

## Getting the Goods: Early Season Backcountry Ski Adventures in Southwest Maine

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In these days of uncertain times, and highly erratic weather, getting the goods when it comes to Backcountry skiing in the Northeast has become more elusive. Just like Crosscountry skiing, it is dependent on what Mother Nature dishes out. Before the rains on Christmas Day, the Northeast was set up for excellent BC ski conditions, some places with 18"-24" base. If you did your homework well and took advantage of this, you too, experienced some of the best early BC skiing. For now that stoke must keep us going until the next significant dump. This story is about this early December 2020 BC skiing.

While the main knowledge and understanding of Backcountry ski locations in the Northeast is concentrated on historically known sites such as those covered in Dave Goodman's book "Best Backcountry Skiing in the Northeast," recent efforts have opened up new areas-runs, and abandoned ski areas by local groups to expand the BC opportunities and to disperse access pressure. Still little is known of other potential areas-runs that may be found in your backyard, and involve little driving, and don't contribute to overcrowding. With enough snowpack these can include golf courses, gravel and winter-gated roads, access roads to fire towers, old-faint logging roads, forest service roads, fire roads, old bridal paths, logged forests, even farmer's fields and pastures, really any place wide enough to allow turns and have sufficient grades for skiing (see for example what urban skiers find for inspiration). What they lack in distance and length, is made up in challenge-difficulty of negotiating natural terrain and features, mastering skiing many different snow conditions that are getting harder to experience at the resorts unless you live out West. A plus is the more relaxed-intimate experience spent in these places. I have several friends who have skied logged areas and thinned forests for years, maybe decades, that have inspired me to explore and find my own "places" and runs.

In the days of Covid-19 skiing off the radar is all the more important. With, resort closings, health and safety concerns faced at skiing resorts, interest in BC skiing has grown rapidly. People want to get outdoors, they want to get exercise and fresh air, but in order to do that safely judgement should be used to not contribute to overcrowding. This strains and impacts resources and the environment greatly, adversely, reduces the recreational experience, and can keep Covid-19 transmission rates high.

In addition, climate change in recent times has made the winter season more uncertain, BC skiing is dependent on natural conditions and warming temperatures and lack of snowpack creates timing challenges and driving farther distances to find snow. So when you have decent snowpack in your backyard, explore your list of places that just may go!

### Dispatch:

December 29, 2020. Home: North Conway, NH & Scarborough, ME. Sunny, 27°F North Conway, 32° Scarborough, Bare Ground in both places. Top of Mt. Washington: -4°, Wind 80mph WNW, Gust 87mph, and building Tues-Wed, Wind Chill Advisory in effect, Tues-Tues night wind chill -40°to-55°. Ground cover 3" ice & snow w deeper drifts, visibility 50' with fog, snow, snow grains, snow accumulation of 1-3" possible. Great Glen Cross Country Ski Center,

located on backside (NE) of Mt. Washington: Closed for X-skiing (Msg posted: No Skiing until more snow), Trail conditions Frozen Dirt, Base depth 0-2", New snow (last 7days) 2", Season total 23". Back home there was 14-18" snowpack in Scarborough, 8-10" in North Conway (past winter storms tracked along coast). An area of ME I drive through had 8-10" of heavy wet snow (wet concrete) from 1<sup>st</sup> winter storm (12/4-5) (started as rain everywhere at 38-40°, changed over to snow with temps falling to 32°, then to teens next few days), and 14-18"+ dry powder (temps 14°-18°) from 2<sup>nd</sup> winter storm (12/17). And then on Christmas Day the Northeast woke up to a building rain storm with temps in ME and NH 45°-55°. Aftermath: Great Glen Trail Conditions posted on its website (above) said it all...we lost all the base cover in Scarborough and No. Conway, and went to bare ground. Back to Square One for Backcountry ski pursuits. Climate change IS Real! End of December the bare ground should be frozen solid in the Northeast. And we have seen more rain in the past winters; during the 2019-20 season Cannon Mt., NH, closed three times due to rain.

3 Days Backcountry Skiing: Dec 17, 18, 23.

Dec 17-Thursday, Backyard-Scarborough, ME; 14"+ Dry Powder, 14°, Powder skiing, 15-20 runs.

Dec 18-Friday, Logged Area SoWest ME; 8-10" firm snow + 12" Dry Powder (14-24" snowpack in places), 20-24°, Powder-Wind firm skiing, 7runs.

