

It's All About Timing

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Watching the winter 2018/19 storm cycles taught me one thing--it's all about timing

The Northeast had a reasonable base from early, surprise snow storms in November-December 2018, but the snow storm trend in January was up and down--storms began with snow and cold temps in the beginning but temps gradually warmed midway through the storm and would end with rain. So I was ready to chase a storm that could result in a powder gamble. Forecasts are just that, until you go or follow snow reports following storms you never know the outcome.

During a particular week in February there was a period of consistent temps (daytime-teens) with snow events resulting in several light inches overnight over a two to three day period, with a larger storm forecasted after the weekend--this set the stage for a possible big snow event in the higher elevations. At what elevation gradient would the snow-rain zone occur? And would it be all snow? Checking and rechecking the weather forecasts for northern New England (weather app on my iphone as well as weather reports from Mt. Washington Observatory, and ski resorts forecasts) all were reporting similar forecasts--steady cold temps, snowfall, and winds up to 75mph in upper valley, gusts 100mph daytime to over 145mph on summits (upper summits of White Mountains). These forecasted conditions meant all safe skiing would be well below treeline, on trails protected from the winds. My plan was to ski the Gulf of Slides backcountry ski trail on the Eastern side of Mt. Washington, NH, since it is more protected and narrower than the Sherburne Ski Trail, built by the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) in mid-1930's.

On Monday morning I loaded the car and headed up, still not knowing exactly what to expect. When I arrived, there were near whiteout conditions starting at about 1800 feet in elevation, heavy blowing snow and 6 to 8 inches had already accumulated in the parking lot at the AMC (Appalachian Mountain Club) Visitor Center 'Base Camp' at Pinkham Notch. It looked like my gamble might pay off. (I later learned that the high winds had put wind holds on all summit lifts at Wildcat and Cannon Mt. ski areas, and that all the snow was being blown off wide, resort ski trails and piling up on the edges.)

Getting all the gear ready in the steady blizzard-like conditions proved challenging--snow was going everywhere when I opened up the car...in the packs, duffel bags, causing a later start than I wanted. But I decided having all the right gear was more essential than rushing out from previous experience. My start time was around 11-11:30am in near whiteout conditions from the parking lot. Once into the woods the skinup was well protected with some occasional wind coming through the forest, although the wind had covered up the skinup route (different than the ski trail, but both can be used for this) and your memory is the only device to use to skinup at this point. With the snow piling up fast, my pole sinking in over 20 inches, skinning in these conditions is very slow, route finding is challenging, and the deep snow underfoot means you are always in the lead breaking trail. Also being alone, there is an added dimension of risk that you

must be comfortable with. Ice climbing has taught me that. Add in overcast skies during a full-on storm so night time seems to come faster--and I tend to err on safety, hence a 3PM turnaround time to make sure you're down by nightfall. To get very familiar with any ski trail you must ski that trail in all conditions to know what to experience, what conditions to encounter, how long the ski down will take, etc. You then have a better sense of timing on turnaround, but occasional visitors should err on safety's side. (As an aside, the next time I experienced this snow event-occurrence, 1-1.5 weeks later, a weekend visitor-climber asked the front desk staff Sat am where was it safe to go climbing above treeline? The storm had rushed out maybe 10-12hrs earlier, and it was a super windy and sunny day. But really where to go above treeline? I exchanged glances with the front desk staff. NO-WHERE! All the higher elevation had snow that was wind-loaded in huge slabs and cornices, etc. The safest place to be?? Below treeline away from any runout zone. Always read the USFS Avalanche Bulletin.)

I set my turnaround time to 3PM, and even though I didn't get as far as I wanted I stuck to the plan. I knew it would be no good to be stranded in a storm when winds were to ramp up overnight with single digit temps. I had not seen anyone on the trail, nor skin or ski tracks. By now the snow depth was 10 to 12 inches with deeper drifts. Would the 101mm underfoot be enough ski for this snow?

