

MARK IT on your calendar

Photo: TOSHI KAWANO

WHILE LUMBERING THROUGH LOT 1

for the hundredth-odd time last season, I was startled by what appeared to be a large animal rummaging through the trunk of a red Civic. Perhaps partly because it was the day after the World Ski and Snowboard Festival (WSSF), or simply because I'm never fully alert at lower elevations, it took me a moment to identify the perplexing sight. Eventually I realized that I had stumbled across the temporary lair of one of Whistler's most dedicated spring visitors.

This friendly creature, whose physical appearance is best described as a cross between a sasquatch and the fourth member of ZZ Top, has been making extended visits to Whistler each spring for many years. Always stylishly outfitted in stretch pants and a navel-length beard, he also has a habit of scouring the Roundhouse for fries and other table scraps after the lunch crowd leaves. Now I'm not suggesting that you come to Whistler primarily for the leftover tartar sauce, but the mountain can be a very interesting place between April and June.

Springtime is when Whistler is host to numerous feature events that bring out all kinds of creatures. Here's a brief rundown of some of the most notable:

THE WORLD SKI AND SNOWBOARD FESTIVAL

April 8-17 This legendary end-of-winter bash brings all the big names to town. Whether you come for the music, the skiing or events like the Photo Search and Showdown, you're guaranteed to see some of the most talented individuals in each field. Now in its 10th year, this 10-day event also kicks off the spring season by putting

everyone in a festive spirit. There's something appealing about being able to finish a great day of skiing by falling into a patio chair and enjoying an outdoor concert in the spring sun.

KING OF THE HILL Although cloaked in secrecy since its inception in 2002, both participation and the prize purse of this 5,000-vertical-foot mad dash continues to grow each year. Unfortunately, due to a terrain clash with ski instructors last season, organizers are keeping the scheduling details of this year's event quiet. Rumour has it that if you pop by the Crystal Lounge before the end of the WSSF, you may be able to find a guy who knows a guy who can help you register.

ON THE CHEAP April 18-June 5 Each year Whistler-Blackcomb sells a spring pass for approximately \$250 that extends from the day after the WSSF up to the start of the glacier season. Last year it even included the first two weeks of glacier skiing. When you crunch the numbers, this pass means that the price of about four regular lift tickets gets you more than seven weeks of skiing and riding on virtually empty, and often sunny, slopes. Saving that much money may even entice you to forget the leftover tartar sauce and splurge on a burger.

SHOWCASE SHOWDOWN May 21-22

The Showcase Showdown was conceived back in the era when snowboarding was considered skiing's cooler sibling. While some skiers believe the event has lost its prestige, and others tend to think of it in the past tense, the Showdown continues to be held atop Whistler Mountain each

spring. It's a snowboard-only event, but we all have less fortunate friends who are required to unclip a binding before loading the chair and who can't traverse to the goods as we can. Besides, we always get a kick out of cheesy old-school skiing, so why not laugh at our sister sport of snowboarding on the Victoria Day long weekend.

CRUD TO MUD May 23 This is a great opportunity to make the crossover from winter to summer sports by testing both your skiing and mountain-biking skills in one event. Whether you enter as a team of two or tackle both disciplines individually, the quickest time to the valley wins. If this sounds too easy, realize that the course conditions always live up to the event's moniker.

GAPPER DAY June 5 The boys at doglotion.com have turned a small gathering of ridiculously dressed friends into a huge annual event. It's always held on the last day of the spring season, and its mission is to celebrate everything dorky in skiing. According to event organizer Jamie Bond, you can come dressed in "a retro one-piece or a raincoat and gas mask as long as you plan to throw a daffy, twister or spread at every opportunity and leave the 'bro' attitude at home." Even extremely thin snow coverage and rain couldn't stop the enormous band of silly-goating delinquents from tearing up the snow-, grass- and rock-covered slopes last June. Gapper Day (gapper, as in one who wears his hat back so far on his head, he creates a noticeable forehead gap above his goggles) is quickly climbing to the top of everyone's to-do list since taking part requires no registration, no skill and, most importantly, no style. ☹