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ADIRONDACK

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THE HISTORIC
Wright Peak
Ski Trail

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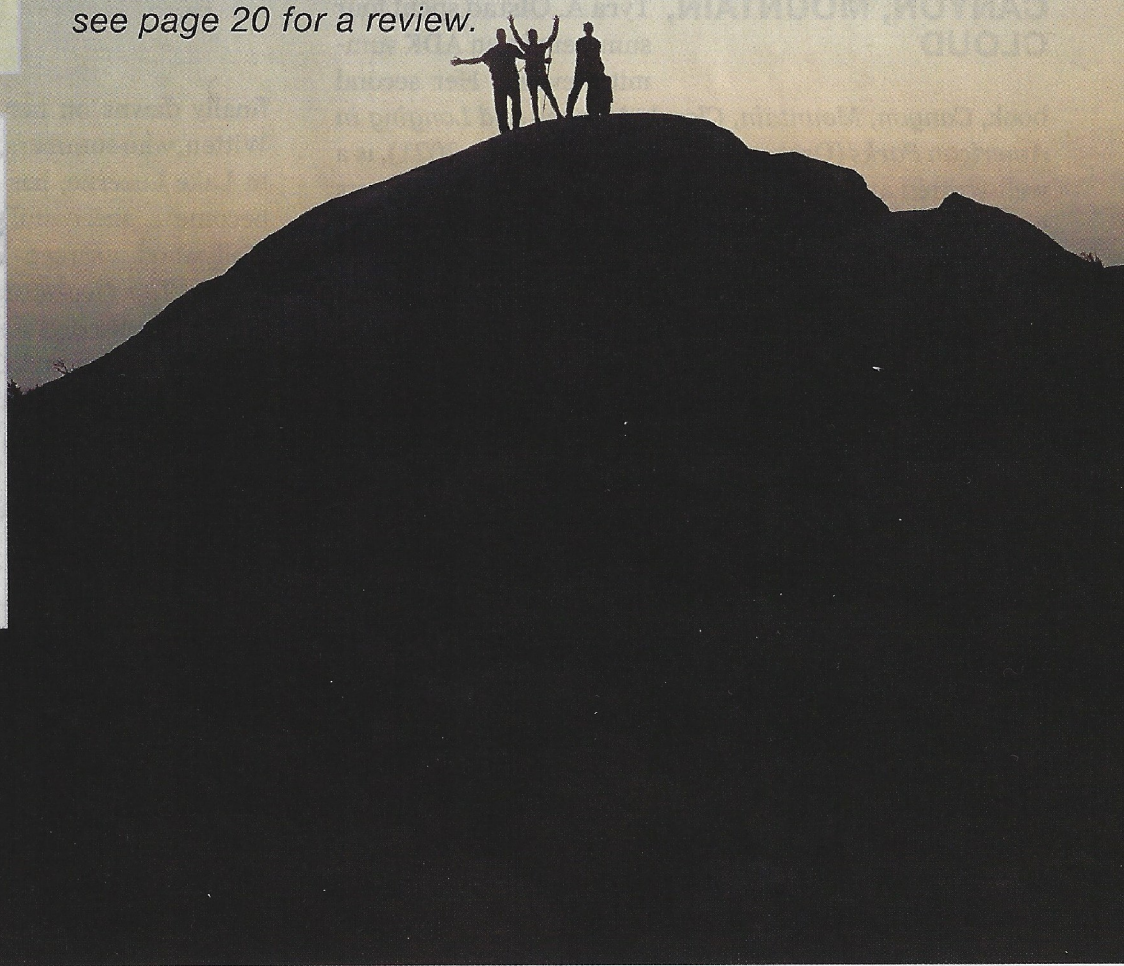


SKIING

WRIGHT PEAK'S HISTORIC TRAIL

Adapted with the author's permission from
Best Backcountry Skiing in the Northeast
by David Goodman

see page 20 for a review.



Above: Sunrise on Wright Peak summit. Anirudh Bagchi

Insets: (top) Otto Schneibs, on the Wright Peak Ski Trail. *ADK Archives* (bottom) Skiing the Wright Peak Ski Trail today. *David Goodman*

THE SKI TOUR

to Wright Peak's scenic open summit and the descent of the historic Wright Peak Ski Trail is an Adirondack classic. It offers all the best elements of a great tour: An enjoyable, challenging climb; panoramic summit views; and a ski trail roomy enough to make many turns.

The ski trail is a by-product of the unique and peculiar politics of the Adirondack Forest Preserve, whose 1894 "forever wild" clause was interpreted to mean that no trail exceeding ten feet in width could be cut. Hal Burton, an avid skier, newspaperman, and later a veteran of the U.S. Army Tenth Mountain Division, was eager to have a good down-mountain ski run someplace in the Adirondacks.



defended the concept at numerous public hearings.

