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NEW HAMPSHIRE



A cautionary trail

A little pain and more pleasure accompany backcountry skiers down Wildcat

By Kari J. Bodnarchuk
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

PINKHAM NOTCH — We launched ourselves off the backside of Wildcat Mountain and descended into the wilderness, leaving the chatter of skiers and the whirl of the high-speed chairlift behind. We soon entered a world of pure backcountry bliss, where falling snow drifted through the trees, adorning the pine branches around us and adding more cushion to the six inches of powder that had fallen overnight.

Several hundred feet and a couple of hairpin turns later, I lay on my belly, skis twisted be-

neath me, arms sunk into the snow past my elbows, snow powdering my face and dripping from my earlobes.

"I'm OK," I called up to my husband, Howard.

No answer.

I looked back up the trail in time to see him careen around a sharp turn, lose his balance, and skid across the fresh powder like a baseball player sliding into home. As I wiped snow out of my ears and regained my vertical composure, it occurred to me that perhaps we had made a mistake in tackling the Wildcat Valley Trail.

This steep and twisting and ungroomed trail

leads cross-country and telemark skiers from the summit of Wildcat Mountain to Jackson Village. It drops 3,245 feet in about 11 miles, as it passes through dense pine forest and stands of birch, crosses hidden brooks, and offers peekaboo views of the White Mountains in this swath of the national forest.

"It should be considered as serious as hiking up Mount Washington," Thomas Prindle, a manager at Wildcat Ski Area, said of the route. "You have to make sure that you know what you're doing and that you're prepared."

I had always wanted to do this trip, and

The trail includes several steep ledges that can be navigated on skis or, if the snow is not too deep, on foot. The author's husband, Howard Wright, chose to hike down this slope after watching his wife tumble down.

KARI BODNARCHUK
FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

WILDCAT, Page M11

Savoring the pines, turns, drops, views, birds

► **WILDCAT**
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thanks to an early snowfall this year, we had a chance to ski the trail over our holiday vacation. After four days of power-eating with family, we welcomed the idea of burning excess calories on this challenging, backcountry route.

The trail begins near the summit of Wildcat, at a spot bisected by the Appalachian Trail. To get there, we bought one-way lift tickets at Wildcat Ski Area in Pinkham Notch and took the chairlift to the top. A sign next to the ticket window didn't go without notice: "There are no services upon leaving the summit. The trail is not swept by ski patrol." In fact, once we left the ski area, we didn't see another person all day.

It was 11 a.m. by the time we descended into the forest, and our main concern was outrunning a snowstorm that was due to hit mid-afternoon. To the east, the blackened sky made it look like midnight on the horizon.

We followed the trail as it wound around tight bends, dipped into little gullies, and switchbacked down the mountain. Blue blazes — blue triangular markers on the trees — guided our way, although it felt impossible to get lost with the trees flanking the trail.

It took us a while to get our coordination and balance back, since it was our first time on skis in a year. We snowplowed when the narrow trail left little room for turning and sidestepped down steep embankments. We also spent a lot of time brushing snow off our faces. But soon we were swooshing down steep pitches and maneuvering around the C-shaped turns.

The Jackson Ski Touring Foundation, a nonprofit organization that maintains the town's cross-country ski trails, built the Wildcat trail in 1972. Paid workers and volunteers spend about two weeks

each fall clearing fields of brush and removing blown-down trees from the trail, but winter storms can create new obstacles. Fresh blow-downs occasionally blocked our route, forcing us to duck under or skirt around them.

After descending about 750 vertical feet, we approached a steep, daunting ledge. Not wanting to psyche myself out, I dug my poles into the snow, pushed forward, and plunged over the edge. My skis disappeared under the snow and I picked up more and more speed until I performed a head-over-skis topple about 40 feet down the trail.

Howard watched my less-than-graceful descent and decided to take a different approach. His 190-millimeter skis were too long for him to sidestep down this embankment, so he popped out of his bindings, grabbed a ski in each hand, and walked down, "post-holing" (or sinking) up past his knees with each step. We still had a long way to go and getting hurt in the backcountry would have meant a long, chilly wait for help.

As the trail leveled off, we spotted a mailbox on a tree to our right with a red cross on it. This small first-aid cache contained several rolls of toilet paper, bandages, and an emergency space blanket that helps a person retain up to 80 percent of body heat.

In case of a serious backcountry emergency, according to Thom Perkins, owner of the Jackson Ski Touring Center, "there's a sophisticated rescue sled at the summit of Wildcat, and we have one down here in Jackson."

