

# Looking for wild snow? Here are 6 backcountry skiing tours to explore

By **David Goodman** Globe correspondent, Updated January 14, 2021, 12:00 p.m.



Skiing powder on the popular Sherburne Trail on Mount Washington. CAIT BOURGAULT

A revival is underway in the mountains of the Northeast as skiers flock to the backcountry in unprecedented numbers. Trailhead parking lots fill early and ski shops are doing swift business: [Outdoor Gear Exchange](#) in Burlington, Vt., has seen its sales of backcountry ski equipment triple since last season.

“It’s the perfect storm,” says Tyler Ray, founder of New Hampshire’s [Granite Backcountry Alliance](#), which is drawing hundreds of skiers to cut new glade zones each fall, and thousands to ski them. “You have a confluence of high resort lift-ticket prices being a barrier to entry for skiing, you have the technical advancement in equipment making backcountry gear better, faster, and lighter, and you have a desire to return to nature.” Add to this the COVID-19 pandemic, which has driven skiers to shun crowded lifts and strike out for wild snow.

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The backcountry boom has its roots in the 1930s, when [the first ski trails](#) were cut throughout New England by the Civilian Conservation Corps. A vibrant subculture of human-powered skiing blossomed and then vanished as chairlifts appeared on the highest peaks of New England. Nearly a century later, backcountry skiing has moved from the fringe to the mainstream. User-friendly alpine touring skis and splitboards now make it easy for resort skiers to ski uphill (“skinny”) and access ungroomed trails and glades. Once you experience the thrill and beauty of skiing in the winter wilderness, you are inevitably lured to return to find the next powdery frontier.

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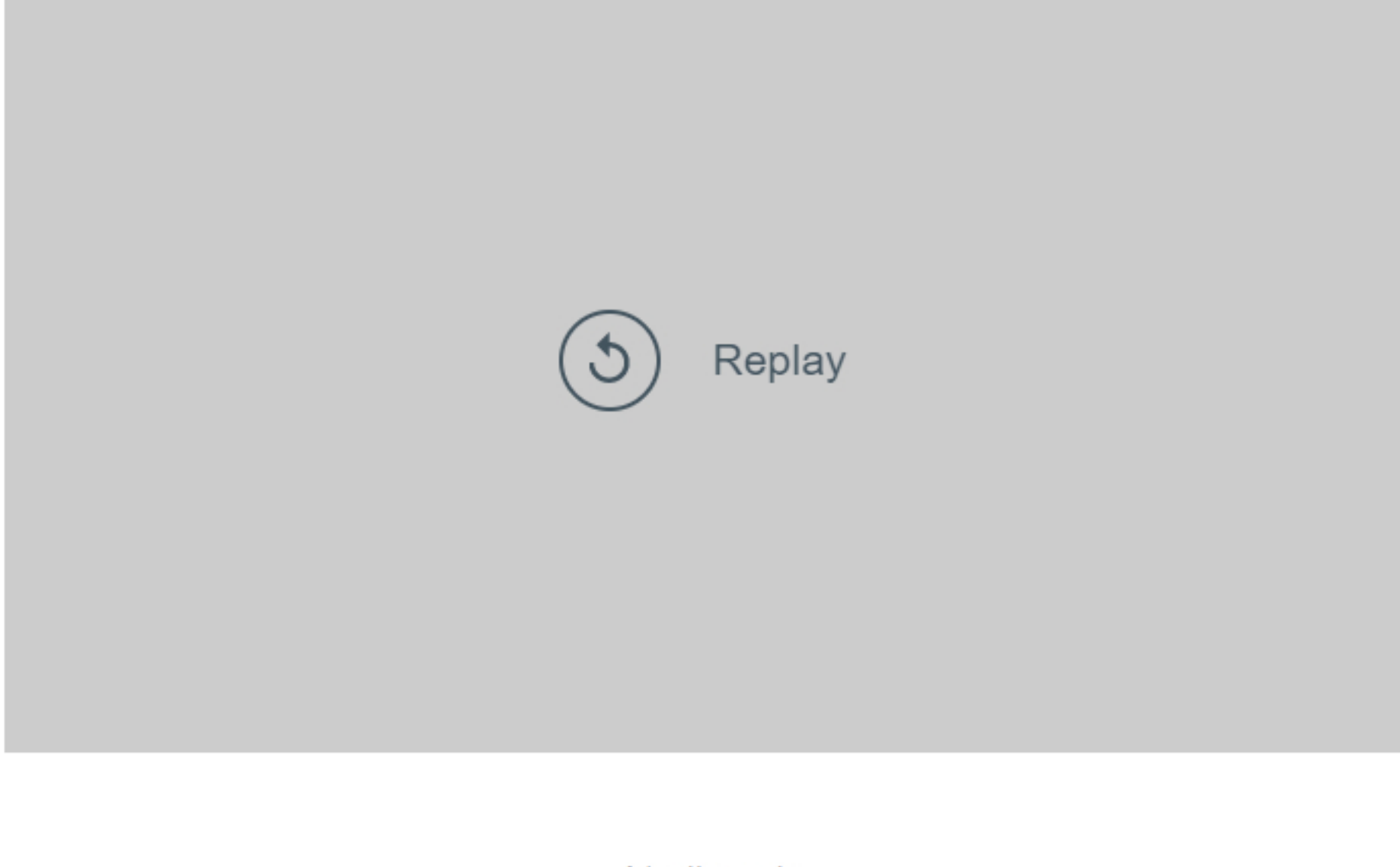
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To travel safely in the backcountry, it is essential to learn basic outdoor skills, including navigation, first aid, and avalanche awareness if you are skiing steep, open slopes. Backcountry skills courses are offered by guide services and outdoor organizations such as the Appalachian Mountain Club, and avalanche courses and forecasts can be found at the [Mount Washington Avalanche Center](#). Newcomers can also consider hiring a guide.