Dec 23-Wednesday, Logged Area SoWest ME; 40° at start falling to 32°; snowpack settled with layer of 8-10" soft moist snow on a firmer base layer, much like new Spring snow, 15-18runs.

We was robbed! Again. First, because of the Covid stay-at-home orders that coincided with last Spring Ski Season, and then because of the Christmas Day Rain Storm. The stay-at-home orders I reluctantly followed were lifted May 15 –May 30, but by then there was no Spring skiing, zip, nada, nothing to ski on. Then after two early snowstorms in December that left from 10" to 20" on the ground (Dec 7, Dec 17), the winter storm on Christmas Day was the most cruel, it washed away all the snowpack, and left us with grass lawns on coastal Maine, and frozen dirt trail conditions at Great Glen Trails Crosscountry Center (I have used trail-snow conditions at Crosscountry Centers as indicators of BC ski conditions for several years).

Earlier, two years ago, I walked by a newly logged area, on my way to a BC run found 4-years ago. I had walked by this area (then forested, now logged out) not quite a hundred times, but many, not really knowing much about its terrain features. Now, actively looking for new BC ski runs, this logged area was basically clearcut (an area of 5-10acres), but with trees cut down to groundlevel (different from the usual practice where logged areas have 1' to 2' stumps remaining that you have to avoid to ski such areas). I noted it could have potential as I walked by on my way to a logged run I had found 4 years earlier-Moose Mt. Chute. After all the summer gardening work was wrapped up, and before gun season started for Deer Hunting, it was time to explore this new area during the Fall. The terrain was gradual and undulating with small hills or rises 10-20 feet in height...not much for downhill BC skiing but good enough for cross-country

BC skiing. Further in I noticed this areas gem, a small hill maybe 200' high with smooth ground-slopes on almost 270° of it, and very few debris piles. This hill had more than good potential for skiing, it might go with minimal snowpack. After time spent picking up stray branches along the slopes to improve the skiing I left, it then hit me later about what a good find it was. Deepdown I hoped I was the only one who knew about this, and dreamed more about skiing it.

Moose Mt. Chute was discovered several years ago on a casual hike down a primitive dirt road that is used as a snowmobile trail in the winter. It surprised me that it even existed, a run that long with 1/3 of it being steep, since these mountains are not that steep, but there it was. It was early April, and it still held snow due to its NE exposure and forest cover. Two days later I was back. The steep part of this chute was fairly steep (as steep as a gully I had skied in the Gulf of Slides, NH a few days earlier), and technical due to objective hazards exposed (tree stumps and large rocks) that you had to avoid--after a few times skiing it there was only 1 line down this steep part where each turn had to be in the same place to make a continuous run. What a find! This chute required a deep snowpack to ski, 3' minimum and somewhat consolidated snow (settled snow due to freeze-thaw cycle and winds). It may only be skiable in Spring.

Fastforward to the two early December 2020 snow storms (12/4-5, 12/17). There was enough of the right kind of snowbase to ski the new logged area. And this is where the story begins.

I woke up Friday, Dec 18 tired from the previous day of snow shoveling 3hrs and skiing the backyard hill (20' height, enough for a half-dozen powder turns per run) for 2hrs in blowing snow 14°, but happy since it was my 1<sup>st</sup> time skiing this season and 1<sup>st</sup> time skiing a new pair of BC skis (Voile V6BC-these are a downhill BC ski with a fishscale pattern in mid-section to allow climbing w/o skins on gentle slopes). After 3hrs of further snow clearing that morning, I packed up and headed off to test the new logged area.

Access required a short approach, about 5minutes. The ski-in (not skin in, since I don't have to use skins with the V6BC skis) helped determine what type of terrain would be skiable. The new 12-14" of powder snow, was really light and dry (20-24° temps kept the snow powdery from start to finish). Even with 104mm of ski underfoot I was sinking in about 8-10", so a slope with an intermediate to advanced level gradient would be necessary for enjoyable skiing. Thinking this, it then hit me, this small hill would Go...it was skiable. Wow! To think I would have top-to-bottom powder skiing without anyone else was also almost too good to be true! In this winter of Covid-19 protocols it was almost unthinkable and somewhat unreal. To not have to mask up and take precautions was a stepback to healthy times, normal times, pre-Covid times. It felt like I had gone through a time-warp so good this feeling was. Because of the late start there wasn't much time to ski, maybe 1.5hrs, so I moved fast. The fishscale on the Voile worked out great, letting me ski-up, climb-up, the largest hill, using a corkscrew pattern. Once the track was packed down going up was fairly fast...just had to slow things down to not overheat too much. Once on top, this hill was skiable in 270°. Also, on the way up the West Face seemed to be best today, and it was in full sun. The West Face was the steepest and the snow was somewhat wind firmed, so a little stiffer than dry powder but extremely forgiving. Yes it would have been better if the storm winds had left the full 12" on the slope. You could read the snow to tell where there were objective hazards under the snow surface like large rocks, boulders, debris piles, that required skiing around, in between, or over those features.

