

Put on the Boards

Enjoy New Hampshire
from Cross Country Skis

BY *Laura Jean Whitcomb*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY *Jim Block*





Bottom left: Clayton Morelock and Sally Shoop take a run on the Pine Hill Ski trails in New London.

Bottom right: Andrew Supplee enjoys blueberry pancakes at Robb's Hut.

There are two types of people: those that like to stay indoors and those who like to play in the snow.

Cross country skiing is one of the benefits of living in the Granite State. If there's not a groomed trail nearby, you can always take a few spins in a neighboring field. You can ski before work; sometimes you can even ski to work. According to Ski New Hampshire, 144,000 people visited a ski area to cross country ski in 2008-09, and many more skied in their yards, at local parks, and on rail trails.

"New Hampshire is one of the most beautiful places in the country so cross country skiing is a great way to get outside, especially during the long winter," says Karl Stone, marketing director for Ski New Hampshire.

Exercise and eat

After a few loops on the trail system, the skiers are ready for a snack. Every February, members of the Pine Hill Ski Club in New London host a blueberry pancake brunch. Visitors, landowners and club members park their cars on Mountain Road, and select one of two beginner trails that intersect at Grand Junction, then follow an intermediate trail over Cascade Brook to Robb's Hut, a rustic cabin in the woods that provides a place to rest and warm up by a vintage wood stove. Ken Kessler of Wilmot Flat is already there cooking pancakes on a gas stove for skiers, who chat while they wait.

"People enjoy getting out. The weather is starting to warm up, and they can sit out on the deck and have some pancakes," says John Schlosser, president of the organization. "It's a picturesque location, and a fun place to gather."

"The blueberry pancakes are just huge," says Bruce Crawford of New London. "It's great to ski out, arrive at the hut when you're a little tired, chow down and chat. The trouble is getting home after all those pancakes!"

Pine Hill Ski Club, established in 2005, maintains 13 miles of cross country trails in New London, Wilmot and

North Sutton. There's parking, a portapotty, a first aid/information shelter, and Robb's Hut open on Saturdays, but "it's not a full blown resort," says Schlosser. "We are giving people groomed and skiable trails. Because skiers have used these trails since 1976, you don't need much snow to get going early in the ski season."

The club hosts four or five events every year, including the pancake breakfast. There's something about cross country skiing and food, because events that include both activities abound in the Kearsarge area. The Eastman Cross Country Center in Grantham hosts Nordic Nibbles, an annual event that encourages families to cross country ski or snowshoe on the green (easy) trails and stop at six stations offering food from participating restaurants. "Food and anything makes a popular event," says Leslie Moses, Eastman's recreation director. "We think, oh, yeah, exercise — now I can eat something yummy."

Nordic Nibbles is part of the Progressive Ski Snowshoe Dinner Series held in four Upper Valley towns. Chad Denning, director of New London's Recreation Department, started the series in Hanover five years ago and it quickly grew to 700 people. "It got too big. Seven hundred people would form two continuous lines to the food stations. Now we cap it at 350 people," he says.

Denning does the same with New London's "Dinner with Jack Frost" event in the center of town. About 350 people (more if you count Colby-Sawyer students, who attend for free) don snowshoes, place their children on sleds, or walk the 1½ kilometer course that starts in the center of town at the ice skating rink. They continue along Main Street, which is closed and covered with snow, to visit the variety of food vendors offering warm treats to eat. "What a great way to get outside in the winter," says Denning. "Some people don't even feel like they are exercising. They talk with friends, enjoy healthy food in small

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portions, and exercise at the same time.”

Follow the trail

Norsk didn't leave the Kearsarge area; it moved from the Lake Sunapee Country Club in New London to Dexter's Inn in Sunapee. Norsk designed a new set of trails over the inn's dormant trail system, and today there are 20 kilometers of groomed trails for cross country skiing and 10 additional kilometers of ungroomed backcountry trails for back country skiing and snowshoeing. John Augustine, owner of Dexter's Inn, describes it as "classic old fashioned skiing. You can meander through woods and fields. The trails are not on a golf course or lake, so there are no super highways to ski. Some are flat, some are hilly."

Although you feel like you're out in the wild, don't be fooled. Norsk pays quite a bit of attention to the Dexter's Inn Trails; they are groomed to provide a variety of terrain for novices, intermediates and advanced skiers. Grooming is one of the benefits of cross country skiing at a club, inn or center. Employees or volunteers brave the early morning weather after a good-sized snow to pack the powder into a smooth surface for

skiers.