We thought about this a little later, when one of Howard's ski poles broke. He had lost his bal-



KARI BODNARCHUK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

After a several-mile-steep descent, the trail levels off and follows an old access road as it cuts through a 500-acre conservation area.

ance on a steep descent and landed on the pole, causing it to snap in the middle. It wasn't an emergency, but it reminded us that we were far from civilization.

We used sticks and duct tape to secure the pole, but it was a brief fix and only held for a few turns. We swapped poles, since I rarely use mine, and continued on, with Howard hunched over and stabbing at the ground with poles that were at least a foot too short for him and me carrying one giant pole that I used to propel myself forward like a gondolier.

But at least the storm clouds had disappeared. The sun cast beams of light through the trees, creating alternating streaks of sunlight and shade on the trail.

We soon left the forest behind and entered the birch glades, an open area where the trees were spaced far apart and the rolling landscape resembled a multi-step waterslide. We played here for a while, making turns through the fresh, untracked snow and then skied down to Hall's Ledge, a short detour from the main trail and one of the highlights of the route. Here, skiers are treated to sweeping views of the Presidential

Range, with Mount Washington to the north, and Spruce Mountain, Eagle Mountain, and the Wildcat Valley to the south.

We had completed the most difficult section and the remainder of the route to Carter Notch Road took us down easy and intermediate terrain. The wide trail followed an old access road as it cut through Prospect Farm, a 500-acre conservation area that was donated to the town of Jackson by a local family in the 1950s.

After a moderately steep but straight descent that evened out at the bottom, we passed several trail junctions, a kiosk with a simplistic map of the area and, just beyond that, Carter Notch Road.

Since several homeowners in the area forbid people from crossing their land, skiers must walk up to a mile down this paved road. With skis in hand, we clicked down the quiet, dead-end street, passing beautiful farmsteads and several of Jackson's oldest homes. We had descended 2,200 feet from the summit of Wildcat, and daylight was quickly disappearing.

"It usually takes people about three to four hours to ski the trail," depending on the conditions, Per-

If you go . . .

Jackson Ski Touring Center
153 Main St., Jackson, N.H.
603-383-9355,
800-927-6697
jacksonxc.org
The center is the base lodge that houses the Jackson Ski Touring Foundation and a sports shop.

Tickets
Trail pass \$7 per person from the touring center; lift ticket \$6 per person one-way at Wildcat Ski Area.

Transportation
To complete the Wildcat Valley Trail, you either need two cars or you have to get a lift to the ski area. The owners of the Village House B&B took us to the start of the trail and picked us up at the end.

Rentals
The center has a limited selection of backcountry skis (\$16-\$24 a day). Eastern Mountain Sports (2760 Main St., North Conway, 603-356-5433) rents telemark (\$35 a day) and backcountry touring skis (\$25).

Safety
Bring water, snacks, extra clothes, Band-Aids, blister products, duct tape, matches, an emergency blanket, and a headlamp with spare batteries.

Rescue
Cellphones may or may not work. The closest telephone is at Mountainside Farm Bed & Breakfast at the end of Carter Notch Road. The Jackson Ski Touring Foundation has a rescue service (603-383-9355) or contact the county sheriff after hours (800-552-8960).

kins had said. "The record from the summit to Carter Notch Road is 16 minutes, but that's not the way to enjoy the trail. The Wildcat Valley Trail shouldn't be gulped down like a glass of water. It should be savored like a fine glass of wine."

We had definitely savored the trail, stopping to bird-watch and enjoying the views along the way. It had taken us 3½ hours to complete two-thirds of the route. By the time we found the spot to rejoin the trail, there were just 45 minutes until it was pitch black.

We had headlamps to guide our way, and the rest of the route promised to be much easier, with a short climb followed by gentle to moderately sloped terrain that would take us across a golf course, past a grand old inn, and back into Jackson Village.

"Are you sore?" I asked Howard

as we stood at the trailhead. "A little," he said. "Where does it hurt?" I asked. "It might be easier to list 'where not,' " he said, followed by a brief silence. "OK, that's the list."

We considered jumping back on the trail, but after nearly five hours of skiing, we were tired, hungry and achy, and ready to call it quits.

Besides, we had relatives to visit that night, people known for their creative cooking skills and taste for fine wine. We couldn't pass up another opportunity to enjoy more holiday calories, so we stuck our skis into a snow bank, sat down, and waited for the owners of our guesthouse to come scoop us up.

Kari J. Bodnarchuk, a travel writer and photographer, can be reached at travelwriter@karib.us.

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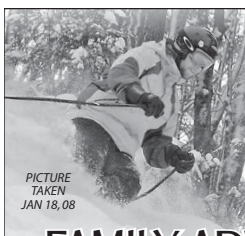
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