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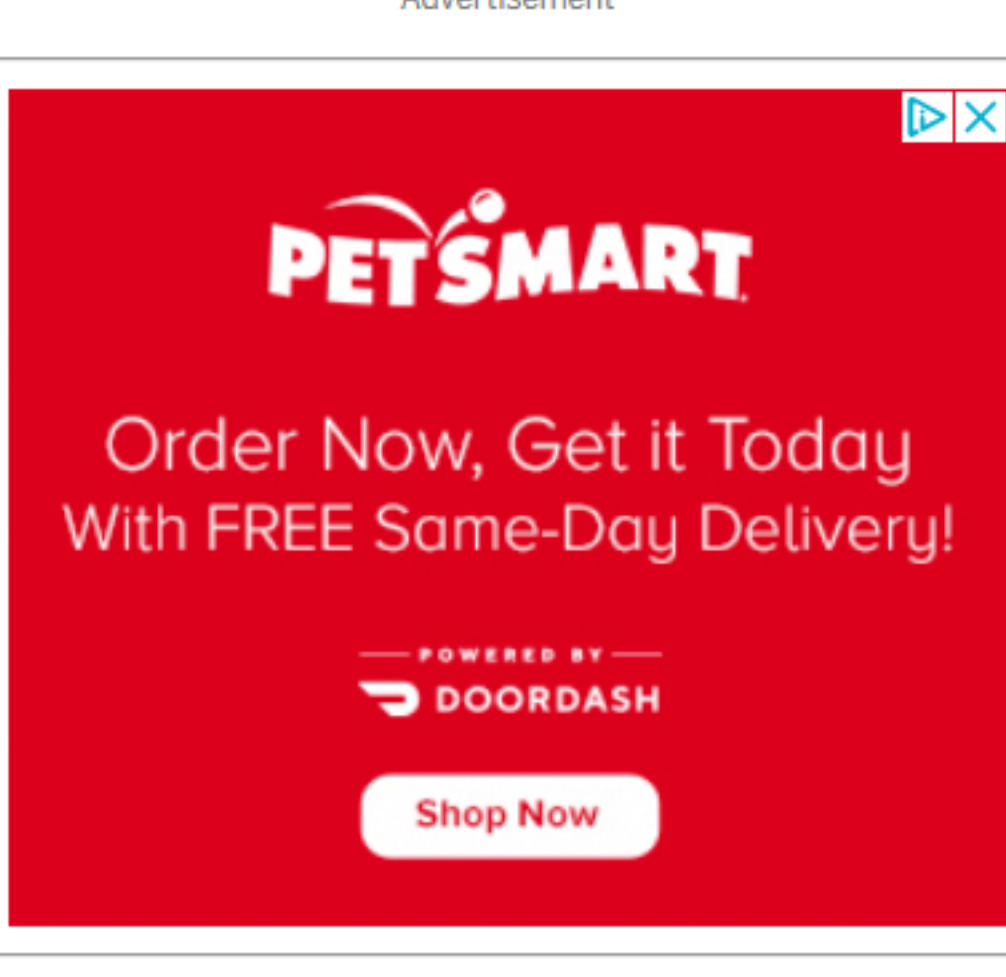
Following are some of my favorite backcountry tours that are suitable for a wide range of skiers and riders. .