"There's a little secret to grooming: catch it at the right temperature," says Crawford, one of the four volunteer groomers at Pine Hill Ski Club.

After a heavy overnight snow, Crawford is out on Mountain Road before the snow plows. After hiking in with a five-gallon tank of gas and digging out the machines, Crawford and another volunteer get the trails ready for the day, packing snow with one snowmobile and tracking with the second to produce a better system sooner. No matter how early they start, "we usually see ski tracks heading off into the deep powder in front of us. Sometimes we run into them, and they are happy to let us go by," Crawford says. "We'll come back from packing and there are usually two or three people ready to ski. We'll retrack trails later in the day, so there is always something that has been groomed recently."

Pine Hill is excited about the club's new acquisition: a Ginzugroomer from Yellowstone Track Systems. "A safe, prepared trail is what folks are looking for," says Schlosser. "Our grooming crew is a critical component. We have four guys with Nordic background who

split up the grooming. You don't see what you are paying for — all the work done behind the scenes."

Eastman Recreation has three winter maintenance workers who do a variety of jobs around the housing community. Grooming the cross country trails is one of those tasks in the winter. There are snowmobiles with plows on the front to move snow to different areas, snowmobiles with pull behind groomers, and a Pisten Bully 100 Nordic machine to groom and set tracks in varying depths depending on the snow fall. "We get great comments on the grooming that we do," says Moses.

Bushwhack your own trail

Some folks prefer nongroomed trails — fresh snow with no tracks — and the fact that these trails are usually free. You can ski where someone has snowshoed, you can ski on a rail trail that has been used by a local snowmobile group, or you can make your own trail in your backyard. Skiing on nongroomed trails "is a lot of work and it is slower skiing," says Crawford. "When you pack a trail, you are taking the air out of the snow. It's a firmer surface, and you can glide along and cover 10 to 15 kilometers in an hour because it

is smoother. If you're not fighting knee deep snow, the skiing is so much more enjoyable. You can look around; you don't have to spend time looking down at the terrain."

Charles Martin, a board member of the Pine Hill Ski Club and a board member of the Friends of the Northern Rail Trail, doesn't believe that groomed and nongroomed trails compete. "The rail trail is a different kind of experience than Pine Hill. Although the snowmobilers pack it down nicely, it's not the best prepared track for skiing." He also notes that the rail trail is completely flat, whereas

PLACES TO CROSS COUNTRY SKI

	Dexter's Inn Trails by Norsk Sunapee www.dextersnh.com	Eastman Cross Country Grantham www.eastmannh.org/ski	Pine Hill Ski Club New London www.pinehillskiclub.com	The Fells Newbury www.thefells.org	Northern Rail Trail Andover www.northernrailtrail.org	New London Recreation Trails New London www.nl-nh.com
Trails Total	30 km	36 km	27 km	2 miles	34.5 miles	5 miles
Groomed	20	30	27	0	10.5	5
Tracked	20	20	15	0	0	0
Skate groomed	0	16	4	0	0	0
BackCountry	10	6	4	2	0	0
Snowshoe	30	36	4	2	10.5	5
Rentals	yes	yes	Village Sports	no	no	Village Sports
Lessons	yes	yes	no	no	no	no
Sledding	yes	yes	no	no	no	no
Ice Skating	no	yes	no	no	no	New London Town Common
Place to get warm	Dexter's Inn	Touring Center & John's Glenn Hut	Robb's Hut	no	no	warming hut
Cost Adult	\$10	\$12	\$10	Donation Suggested	Free	Free
Junior	\$10	\$8	\$5			
Kids	6 & under, free	5 & under, free	12 & under, free			

Pine Hill has ups and downs. “It’s more interesting. You get a work out going up, then a nice downhill slide.”

Not all skiers want to bushwhack — make their own trails — or have an “adventure” as they ski over tree roots and down rocks. They just want to get outside and “experience the motion, that fluid diagonal stride motion,” says Martin, a New London resident. “I’ll go out for 45 minutes in the afternoon and clear my head. When you are on a really well prepared track, it’s effortless.”

More places to go

The Sunapee-Ragged-Kearsarge Greenway Coalition knows that hiking trails also make good cross country trails. In the early spring, you can snowshoe old trails at the King Hill Reservation in Sutton with Art Robbins, or put on the boards with Andy Hager for a cross country ski trip from Twin Lake Village in New London to Morgan Pond in Springfield. “SKRG has 75 miles of trails,” says Hager, a New London resident. “Not all of it is suitable for cross country skiing in the winter, but there are no restrictions and it’s free.”

