

Into the Backcountry ...and Back

Skiing in the woods beyond the boundary lines goes hand in hand with personal responsibility.

Story and photos by Alessandra Bianchi

More than anything, Jigger's whistling unnerved me the most. My husband, you see, is not a whistler. Tightly wound, serious, and competent with his GPS slung around his neck, Jigger on skis behaves pretty much how you would expect an engineer born and raised in a Vermont ski area to be: in his element. Normally the grimmest, grayest days or the bluest, hardest ice are no match for his sheer exuberance and natural ease on anything remotely snowy with a pitch.

With ridiculous grace, in the most inhospitable terrain, Jigger alpires, teles, cross-countries, shushes, carves, bushwhacks, floats, and—like his Norwegian

hero, Herman “Jackrabbit” Johannsen, who skied to the ripe old age of 108—hops like a bunny mad for snow. (“Never stay on two skis at once. Always jump,” advised the Jackrabbit.)

What Jigger decidedly does *not* do on skis is whistle.

Yet, even above my huffs and panting—at this point, we had been “walking” mostly uphill on skis for more than two hours—and over the intermittent jingling of the Swiss cowbell affixed to his pack, I could hear Jig's halting, timid, yet unmistakable whistle. We knew exactly where we were: on one of the 31 sections of the Catamount Trail, the 300-mile winter-use-only path that crisscrosses private and public land, enabling willing travelers to ski

or snowshoe the entire length of Vermont. That is its charming theory, at any rate.

In practice, even completing a short section of the Catamount, specifically the four-mile stretch from the parking lot of West Hill House B&B in Warren, to the top of the Lincoln Gap, as we were, can make one feel like an extra on the set of *Man vs. Wild* or *Alive*. The trouble wasn't the 1,000 vertical feet we had been doggedly, but happily climbing, thanks to sticky “skins” affixed to the bottom of our skis, that enabled us Superman-like, to walk up the mountain without sliding backward. My Norwegian-descended husband had already brainwashed me years ago about the romance of skinning, with our uphill snowy treks playing the role of date night



While the great woods and the freedom of skiing beyond the boundary lines beckoned, there were concerns: “Catamounts are mountain lions; we didn’t see any...but what if we hadn’t been that fortunate? Had we needed rescuing, how would we feel about facing possible criminal charges and fines up to \$500?”

for the better part of our 20-year marriage (see “Earning Our Turns: Celebrating Romance Nordic Style on Vermont’s Long Trail,” January/February 2012).

Nor was it the fording of the mostly frozen streams we’d had to navigate, with skis on. Compared to some of the tree skiing Jigger and our two teenage sons regularly subject me to (think Tarzan swinging from a branch to drop into what always seems to me like more scratchy terrain but what the men swear are hidden stashes of snowflakes, “freshies,” in their parlance), the Catamount’s stream crossings are downright peaceful.

The lack of cell phone service in the last section of the trail did give me pause, for I admittedly derive false if illusory comfort from the possibility of making and receiving calls in the wild (sincere apologies to ski patrollers everywhere). I calmed myself remembering Peter MacLaren’s warm smile, glad I had followed informal protocol and checked in with West Hill House’s perennially good-natured innkeeper before starting out. Peter and his wife Sue graciously allow Catamount travelers to park in their driveway and are among the trail’s many de facto Neighborhood Watchers who generously allow passage across their property during the winter months.

I was also grateful that we had left a

car at the bottom of the Lincoln Gap to hop into after our ski down. Even though the road was closed to traffic this time of year, surely someone would notice if a car remained parked there too long?

No, what bothered me most this late January afternoon were the eerie, enormous granite boulders that suddenly obstructed the darkening trail. Skinning through thick woods is one thing; thanks to the Green Mountain’s preponderance of deciduous trees, wintertime visibility, even in dense woods, is better than you might think. Unless it is pea soup fog or snowing hard, hiking in Vermont’s winter woods is like being in an Ansel Adams painting, only much colder—lots of black and white and silver scenery with comforting open space between slim birch and maple trunks.

