icy car park in what can be only described as very unpleasant conditions with swirling spindrift, but once some deep snow drifts had been negotiated between the roadhead and the forest, the wind's force was greatly dissipated by the trees and we snowshoed over a lot of debris - pine needles and lichen covered twigs. Unsurprisingly no-one had been up before us. Just before the chalet we were exposed to the wind again as we crossed a large clearing. The refuge was warm, the guardian friendly and the pea soup excellent, fortifying us for the return journey. Back at the snow-covered and icy road, the wind was now much fiercer driving more spindrift but just managing not to blow anyone over.

Sue decided to have a day indoors, and caught up on sleep and reading. Rory had a look up towards La Cure, which convinced him that a more sheltered route would be pleasanter, so walked down through the village, across the valley, and up to the viewpoint at La Roche Blanche.

Ros and John braved the wind-chill and walked down to the Lac des Rousses, they were hoping for a coffee at the restaurant but it did not open until February. They then walked back into town for lunch, ploughing through the snow drifts on the way.

Hilary and Gail sensibly kept within the confines of the village where the buildings provided some respite from the strong winds.

Wed 18th

Another very cold day was in prospect, but with the wind forecast to moderate in the afternoon, so Mick chose Mont Sala (1511m) as a lot of the route was in the forest. It was a chilly -11.5°C as Mick, Tim, the Chadwicks, Browns and Smiths left the car park in Bois d'Amont, but we soon warmed as we climbed up through the steep lower forest to emerge in the sun at the Les Loges *alpage*. We had been fortunately following the *piste* made by an earlier French party, but they were only out to enjoy a relatively short walk and returned from this point. More trail breaking was needed with most of the party having a turn at the sharp end following the marks of a faint *piste* past several *chalets d'alpage* and a carved boundary stone marking our transition into Swiss territory. A gentle ascent took us through the Bois de Loges and up to the unmanned Cabane des Electriciens refuge (1474m). The large cross on Mont Sala lay just 10 minutes away and suddenly the view across to Mt Blanc and the rest of the alpine chain could be enjoyed above the temperature inversion which had submerged Geneva in cloud. We returned to the cabin for lunch in the sun sat on a splendid bench seat carved out by Michael with his snow shovel.

We were getting chilly in the wind and a swift and easier return following our own well-tramped *piste* was made. Ann caught a glimpse of a chamois disappearing into the trees. As we descended back into the lower forest, the familiar figure of Rory came into view as he was prospecting our route for he and Sue to do in boots the next day. We just had time for a round of hot chocolates in Bois d'Amont before returning to the hotel – noting it had warmed up to -10.5°C.



Photo - M Borroff

As Richard was having difficulty in coming to terms that downhill in snowshoes necessitated more than merely standing still, he decided to have a rest day and hired some alpine downhill kit. Whilst he appreciated that this requires no effort to ascend (on a lift) or descend (stand still and lean from side to side) he had forgotten that this lack of effort does not keep one as warm as slogging up and down hills. He was easily able to make use of his ski pass age allowance and visited Les Jouvencelles, La Darbella, La Serra, Les Dappes and reconnoitred the Massif de la Dole. Fortunately, he had been allowed use of 'the family car' as the link lift Le Balancier had been flattened during the previous day's storm. In good YRC tradition he invited himself to finish off a sumptuous lunch buffet at mountain hut he stumbled across which otherwise would have gone to waste. The only disappointment in an otherwise perfect day was the lack of mountain bars, loud music and dancing on tables.

Rory and Sue walked down through the village and up to the belvedere at La Roche Blanche – excellent view – and explored the forest. Later Rory prospected Mont Sala as above.

Hilary and Gail went on the train from La Cure to Nyons and onto Geneva for a refined day of culture of which the highlights were the Museum of Modern Art and the Bienale exhibition of the Moving Image.

Thu 19th

Mick had his eye on a snowshoe ascent of Mont Tendre (1679m), the highest peak in the Swiss Jura. Accompanied by Richard and Tim, an excellent day was enjoyed under clear blue skies above another temperature inversion filling the Geneva valley with cloud. Starting at -9°C at the Col du Marchairuz (1446m), we headed up a well marked trail with a compacted *piste* left by previous snowshoe parties



accompanied by a retired Swiss surgeon and mountaineer on alpine skis who spoke good English. We soon reached the closed CAS Cabane du Cunay (1588m), meeting another couple of ski-tourers on the way.