At one public hearing, a conservationist sniped at Osborne, “I gather you propose to approve this trail. When will construction begin?”

“The rangers,” Osborne replied, “are already halfway up the mountain.”

That was almost as far as the Wright Peak Ski Trail got. In October 1938, forest fires swept through the Catskills and all available rangers from the Adirondacks were transferred south to fight them. They had just begun cutting the Wright Peak Ski Trail when they were forced to abandon the project. But Burton was determined. He recounted later in the *Lake Placid News*, “I happened to have saved \$400 for the down payment on a new car. Cars were cheap in those days, and so was the pay for woodcutters. The \$400 went for the hire of guides from the Ausable Club. The new car had to wait a year, but the trail was completed.”

DECLINE AND REBIRTH

The trail was designed by legendary Dartmouth and St. Lawrence University ski coach Otto Schneibs and New York State ski trail designer Bob St. Louis. Schneibs wanted a wide trail for speed, but St. Louis scaled it down. They followed old logging roads most of the way. The Wright Peak Ski Trail opened in December 1938.

The trail was nearly done in by its many admirers. Within a few years, Burton skied the trail and “found only congestion—one skier every five minutes.” His solution to the backcountry traffic jam was to propose a new ski area in the Adirondacks. The seeds were thus sowed for the creation of Whiteface Ski Area, following state voter approval of an amendment to the “forever wild” provision.

The decline of backcountry ski trails was swift. The Wright Peak Ski Trail was maintained until about the early 1960s, but Whiteface and other lift-served slopes stole its thunder. The trail faded into obscurity.

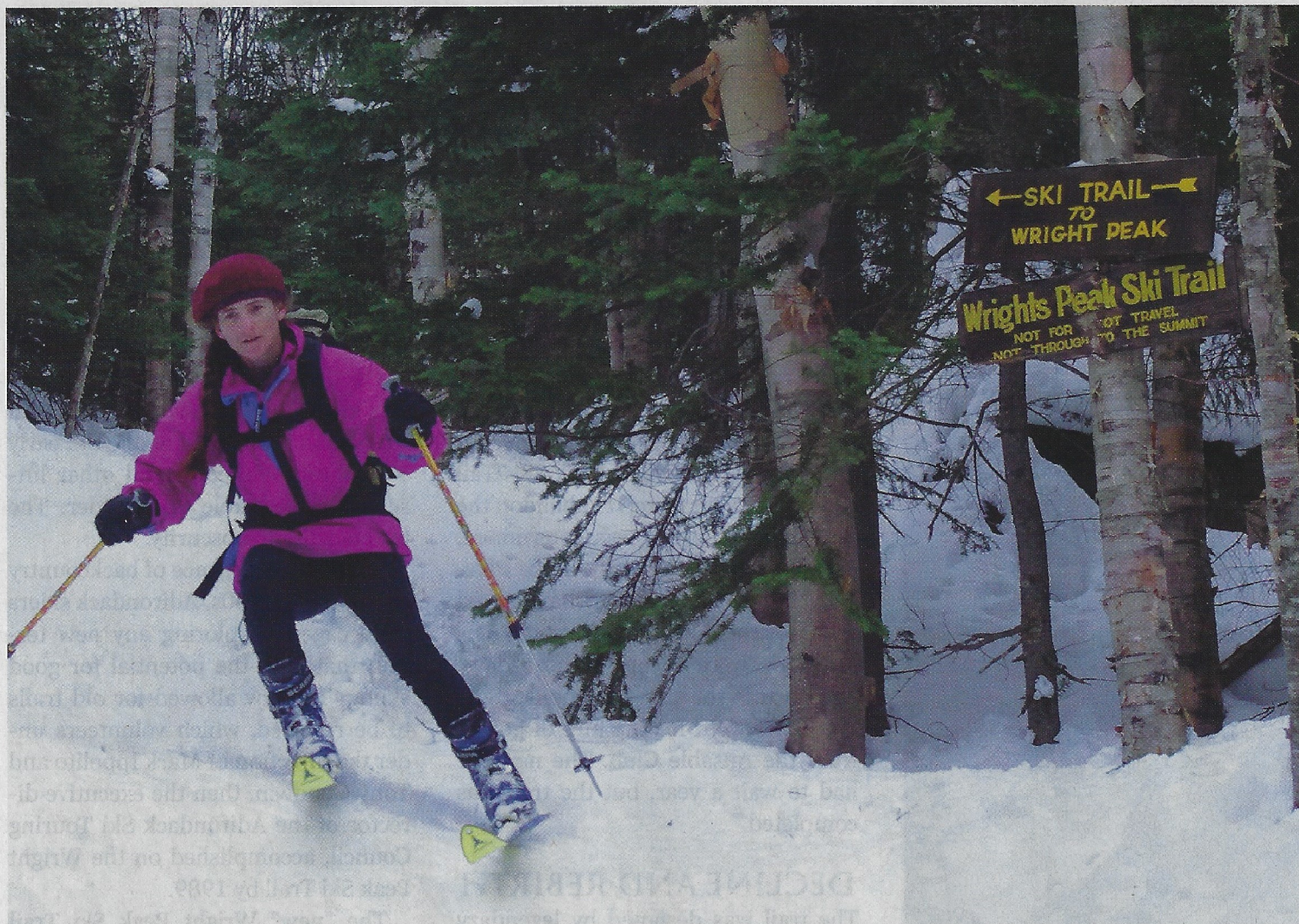
With the resurgence of backcountry skiing in the 1980s, Adirondack skiers were eagerly exploring any new terrain that held the potential for good skiing. The law allowed for old trails to be restored, which volunteers under the direction of Mark Ippolito and Tony Goodwin, then the executive director of the Adirondack Ski Touring Council, accomplished on the Wright Peak Ski Trail by 1989.