The way down--OMG what incredibly light soft snow. The way down on the trail was floating on white softness. It was so much fun. The skis floated effortlessly, darting here and there, left to right wherever it looked good--all first tracks. The flats were deep and slow with lots of poling...but made the drops more fun. In one place I hit a pocket up past my knees, soo-much-fun, did I already say that? I had such a big smile on!

Back at the AMC Base Camp everything was worth it, the gamble, my instincts. Later that day when I talked to my friend Rick, he was totally surprised--the temps were in the mid-30's with heavy wet snow most everywhere and all resorts had wind holds on their summit lifts, while I had white softness. So elevation did matter. In fact, this story repeated itself two weeks later with, you guessed it--blower snow, 8 to 10 plus inches and hardly anyone out. And, guess who had a big smile on in the backcountry?

A shorter version of this appeared in *Backcountry, The Untracked Experience*. The Boundless Issue 133:36.

Douglas plans his ski trips from his base in North Conway, NH or Coastal Maine exclusively to the mountains of New Hampshire wherever the snow is best, eastern or western White Mountains, or smaller foothills south of the Whites, with occasional trips out west. Introduced to the Sherburne Trail by his dad in 1968-69, he has returned many times as well as to the Gulf of Slides Ski Trail, all lower elevation pursuits well out of avalanche danger. He has been targeting logging roads and newly logged areas in southwest Maine whenever the snow is good, and

resorts get too crowded. That day he skied a G3 Synapse 101 ski with Fritchi Freeride Pro Bindings.

The Point

2018-19 snow season in New Hampshire and southwest Maine had experienced a snow cycle of wet snow; cold temps in the beginning of storm cycle, then warming at the middle to end of storm cycle, so it would start as snow and then turn to rain. Although this built up the base light fluffy snow was hard to come by. Decided to explore a backcountry ski trail located in higher elevations away from avalanche danger to find dry-light powder “western powder conditions”. During a particular week in February there was a period of consistent temperatures (teens) with snow events resulting in several light inches overnight, with a larger storm that occurred after the weekend; this set the stage for a possible big snow event in the higher elevations. Checking and rechecking the weather app (apple iphone weather app) and Mt. Washington Weather Observatory forecast and alpine ski snow reports all were reporting similar forecasts; steady cold temps, snowfall, and winds up to 75mph in upper valley, gusts 100mph daytime to over 145mph on summits (upper summits of White Mountains). These forecasted conditions meant all safe skiing would be well below treeline, on trails protected from the winds. My plan was to ski the Gulf of Slides backcountry ski trail, since it is more protected and narrower than the Sherburne Ski Trail on Mt. Washington, NH. My start time was around 11-11:30am in near whiteout conditions in the parking lot of the AMC Base Camp at Pinkham Notch. Once into the woods the skinup was well protected with some occasional wind coming through the forest, although the wind had covered up the skinup route (different than the ski trail, but both could be used for this) and your memory is the only device to use to skinup at this point. The snow was piling up fast and my pole was sinking in over 20” in many places. Skinning in these conditions is very slow, route finding is challenging, the snow is deep 12-14”+, and you are always in the lead breaking trail. Also being alone, there is an added dimension of risk that you must be comfortable with. Ice climbing has taught me that. And with overcast skies in a full-on storm, maybe “blizzard” is apropos, night time seems to come faster, so I tend to err on safety, hence a 3PM turnaround time to make sure you’re down by nightfall. To get very familiar with any ski trail you must ski that trail in all conditions to know what to experience, what conditions to encounter, how long the ski down will take, etc. You then have a better sense of timing on turnaround, but occasional visitors should err on safety’s side. (As an aside, the next time I experienced this snow event-occurrence, 1-1.5weeks later, a weekend visitor-climber asked the front desk staff Sat am where was it safe to go above treeline? The storm had rushed out maybe 10-12hrs earlier, and it was a super windy and sunny day. But really where to go above treeline? I exchanged glances with the front desk staff. NOWHERE. All the higher elevation had snow that was wind-loaded in huge slabs and cornices, etc. The safest place to be?? Below treeline away from any runout zone. Always in mid-winter read the USFS Avalanche Bulletin.)