We took our lunch on the hut terrace whilst admiring the astonishing 180° panorama of the *Chaîne des Alpes* – we could see from the Bernese Oberland to the Ecrins without a trace of cloud over the summits. Dragging our eyes away, we found that the main *piste* soon disappeared off to the east and we chose to ascend the undulating wind-scoured SW ridge leading to Mt Tendre's summit triangulation cone for more photos of the Alps.



**Descent from Mont Tendre's summit ridge
Photo - M Borroff**

We decided to return to the CAS hut by a different route taking the path linking the *chalets d'alpage* and then back the way we came, where Mick spotted a rabbit. Mick lost a snowshoe heel bar with about 2km to reach the car, but fortunately the *piste* was sufficiently trampled to do it in boots without too much post-holing. A very well-earned Boxer beer was savoured in the Hotel du Marchairuz as we reflected on a fantastic mountain day on top of the Jura.

The Smiths and Chadwicks decided to visit a different area northwest of Les Rousses and headed over to Morbier to snowshoe up to the viewpoint of the La Roche Devant (1144m) and then visited the upstream end of the iced-up Cascades du Herisson.

Rory and Sue drove up to the Col de la Faucille and with Sue's blistered heels still troublesome in snowshoes, followed the well-compacted trail down to the Le Turet viewpoint in boots and returned to the col, meeting Hilary, Gail, Ros and John bound for the same belvedere in snowshoes. Rory and Sue then repeated Monday's route to the summit of Montrond to admire the wonderful alpine view.

Fri 20th

For our final day together, another cross-border route was chosen by Mick which traversed La Dole (1677m), the second highest summit in the Swiss Jura, starting at the Col de la Faucille road close to the Chalet Girantette in France and finishing at the Col de Givrine in Switzerland. Mick got a replacement heel bar fitted to his snowshoe while two cars were dropped at the end of the route thanks to Hilary and Rory. From our drop-off, Mick, Tim, Richard, the Chadwicks and Smiths gradually ascended the *piste* across snow covered meadows and the border wall up to La Dole's undulating southwest ridge.

Another almost windless day of blue sky and sunshine prevailed and we had lunch beside the summit radome which watches over Geneva airspace, with the Alps laid before us. Peter had bought his binoculars and, over lunch, some time was spent identifying summits and reminiscing about old climbs.



Photo - M Borroff

The other side of the radome was an orientation table where we could check our observations. The descent was made down a section of wind-scoured ridge past some very large chunks of ice-rime which had fallen off the summit aircraft warning-light towers and down to the Col du Porte. A steep slanting descent from the col across sun-softened snow in raquettes was not for the faint-hearted. From the Chalet des Apprentis, a varied route through sections of forest and steep open ground took us to a groomed husky track near St Cergue. The air was so still here that distinct layers of mist had formed in the valley bottom giving the illusion of a reflection. A gently ascending track brought us up to the Col de la Givrine and our cars for the return to Les Rousses and out hotel.

Rory and Sue did a walk up to the Belvedere du Dappes on the Montagne des Tuffes at the northern end of the Forêt du Massacre. Previously known as the Forêt de La Frasse, it was renamed after the slaughter of 600 Italian mercenaries by Savoyard forces in a conflict between the Duke of Savoie and the King of France in 1535. They had good views and saw nutcrackers, jays, crossbills, goldcrests and long-tailed tits. Later Rory walked down to the Lac des Rousses and up to the Roche de Lavenna.

Hilary, Gail, Ros and John caught the ski-bus to Premanon and showshoed to the frozen Bief de la Chaille waterfall and then circumnavigated the Fort les Rousses and back to the hotel.

The hotel management gave us each a glass of *kir royale* as an aperitif in appreciation of our visit and we toasted the success of the meet. This was followed by yet another good dinner and an impromptu financial management workshop as we unpicked the complexities of the billing arrangements.

Sat 21st

The group split up to head home except for Mick and Hilary who were fortunate to be staying on in the Jura at La Bourbe for another week of holiday in the glorious weather.

Sun 22nd

Mick had been invited on a snowshoeing route being led by Paul Everett. A large group from the Geneva branch of the CAS took the train up to the La Givrine col where Mick met them and snowshoed up to Mont Sala, stopping on the way for a warming bowl of soup at their Carrox refuge. Mick returning via the Creux de Crou to La Bourbe, while Paul's group dropped down SE to Arzier, to catch a train back to Geneva.

