Backcountry Snowboard Tour

Location: Hillman’s Highway, Mount Washington, NH

Date: March 29, 2014

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Every spring in the Northeast as temperatures begin to climb, the snow begins to melt, and lifts inevitably close for the season, droves of skiing enthusiasts make the annual pilgrimage to the slopes of Mount Washington and its most famous glacial cirque, Tuckerman Ravine. On any given Saturday it is not uncommon to see a few thousand people work their way up the Tuckerman Ravine Trail past the Hermit Lake Shelter to the iconic bowl. While the attention of most skiers at Hermit Lake is fixated on Tuckerman Ravine, Hillman’s Highway and its surrounding lines loom over Hermit Lake just to the looker’s left. These descents which start close to Boott Spur have the longest, most consistent pitch down to Hermit Lake from the Alpine Garden. Hillman’s Highway drops 1500 vertical feet at a sustained pitch of 30° while lines like The Duchess drop at 45°–50°.

This day in late March was not shaping up to be your typical spring day on Mount Washington. Recent rainfall followed by low temperatures had presumably turned the snowpack into a solid block of ice. The forecast for the day was predicting warm temperatures, but under a blanket of clouds which would presumably keep most aspects at high elevation frozen without the intensity of the sun’s rays. With this in mind, I arrived at Pinkham Notch with Tim Dyson, Tony Telesco, and David Butler in the early morning fog around 7:30 AM EDT. We had a flexible plan such that we could make adjustments based on observed snow conditions, but the ultimate goal for the day was to spend the day in Oakes Gulf, the southern cirque of Mount Washington.

We inevitably began our ascent up the Tuckerman Ravine Trail, a veritable superhighway in the backcountry skiing world. Between the members of our group, we have made so many ascents of this trail that we know every last twist and turn of its 2.4 mile length. At a break point about two-thirds of the way up the Tuckerman Ravine Trail to Hermit Lake, we decided to divulge from the trail to ascend the remainder of the distance to Hermit Lake on the John Sherburne Ski Trail, the classic Civilian Conservation Corps trail from Hermit Lake to Pinkham Notch.

When we reached Hermit Lake, something entirely unexpected happened; the fog burned off to reveal brilliant blue skies and the alpine slopes of Mount Washington. Realizing that The Duchess was filled in and the eastern slopes would easily soften under the...
intense radiation, we decided to forego our original plan in favor of this classic line which rarely looks enticing to ski. We knew that we could not afford to dally since every minute of spring sunlight weakened the snowpack towards potential failure. After quickly refilling our water from the Hermit Lake well, the pump for which would have been buried beneath eight feet of snow had it not been for other visitors previously digging it out, we set out to attack the ramp of Hillman’s Highway.

After a transition which took much too long for our own good, we made our way to the top of Hillman’s Highway with undercast moving back in to obscure Hermit Lake from view. Tim and Tony decided to go over to The Duchess while David and I finished our preparations for the descent. A few minutes later, David and I made our way to the top of The Duchess, awaiting word from Tim and Tony on the radio that they had cleared the choke. With our line fluctuating in and out of the clouds, we dropped in. The clouds cleared, and we immediately became visible to the gathering crowd at Hermit Lake. We successfully navigated the choke in perfect corn snow, and upon reaching the apron into the Lower Snowfields cut skier’s right to return to Hillman’s Highway for another run.

The next ascent was much quicker since we were able to utilize the boot ladder we had kicked in on our first ascent. After a quick bite to eat and drink of water we made a descent down Hillman’s Highway itself, snapping photos as we went. For me this was very reminiscent of the slopes of Avalanche Gulch on Mount Shasta in California due to its geometric consistency. We quickly turned back uphill when we reached the bottom since a crowd was beginning to gather, finally realizing that the skiing on Hillman’s was all time.

When we reached the top of Hillman’s Highway for the third time around 1:30 PM EDT, we were greeted by two unpleasant omens. First was the presence of a massive avalanche debris field on the summit snowfields. The crown of the slide was about 1.25 meters deep and 200 meters wide. Dozens of individuals were scouring the debris field, presumably looking for a buried person. Fortunately later reports confirmed that the slide had not buried any individuals. It was immediately apparent that the day’s heat and sunlight had destabilized the snowpack enough to cause avalanches on eastern aspects like those
we were skiing. Combined with the return of thick and descending cloud cover, we took our cue to take our final run down to Pinkham Notch.

While David and I opted for the familiar slopes of Hillman's Highway and the Sherburne Trail, Tony and Tim decided to descend off the other side of Boott Spur Ridge into the Gulf of Slides and consequently the Gulf of Slides Ski Trail. The descent was by far the most enjoyable descent I've experienced from the Tuckerman Ravine area; soft spring conditions and good coverage greeted us throughout our descent of the Sherburne Trail. We were puzzled however by the boot holes that peppered the trail. At the bottom of the trail in Pinkham Notch we encountered a group of several dozen students from the University of New Hampshire Outing Club who had descended the mountain on sleds. They cheered us as we came screaming off the last pitch of the Sherburne Trail, much to our enjoyment. About a half hour later, Tony and Tim emerged from the end of the Gulf of Slides Ski Trail. As we prepared to return to the loj, we reveled in our unexpected exploits which totaled about 6000 feet of ascending and 6000 feet of descending.

–Lou Cassano