But this last section of the Catamount was entirely different. The dark spaces outnumbered the light ones, and the way the huge slabs of stone overhung the trail, it took zero imagination to picture furry creatures...bears? catamounts?...nestling snug in their beds for their long winter’s nap.

What was a catamount, anyway? And did they hibernate? Between his feeble whistles, as he rounded each bend, I knew Jigger was wondering the same thing.

“Can Vermont keep skiers from ‘do-

ing stupid stuff?’”

The *Burlington Free Press* February headline a few weeks after our Lincoln Gap/Catamount outing was specifically referring to the 50 or so skiers who had already gotten lost venturing off trails at Killington and Pico up to that point in the season, but its import was not lost on Jigger and me. (Spoiler alert: Catamounts are mountain lions; we didn’t see any that day, and, as a reward for our survival, we savored a sweet ski down a snowy Lincoln Gap all to ourselves.) But what if we hadn’t been so fortunate?

Had we needed rescuing, how would we feel about facing possible criminal charges and fines up to \$500? A Vermont’s Senate Judiciary Committee charged with reviewing just such a proposal—making it a crime to ski out of bounds and lose one’s way—ended inconclusively last season. “There’s a lot of concern about how to make sure people are safe, but at the same time, we don’t want to interfere with Vermont’s backcountry skiing industry, which is doing fairly well,” says Committee Chairman Dick Sears. The committee has no further plans this year or even next, he adds. “If people behave, we won’t bring it up.”

That suits enthusiasts like Adam Howard, editor of *Backcountry* magazine, of Jeffersonville, just fine. “You’re

talking regulating freedom of movement. These are public lands that we're accessing. Anyone who doesn't want us to do that should be shackled," he flatly says. It would be easy to construe his vitriol as professional bias—wandering around in the woods puts food on his table, he readily concedes—yet Adam also speaks as a seventh-generation Ver-

monter and former state rep (Cambridge, Waterville, Belvedere). If legislators restricted access to skiing in the backcountry, he says he would be forced to move his company to a different state. Lost skiers are not a new phenomenon, he argues; people have been getting lost in the Rockies, the Alps, and the Green Mountains forever. If anything, the backcountry ski population is "far more educated and equipped than it's ever been," Adam notes. "The numbers are just bigger than ever."

Extrapolating data from the Snowsports Industries America (SIA) trade association, Adam estimates that of Vermont's record 4.5 million-plus skier visits last season, some 800,000 had some sort of resort-accessed backcountry experience. It is no wonder some of them got lost. "This whole concept that skiers in the East are dumber, I just don't buy it," he says. According to Kelly Davis, head number cruncher for SIA, out of roughly 11 million skiers season to season, approximately 5 million of them are currently sampling backcountry both outside and within resorts. (SIA defines backcountry thus: "Backcountry terrain and lift accessed backcountry terrain are both beyond the ski area boundaries. Although some lift accessed backcountry terrain is controlled, the risks still remain the same. Once you are beyond the ski area boundaries you are clearly in the backcountry regardless of how close by a ski area is.") These 5 million intrepid skiers have swelled in ranks from 4 million during the 2008–2009 season, says Kelly, representing a 25-percent increase in 3 years.

Even before the SIA data confirmed it, Jigger and I suspected that no matter how special we felt when heading into the backcountry, we were in fact part of a national trend. A few weeks after our remarkably solitary Lincoln Gap outing, we headed to a different section of the Catamount, the 9.4-mile stretch start-

slick, luge-like conditions, our February outing with some Morrisville friends was downright social. Around a blind bend, we'd skitter into a cluster of locals, whom our friends would stop and chat with as casually as though they were running into each other in the grocery aisle.

On another morning, we met these same friends at Stowe Mountain Resort Cross-Country Ski Center, purchased a ticket, and hopped on its trails before heading off and upward 1,400 feet into the woods toward the Skytop ridge. Our destination and reward for our climbing: Steeple Trail, one of Vermont's oldest backcountry trails, originally cut by FDR's Civilian Conservation Core volunteers in the 1930s and supposedly deriving its name from the fact that skiers thought it was "like the side of a steeple."