The Fells is another popular site for cross country skiing and snowshoeing. “Cross country skiers who enjoy breaking their own trails through woodlands and meadows can ski at The Fells seven days a week from dawn to dusk,” says Mary Kronenwetter, education director. As part of the Fells’ Trail-Walk Series, a guided cross country skiing tour is held in February. Participants ski around the main house, with a nice view of Mount Sunapee, then follow guides Bruce and Laura Crawford through the gardens and woodland trails. The trails are un-groomed, but there are existing tracks from people who have already skied on the grounds.

“Without groomed tracks, you aren’t locked into a route. You can explore any part of the woods here,” says Kronenwetter. “It’s a wonderful opportunity to track winter wildlife.”

Many towns offer recreation trails. They may be primarily used by snow-mobilers, like the Grantham Recreation Trails groomed by the Blue Mountain

Snowdusters Snowmobile and Cross Country Ski Club, or primarily used by schools, like the New London Recreation Winter Trails. Either way, “it’s a free activity,” says Denning, who grooms the New London trails with a snowmobile and a pull behind. “It’s a lifelong learning sport and a flat course lends itself to beginners. You can start right from the Kearsarge Area Council on Aging, or from the old Kearsarge Middle School. I see fresh tracks every morning I groom.”

New this year at Whaleback in Enfield is a designated uphill course for cross country skiers or snowshoers. “A ¾-mile trail, 700 vertical feet, follows along the edge of the mountain. You’ll start on a trail called Scrimshaw, then Splash, and continue on several different trails all marked with signage. You’d be surprised at how steep some of the trails are,” says John Drinane, director of marketing.

The trails are un-groomed and somewhat “free form,” but that’s part of the appeal of this sport which is growing in popularity out West. Whaleback will be holding races this season for serious competitors who don’t mind taking a full lap around the mountain — snowshoeing up and running down or skiing up and skiing



Skiers leave Robb’s Hut for the Pine Hill Ski Club trails.

down. “We promote any way you can be outside in the winter and stay healthy and active,” says Drinane.

Extra, extra

Free is always nice, but you might want to consider other factors when planning a cross country ski excursion. Do you have your own equipment? That might leave out options like The Fells or the Northern Rail Trail. Will you be out of commission if you fall? You might want to ski on a groomed trail — or a flat trail that has been packed by snow-mobilers — and skip the backcountry options. Does everyone in your party want to ski, or do they have different interests? A center like Eastman Cross Country or Dexter’s Inn Trails by Norsk will provide some alternatives, such as sledding, ice skating and dining.

“What differentiates Dexter’s Inn Trails by Norsk is the combination of the inn and the skiing,” says Augustine. “Families can have a fun, recreational day. You can ski right out the back door

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PUT ON THE BOARDS *continued from page 45* of the inn and ski for hours. You can come back and sit by the fire, have lunch on the weekend, then go back out in the afternoon. The inn is conducive to a group of friends looking for more than exercise, or a family where one spouse wants to ski and the other wants to sit and read.”

The Eastman Cross Country Center has similar offerings, including a restaurant, skating pond and sledding hill. “You can get whatever you are looking for,” says Moses. “You can stay close to the lodge with trails on the golf course, or ski further out for a feeling of being out in the woods. You can work out for 45 minutes, or pack a lunch and ski all day.”

Eastman sees up to 6,000 skier visits a season, depending on how much of the white stuff falls. There are some challenging trails, so the center offers private or group lessons on weekends, and weekly clinics for season pass holders. You won't be able to sign up for lessons at Pine Hill Ski Club, but you probably won't see any crowding on the club's nine trails.

“We have about 60 members, and people with day passes who roll in when they feel like it. You might see some skiing with kids, but most people are likely to ski for an hour then head home,” says Schlosser. “There's no lodge or facility so there's not a lot of lounging or all day affairs. People are in and out. It's kind of organic.”

“It's our winter,” says Crawford. “We ski every day — sometimes twice if it's nice.” **K**

Laura Jean Whitcomb is the editor of Kearsarge Magazine and Upper Valley Life.

Jim Block enjoys photographing people and wildlife in natural settings. And he loves to share his photo knowledge with others. Jim teaches small group digital photography courses to enthusiastic adults in his home studio in Etna. He spends part of the year living on Great Island in Lake Sunapee and can be contacted at jab@valley.net



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