**Mount Cardigan, N.H.** — Countless skiers have been introduced to backcountry skiing on the trails of Mount Cardigan. The Alexandria and the Duke’s ski trails are historic runs cut by the CCC in the 1930s. Alexandria is the steeper and more exciting trail that accesses the dramatic summit of Mount Cardigan, where a rime-encrusted fire tower crowns the peak. On a clear day, there are commanding views of Mounts Monadnock, Ascutney, Killington, Moosilauke, and Washington, and Lake Winnepesaukee to the southeast. The moderate Duke’s Trail leads to the open ledges beneath the summit of Firescrew, a fine place to take in views of central New Hampshire and make turns.

**Doublehead Ski Trail, Jackson, N.H.** — The CCC built the Doublehead Ski Trail in 1934 to meet the growing appetite for skiing in the Mount Washington Valley. The trail on North Doublehead retains the classic character of other CCC creations: swooping turns, double fall lines, and a fast descent. This is a beautifully restored gem from an earlier era of skiing. There is also a cabin at the summit that skiers can reserve to stay overnight.

**Mount Washington, Pinkham Notch, N.H.** — New Hampshire’s highest peak is home to Tuckerman Ravine, the steep skiing Mecca of the East. Thousands of expert skiers go on pilgrimage there (if you are skiing the steep, check the avalanche forecast at [mountwashingtonavalanchecenter.org](#), carry avalanche rescue equipment and know how to use it). But intermediate skiers can enjoy skiing the John Sherburne Ski Trail to just below the Ravine and just take in the spectacular mountain landscape. The Sherburne is the most popular backcountry ski trail in the East and a worthy run on its own.

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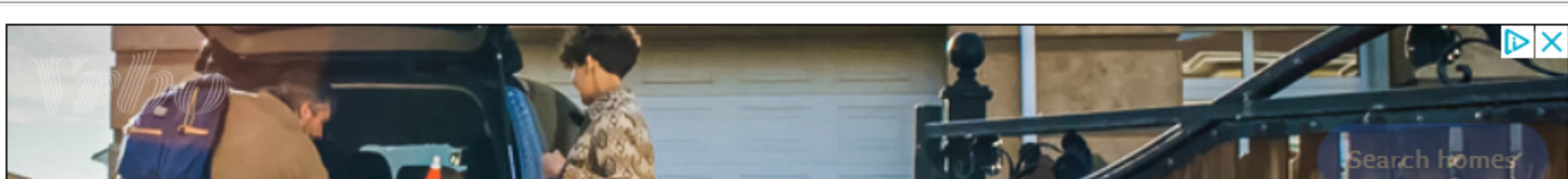
**Crescent Ridge, Randolph, N.H.** — Crescent Ridge was the first glade zone crafted by the volunteers of Granite Backcountry Alliance, which formed in 2016 to help launch “a movement of human-powered activities that is the basis for an emerging outdoor economy.” Crescent Ridge sits opposite one of the most majestic landscapes in the East. The ski zone is in the 10,000-acre Randolph Community Forest, the largest town forest in New Hampshire, and stares directly at Mounts Adams and Madison and the imposing walls of King Ravine. The views alone make the skiing memorable. So too does the bountiful snow and excellent terrain. The zone offers moderate 500-vertical-foot runs that weave through the forest. Consult [granitebackcountryalliance.org](#) for maps and directions, and while you are in the area, ski Maple Villa, an excellent and popular GBA glade zone in Intervale, N.H.



Dropping into the Steeple Trail, a reliable Vermont powder run in the shadow of Mount Mansfield. BRIAN MOHR/EMBER PHOTOGRAPHY

**Steeple Trail, Stowe, Vt.** — Mention “Stowe” and “steeple,” and many people assume you are referring to the stately Stowe Community Church that has stood watch over the town since 1863. But for skiers, the Steeple they have long sought is a steep, powder-choked trail that resides high in the Ranch Valley. This is the Steeple Trail, one of Vermont’s earliest, and still among its best, backcountry ski trails. The Steeple lies within an extensive network of backcountry ski trails accessed via the cross-country ski centers of [Trapp Family Lodge](#) and [Stowe Mountain Resort](#). You can explore these trails over several days, including the Skytop, Bruce, Burt, and Dewey trails. Trail passes must be purchased at the cross-country center where you begin, where you can also rent backcountry ski gear and arrange a guide.

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**Braintree Mountain Forest, Braintree, Vt.** — Braintree Mountain Forest is one of Vermont’s best glade zones. It was created by volunteers of the [Rochester/Randolph Area Sports Trails Alliance](#), in partnership with the [New England Forestry Foundation](#). Skidoo Mountain offers lower-angle skiing with nice views of Braintree Mountain, while Twin Peaks offers steeper trail skiing. The 1,650-vertical-foot drop on the tours ensures plenty of powder turns on the descent.

David Goodman is the author of “Best Backcountry Skiing in the Northeast: 50 Classic Ski and Snowboard Tours in New England and New York,” published by AMC Books. Follow him on Twitter @davidgoodmanvt.