

## Back-Country Skiing On State Lands: Stay Fit, Have Fun, Explore

Last week, a quirky fact popped up in the headlines and made the rounds on social media. It seems that the state of Vermont produces more winter Olympians than any other. That's not as surprising as it might first seem, given the love affair we Vermonters have with winter recreation and snow-sports. One of those that has grown

tremendously in popularity in recent years is backcountry, or off-piste, skiing. Back-country skiers are largely looking to get away from crowds, off-the-beaten-track and out into Vermont's extensive back-

country. For those who crave wild places, who enjoy exploring or who are interested in getting back to the roots of skiing, backcountry skiing is an exciting way to be healthy and experience the winter woods. With over 345,000 acres of diverse terrain held in the public trust, Vermont's state forests and park lands are a natural draw for many.



Photo Credit: Catamount Trail Association

From our perspective, the growing interest in backcountry skiing is a welcome development. As an agency, we want to encourage people to get outdoors. Not only is it fun, it's a great way to get in shape and a perfect activity to share with friends. When managed correctly, backcountry skiing is also a very sustainable winter use of public lands.

As land managers, one of the trends that we've seen is much more off-trail use. Unfortunately, we've also seen a rise in trail and glade cutting, something that affects both the forest and public access. Please, never cut vegetation without permission. While it may seem harmless, cutting has negative consequences. It can reduce natural tree regeneration, impact food supplies for wildlife, cause increased erosion and impact wildlife habitats. Ultimately, state lands belong to everyone. Because of that, we weigh many interests when considering how to manage a particular piece of land. In fact, right now we are working very closely with the back-country skiing and riding community to create a Backcountry Ethic and exploring sustainable glade standards.

As with any activity that takes place in a wilderness environment, backcountry skiing also comes with inherent risk. While this certainly shouldn't stop anyone, backcountry skiing or riding does require a higher level of expertise and preparation than standard resort skiing. Finding friends who know the terrain and will take you out is the best way to both have a great experience, and to stay safe. Other important safety considerations include:

- Learn how to use a map and compass, and have them with you when you go. Please don't rely on a GPS or smartphone - cold temperatures can drain batteries and cell reception in Vermont is not reliable.
- Pay attention to the weather and conditions. Vermont does occasionally experience avalanches, and you should be aware of the risk and familiarize yourself with indicators for avalanche conditions.

- Never ski alone.
- Always let someone know exactly where you'll be and when you'll be back. Don't stray from your plan, no matter how tempting. If something happens and a rescue situation ensues, time is of the essence.
- Know the conditions and be prepared. Leave early to have plenty of daylight.
- Bring the proper equipment, layers of clothing, food, water, a headlamp and fire starters.
- Know your skiing ability and fitness level and please don't ski beyond it.

As the popularity of backcountry skiing and riding grows, we are working to develop policies to support both skiers and riders, other uses and the long-term health of the resource. We are committed to providing great recreation experiences on state lands. Much like backcountry skiers, we are trailblazing with regards to resource management and policy development related to backcountry skiing. Our goal is to engage backcountry skiers and riders, build cooperative relationships and develop programs that increase access to appropriate backcountry recreation. We're currently working on a Backcountry Skiing Management Program, in partnership with the Vermont Backcountry Alliance and the Catamount Trail Association, to identify locations that might benefit from improvement and to develop long-term management strategies that take the needs of winter backcountry recreation into consideration.

There are lots of great resources out there for those who are interested in backcountry skiing and riding. We've compiled just a few:

- Stowe Mountain Rescue has produced a short and informative video, filmed in Mount Mansfield State Forest, which includes some great safety recommendations for backcountry skiing:  
<http://vimeo.com/25573565>
- The Vermont Backcountry Alliance (VTBC) will be at the Backcountry Basecamp event at Smuggler's Notch Ski Area on March 29-30. This is a great opportunity to learn more about backcountry skiing/riding in Vermont, demo backcountry skiing/riding gear, and connect with members of the VTBC working group. Visit Backcountry Magazine's event page for more information:  
<http://backcountrymagazine.com/backcountry-basecamp-2014/>
- A good guide for general backcountry safety, the Mountain Rescue Association's General Backcountry Safety Guide is available for download here:  
<http://www.mra.org/images/stories/training/backcountrysafety.pdf>
- For people looking for a way to get the backcountry experience while still on a trail, the Catamount Trail (<http://catamounttrail.org/>) is a great place to start. The Bolton Valley Nordic Center (<http://www.boltonvalley.com/the-mountain/nordic-and-backcountry>) trails are another great resource for those looking for both groomed and backcountry skiing experiences.

If you want to share thoughts on the planning and policy development process, contact Jessica Savage ([Jessica.savage@state.vt.us](mailto:Jessica.savage@state.vt.us)) or Craig Whipple ([craig.whipple@state.vt.us](mailto:craig.whipple@state.vt.us)) at the Department of Forests, Parks & Recreation. You can also join the Catamount Trail Association (be sure to check the box indicating interest in

the Vermont Backcountry Alliance). Meanwhile...these snowy days are numbered, there is no better time than the present to get out and enjoy them!