The skiing was so much fun! Skiing fresh powder on a fairly uniform slope, turning where the features indicated, could be repeated over and over. Not a place to charge, just keep linking controlled turns...too aggressive and the risk was breaking deeper into the snowpack, hitting an objective hazard and losing balance, etc. (read Louis Arevalo's account of the need to go slower in these kinds of BC areas in *Slow Down, Backcountry* 136:20-21). With no time wasted in using skins, I could repeat laps quickly. As I skied back to the car, being Friday, I was hoping the area would not be discovered and covered in snowmobile tracks over the weekend. I wanted another ski on it in untracked conditions. And that happened on Wednesday.

Wednesday, December 23, with temps mid-40's and full sun brought more Spring like conditions. The snowpack in Maine (Scarborough) had definitely settled during the warmup and full sun, and it was soft, good snowman making. Wasn't sure what that would mean for the snow where I was heading to, because the microclimate there is always colder than anywhere else. When I pulled in, temps were in the low-40's with sun, but high wispy clouds were coming over the sky. Once I skied in to the logged area, I could see no one else had been there. But, the snow had changed, it was still soft, but not like the powder 5 days earlier, more like new Spring snow. This made the ski-climb easier and faster as I followed the same tracks from before. Being a small hill, the fishscale pattern on the Voile V6BC worked brilliantly.

The only problem being it was almost hot during the ski-up. Further insight about the snowpack was: it had consolidated-settled and was more dense top to bottom (probably close to "moist snow" that contains less than 3% water content and distinguished by its ability to form snowballs with little pressure applied). The West Face with sun on it over the past few days maybe was skiable but there were more objective hazards poking through the snow (it had lost critical depth over a few days). The North Face and NW Face looked best. With the sun overhead, the North Face had the least consolidation, and the greatest depth (the winds from the South in the previous storm had deposited the snow here) maybe 18-20". The first few runs allowed me to gauge how soft the snow was, how much I was sinking in, and how aggressive I could go. The more dense snowpack allowed me to stay on top more than on the 1<sup>st</sup> day, and gently skim and slice along the surface on this buttery soft snow and ski over almost all the features and not bottom out. My only visitor was a solitary Pileated Woodpecker that flew by overhead singing loudly as it enjoyed its act of flying.

Later that afternoon with winds picking up from the North, a setting sun, and falling temps (though still above 32°) the snow transformed again...on each successive run the snow was firming-crusting up and the North Face was skiing faster, and supported more aggressive skiing. A few more runs and it was time to go. As I skied back to the car darkness was setting in. The night would go into the lower 20's, and become more like Spring conditions, where you have to wait for the snow to unfreeze to ski it. And then the Xmas Day Storm brought disaster taking away all of this snowpack, like a sick dream.

So...the Take Away?

Living in the Northeast with climate change having more noticeable effects, time your BC skiing when the snow is here, when it is good. It could be gone several days later. So:

Hone your skills! Know your equipment. Know your skill. Work on improving your skill. Learn to handle many types of snow conditions in the Backcountry. Learn how to read the terrain, the snowpack surface to avoid any hidden-objective hazards and keep safe.

Know what's going on with: Weather; Snowfall (quality and depth); Snowpack; Temperature patterns; Parking access and approach. And be aware of your turn around time.

What else can we do? Practice energy and resource conservation (try to lower your heating and utility bills each year), limit your driving and travel (essential supplies, specific outdoor outings), plant more trees and shrubs, cut lawns once a month at highest settings, water at cooler parts of day, and vote-vote for those who believe in climate change and want to do something about it. I'm getting sick and tired about seeing warmer temps and rain during winter, and you should too.

So keep doing your homework scouting out local spots for BC skiing, who knows maybe I may see you at one of these.