Mon 23rd

Hilary was feeling unwell with a bad headache and cough and so confined herself to bed, but was happy enough for Mick to drive up to the Col du Marchairuz to snowshoe up to the cross at the Cret de la Neuve (1494m), with a visit to the Glacière de St George (a 22m deep pothole, previously used as a snow pit to store ice) and return via the Combe des Amburnex.

Tue 24rd

Hilary was still poorly, so Mick headed up to the Col du Mollendruz (the next road col NE of the Col du Marchairuz) and did a half-day route to the Chatel pastures to prospect the way to avoid the ski de fond tracks for climbing Mont Tendre the next day, returning via the Combe de la Neige.

Wed 25th

Hilary wisely stayed in bed again, so Mick drove back to the Col du Mollendruz and snowshoed in solitude up to Mont Tendre. He took the direct route from the Chalet du Pre l'Haute-Dessus via the Chalet du Rizel, making use of some previous tracks which eased both progress and route finding between the clearings in the upper forest. There were a couple of other parties on the summit this time, all having come up from Col du Marchairuz to soak up the sun and gaze at the view.

Mick returned to the car by a different route via the Chalet de Pierre and the Combe de la Neige, slowly being engulfed by freezing fog.

Thu 26th

Hilary was now feeling well enough for a little excursion to view the frozen Cascades de Herisson, so they drove to the bottom car park beside the Maison de Cascades and walked up the icy path to the spectacular 65m high L'Eventail waterfall. The Club's ice-climbers would have been drooling if they'd been there. Mick then ventured up to the next fall – the 60m Grand Saut, again very impressive and on the return photographed a Great Egret fishing in the icy stream, quite oblivious to the pedestrian traffic on the adjacent path – it even caught a fish!

Fri 27th

Mick's last day on the hill was spent on a pleasant traverse of Mont Noirmont (1567m) starting at La Cure station and returning by the Creux de Crou, to finish back at the apartment in La Bourbe thus ending a perfect second week.

Conclusion

The Jura meet achieved its objectives of introducing a good number of members and guests to the pleasures of snowshoeing in an area new to most. January is a good time to go to the Jura to miss the start of the five weeks of French half-term and snow is usually plentiful. This year it was late and we were fortunate that a significant amount of snow had fallen immediately before our arrival or we would have been hill-walking.

Everyone took to wearing snowshoes, although there were some blistered heels on the first day out (Compeed to the rescue). We undertook a variety of routes to match the conditions and summited four of the main Jura peaks, where the panoramic view of the Alps was simply amazing.

Whilst deer, chamois, fox, mustelids, hare and rabbit tracks were frequently seen, the animals themselves proved elusive, with only a couple of glimpses in the forest. We looked hard for birds but they all seemed to have disappeared for the winter to warmer climes.

Les Rousses is a good hub for this part of the Jura and is close to Geneva airport for access. We all enjoyed our stay at the Hotel Gai Pinson - Monsieur and Madame Clerc and their staff including our very patient waitress Gwendolyn looked after us very well and the kitchen team did a great job throughout the week.

The hotel can be warmly recommended to future visitors.

The leader can provide more detailed information for anyone wanting to go snowshoeing in this attractive area of the Jura.

Further reading

Mick Borroff, Snowshoeing, YRC Journal 2011;13(11):28-30

Olivier Deconinck, *30 Balades à raquettes dans le Jura*, Editions Glenat, Grenoble, 2016.

Kev Reynolds and R. Brian Evans, *The Jura*, Cicerone Press, Milnthorpe, 1989.

Gallery



**L'Eventail Waterfall, Cascades de Herisson
Photo - M Boroff**



Main Jura ridge Photo - M Borroff



**Great Egret, Cascades de Herisson
Photo - M Borroff**



**Mick, Cret de Neuve summit
Photo his camera**



Descent from Mont Sala Photo - M Borroff



**Mont Blanc and the Alps over Caban de Cunay
Photo - M Borroff**



**Breaking trail back to Col de la Faucille
Photo - M Borroff**



**Crossing into Switzerland,
heading for Mont Sala
Photo - M Borroff**



**Mont Sala summit
Photo - Tim Josephy**



**Lunch at the Cabane des Electriciens
Photo - M Borroff**



**Descent from the Cabanes des Electriciens
Photo - M Borroff**



**Col du Marchairuz
Photo - Richard Taylor**



**Tim and Richard, homeward bound
Photo - M Borroff**



**La Dole from the Chalet Girantette meadows
Photo - M Borroff**



**La Dole descent from the Col du Port
Photo - Tim Josephy**



**Chalet at the head of the Combe de Neige
Photo - M Borroff**