

The Catamount Trail Vermont's Backcountry Ski Adventure

by Susan Shea and Ted Vogt

One winter afternoon I followed an old railroad bed on the Catamount Trail, skiing up a slight incline and into a channel cut through rock. The cliff faces were thick with ice and icicles that glowed strangely blue and white. The day had started out hazy with snow flurries and a gusty wind, but now the sun was bright and distant above the trees. I startled a bird in a thicket of spruce but did not see it. The trail dropped off the railroad bed and followed an old logging road into a dark woods. Other skiers had preceded me, packing the snow and allowing me to race along the flat surface of the trail. - TV

The 300-mile Catamount Trail, North America's longest cross-country ski trail, stretches the length of Vermont, from Massachusetts to the Canadian border. Following old woods roads, snowmobile trails and remote wilderness paths over varied terrain, it connects eleven cross-country ski centers and is accessible to skiers with a wide range of abilities. Snowshoers are also welcome. Ben Rose, GMC Executive Director and one of the founders of the Catamount Trail, describes the trail as a "very intimate way to see the landscape. Like hiking the Long Trail, skiing the Catamount Trail is a way to see Vermont from its heart."

Birth of the Trail

The Catamount Trail was conceived in a tent on White Rocks Mountain on a rainy evening in August 1982. Friends Steve Bushey and Ben Rose were brainstorming their next big outdoor adventure. Steve proposed "Let's ski from Massachusetts to Quebec!" The young men shook hands. The next morning, tentmate Paul Jarris, who had been asleep during the late-night conversation, also said he was "in". Over the next two years, Steve, a cartography student, made the leap from a ski trip to a ski trail. Studying maps, he could discern a route connecting existing cross-country ski trail networks. Later Steve made the Catamount Trail his master's thesis project at Carleton University in Ottawa. In March 1984, Steve, Ben and Paul, sometimes accompanied by Jim Painter and others, skied the length of Vermont, forging a preliminary route with the help of local ski enthusiasts. Following their trip, the group received a matching grant from the Vermont Travel Division to publish a map of the trail and formed a Board of Directors. In 1985, Rose became the Catamount Trail Association's first Executive Director, part-time.

Modeled after GMC and the Long Trail

In June 1985, the fledgling Catamount Trail Association (CTA) approached the Green Mountain Club, requesting a merger to benefit from the club's expertise and manpower. After studying the proposal, GMC declined to merge, but adopted a resolution supporting CTA in its efforts to develop the ski trail, and pledging its full cooperation. Ben Rose comments: "The club's board was wise not to take on the project, but instead to encourage CTA to follow the GMC model. As a result, the Catamount Trail is farther

along than it would be, and the two organizations have more strength collectively than if GMC had taken on the project.” Ted Milks, Executive Director of CTA, says the group has “a very positive relationship with the Green Mountain Club. We have a similar mission, and look to GMC as a big sister. The club has a wealth of experience and knowledge and has been generous in sharing advice and partnering on projects.” Association Treasurer John Stearns mentions the two organizations have a “strong people connection”, with several people over the years serving on both boards.

CTA Today

The Catamount Trail Association now has over 1300 households as members and a board of twenty-one. CTA publishes a guidebook and a newsletter and offers ski tours and special events during the winter. As with the Long Trail, volunteers play an indispensable role in maintaining the Catamount Trail. Over forty “trail chiefs” oversee sections of the trail, maintaining both the route and landowner relations, organizing fall work days, scouting new routes, and helping to build bridges. On average, over 150 volunteers work on the Catamount Trail annually. CTA is interested in starting local sections, similar to GMC’s, which would offer outings and help care for the trail.

Another time I skied along the southeast side of the Deerfield River on a lovely, peaceful stretch of the trail, through powdery snow and spruce and hemlock stands. As the trail rose high above the river, the water sparkled in the sun amidst snow-capped boulders. I saw tracks where a deer had crossed the river and gone crashing up the slope. In another spot I came upon chickadees pecking about in troughs in the snow that had formed around the trunks of trees. Pine cone chips adorned the white snow under a tree where red squirrels had been. Soon the back of Harriman Dam was visible, looming on the horizon. - TV

Goals and Challenges

CTA’s primary goal is finishing the ski trail. For many years, due to difficulties in terrain, road location, and landowner relations, there was a gap in the Catamount Trail in northern Vermont between Hazen's Notch and Route 242. The association has recently cut five out of six miles of the trail in that area. The only remaining gap is a four-mile section in southern Vermont between Route 30 and Stratton Mountain in the Green Mountain National Forest. Because the Forest’s Management Plan is not yet finalized, CTA has not yet been able to establish a route in that area.

A major challenge is protecting the Catamount Trail. About 145 miles of the ski trail cross private land, held by 250 different landowners. As a result, says John Stearns, “the trail route is in constant motion due to changes in ownership and development.” CTA started a trail protection program six years ago, with the support of the Freeman Foundation and the state legislature. Fifty miles of the ski trail are now protected from closure through easements held by CTA, GMC, the Vermont Land Trust, or by long-term licensing agreements. CTA is looking for a simple trail easement from landowners, a 50-foot wide right-of-way for winter use only. The association will relocate the trail to

accommodate timber-harvesting or other activities. An issue in some locations is unauthorized summer use of the trail by all-terrain vehicles and mountain bikes, which can cause problems for landowners. For a small organization to secure the financial resources to acquire easements and steward them into the future is the greatest challenge, says Ted Milks. Expanding membership and creating an endowment is an important objective which will facilitate this.

Another of CTA's goals is to move the Catamount Trail off busy snowmobile trails; about 1/3 of the route is now shared with snowmobiles. While CTA has a good relationship with the Vermont Association of Snow Travelers, as machines become faster and quieter, skiers and snowmobilers can be a dangerous mix. In the future, after a route for the Catamount Trail has been finalized, the association has discussed side trails and connecting with existing community ski trail networks. CTA has also been approached by a couple of individuals who are developing a yurt system for overnight stays, which may interface with the trail in the coming years.

Skiing the Trail

Ted Milks estimates that 8,000 skier days occur on the Catamount Trail each year. Due to the difficulties of camping and carrying gear in winter, only twenty-seven people have skied end-to-end. Since half the trail is ungroomed, Milks recommends skiing in a group of at least three to take turns breaking trail through deep snow. Conditions can vary considerably depending on weather and traffic. The topography also varies from mountainous to gentle and rolling on different portions of the trail. Milks stresses that the Catamount Trail is not intimidating; there are many parts, such as the section from Blueberry Hill Inn to Route 125 in Ripton that are suitable for novice cross-country skiers with some experience.

For further information, or to purchase a guidebook, please visit www.catamounttrail.org, or contact CTA at (802) 864-5794. The *Catamount Trail Guide* is also available at GMC's Hiker Center.

On a warm January afternoon I navigated the trail along Somerset Reservoir. The trail was unbroken and the deep snow made for slow going. The route runs close to the shore, up and down over slight hills and valleys, through woods and frozen marshes. A VAST trail runs parallel to the Catamount Trail here before veering sharply east, and occasional snowmobile noises filtered through the woods. The noises diminished with distance and the end of the day, and I was left alone in the quiet of this remote place, watching the sun set across the reservoir and the light recede into the distance. This is semi-wilderness, and the trail has a rugged quality to it. With my headlamp I was easily able to pick up the distinctive blue Catamount Trail markers, and the broad expanse of ice and snow-covered water to my left was an obvious guide. A bright moon emerged, illuminating the snow and casting shadows over the reservoir, and I stopped a moment to contemplate this extraordinary vista before pushing on. - TV