As we climbed, on a gorgeous, sunny morning, we encountered everyone from old timers on skinny metal cross-country skis to a Gortex-, neon-clad group of young men and women who would not have looked out of place in Boulder, Colorado or Jackson Hole. Then, on our glorious three-mile descent, which alternated between tight-knit, tree-filled powder stashes and gentle open glades, we ran into several skiers out "walking" their dogs (uphill, when we saw them), doing our path in reverse in what looked like a Saturday morning routine.

Why the sudden rush into the woods? Despite their striking variety, the vast majority of these people are sampling backcountry terrain for the same reason: because they can. Specifically, their gear enables them to do this more easily than ever. Skis are getting wider, and bindings and boots lighter and more versatile, in particular Alpine Touring (AT) gear—bindings that lock down for descents and allow the heel to raise on climbs and boots sturdy enough for skiing downhill, but also light and comfortable enough for going uphill. Sales of AT boots, in particular, were up a staggering 70 percent last year, impressive and welcome, given that

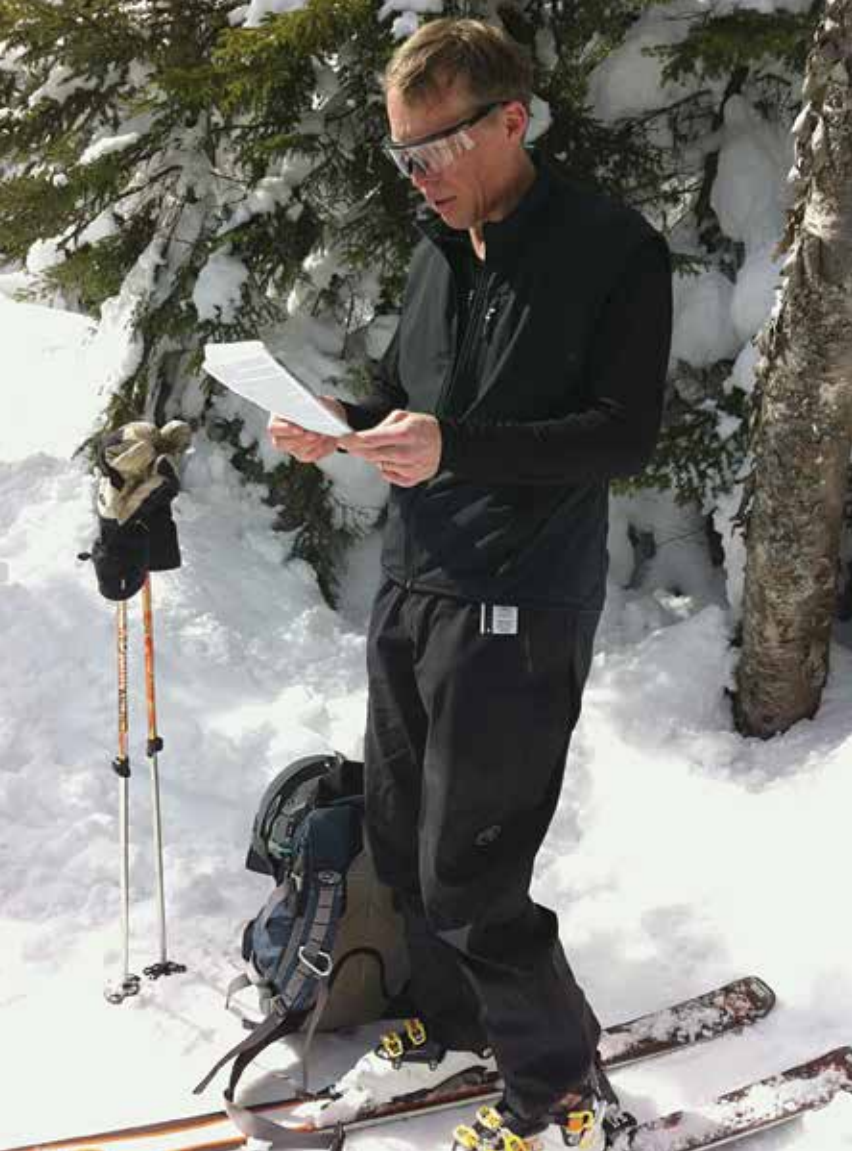
“Despite howling winds and slick, luge-like conditions, our February outing with some Morrisville friends was downright social.”



Oops! One of Alessandra's party took a spill, but quickly recovered. "Why the sudden rush into the woods? Despite their striking variety, the vast majority of...people are sampling backcountry terrain...because they can."

ing from the Bolton Valley Nordic Center and ending at Trapp Family Lodge.

In his excellent guidebook, *Best Backcountry Skiing in the East*, David Goodman aptly chooses his adjective when he describes this as a "committing" tour; once you're on the serpentine skinny trail that climbs more than 1,000 feet and descends nearly 2,000—a journey that took us nearly 4 hours—there is no way out. Yet, in a sign of the times, this extremely challenging trail is also one of the most popular backcountry routes in the East. Despite howling winds and



Jigger, Alessandra's husband, carefully double-checks information about the area before making the next move on a backcountry tour. Beyond-boundary signs abound. "The truth is there are serious risks in the backcountry, and you can never be safe," says Snowsports Industries America's Kelly Davis.

snow sports sales as a whole were down 3 percent, according to the *Wall Street Journal*. (Personal AT boot testimonial: mine are so comfortable, I regularly grocery shop in them.)

The rise in backcountry skiing's popularity certainly makes life more exciting for its practitioners, and profitable for AT gear manufacturers, but also undeniably creates significant challenges for most, if not all, of its vested parties. In addition to lost skiers wandering out of bounds, ski resorts increasingly must address how to deal with uphill travelers. Allowing them to skin uphill on the same slopes and at the same time as downhill skiers is awkward at best, not unlike having "cars driving on the wrong side of the road," notes Stowe's Communications Director Jeff Wise. Jay Peak's PR Director JJ Toland hones his powers of diplomacy by saying, "The enhanced interest in the sport needs to go hand in hand with personal responsibility. There's often a lag in that."

Ski resorts are responding by drafting or revising uphill travel policies, which vary from embracing (Magic) to nuanced (Crested Butte) to forbidding (Mad River

Glen); an updated list can be found at ussma.org/resort-uphill-policies. Resorts are also not shying away from spelling out the risks and responsibilities to their out-of-bound clientele, posting blatant signs that leave no doubt as to where they stand. The SIA's 40-member Backcountry Committee has already met twice in the past year to ponder the opportunities and risks of their pastime and has launched Project Zero 2025, whose lofty aim is to eliminate their sport's annual number of fatalities (between 20 and 40) over the next dozen years.

All of these developments give me pause. But will they stop me from heading into the backcountry? As long as I am married to my own "Jack Rabbit" and mother to two boys whose favorite place is the Vermont woods, probably not. In fact, last year we upped the ante and as a family skied out of a yurt in the Idaho Sawtooths, and this year returned for more backcountry touring and avalanche training. We learned about "whumpf" detecting and Rutschblock tests—technical terms we are highly unlikely to ever need in Vermont's backcountry, where avalanche deep snow is virtually unheard of.

Unheard of, but not impossible. As I tell my boys, Mother Nature is even more fickle than a Mother of Teenage Boys. "The truth is there are serious risks in the backcountry and you can never be safe," concedes SIA's Kelly Davis. For now, our family will take its cue from our Idaho guide and former Sawtooth Avalanche Center Director Chris Lundy, who distills all of his technical jargon down to an easy message: "The gist is staying alive and being a backcountry skier for the long haul. If you want to keep doing it your whole life, you need to learn how to minimize the risks down to something that is acceptable. This can be done through education and training, mentorship, and of course, being properly prepared and equipped."

Chris Lundy's counsel echoes a particularly memorable comment from SIA's Kelly Davis, which I also stress to my boys. "The most important piece of gear you take with you into the backcountry is between your ears." 🦋

Alessandra Bianchi, a native southern Californian, lives in Marblehead, MA, and has been brainwashed by her husband into thinking that skiing on blue ice is fun.