The “new” Wright Peak Ski Trail was never recut all the way to the summit out of concern that summer hikers would start using it and trample fragile alpine vegetation. As a result, the top of the trail remains intentionally obscure. That has succeeded in warding off the hikers, but it has also stymied many a skier hoping to drop into the trail from the top.

He and his friends watched enviously as the Civilian Conservation Corps built exciting ski trails throughout New England, while Adirondack skiers were forced to negotiate narrow, unforgiving hiking trails.

Burton decided that Wright Peak would make an excellent location for a ski trail. It was easily accessible and had a good gradient for skiing. He managed to persuade New York State Conservation Commissioner Lithgow Osborne that he could build a “self-concealing” trail, and Osborne

THE WRIGHT PEAK SKI TRAIL CAPTURES THE SPIRIT OF THE BEST 1930S-ERA TRAILS: DRAMATIC ALPINE TERRAIN AND VISTAS ON THE SUMMIT, AND THE POWDER YOU CAN ENJOY ALL THE WAY DOWN.



The Wright Peak Ski Trail sign is visible near the junction where it meets the hiking trail. David Goodman

FINDING THE TRAIL

To be certain you find the trail, your best bet is to climb it from the bottom, where it departs from the Algonquin Trail. From ADK's High Peaks Information Center (HPIC), take the blue-marked Van Hoevenberg Trail 0.9 mile to the Algonquin Trail junction, then follow the yellow-marked trail to Algonquin and Wright Peak. You soon cross a junction with the Whales Tail Ski Trail, which was cut in 1937 and leads up and over a saddle between Whales Tail Mountain and Wright Peak, then drops to Marcy Dam. (This is an enjoyable and more moderate ski, but it needs at least a foot of snow to be skiable, and is prone to melting early because of its southern exposure.)

The hiking trail up Wright and Algonquin climbs gradually, then crosses MacIntyre Brook at around 3000 feet

and ascends more steeply. It snakes briefly through a dense conifer forest and then emerges into a stunning grove of birch trees. The green forest gives way to a white-on-white world.

The bottom of the Wright Peak Ski Trail intersects the hiking trail at 3100 feet. Most skiers are advised to climb the ski trail from here to the summit. Those who enjoy a treasure hunt and want to find the trail from the summit should continue on the hiking trail, soon crossing an old abandoned trail at an arrow. A few hundred yards farther is a camping area, and then a prominent waterfall that crosses the trail and empties into a major drainage.

After 3.1 miles, you reach a junction. The trail left, with blue markers, leads to the summit of Wright Peak in 0.4 mile. As you climb steeply you soon reach timberline. It is best to suit up for the summit just before stepping

out onto the rocky ridge. You will have to remove your skis and climb over rocks to reach the actual summit. Be warned that the summit can be plastered in rime ice and footing can be treacherous. Expect the full force of the weather on the exposed summit, and don't attempt it if visibility is poor or conditions are deteriorating.

From the summit there are fantastic views of the enormous slides on Colden, the snow-plastered dome of Algonquin Peak, and Mt. Marcy. Your 360-degree panorama also includes Whiteface and Heart Lake.

TOP-DOWN STRATEGY

After savoring this scenery, it is time to find the top of the Wright Peak Ski Trail. From the summit, walk along the rocky ridge about fifty feet directly toward Marcy, then stop and look down toward Heart Lake directly north. You will see a prominent rock

EXPECT THE FULL FORCE OF THE WEATHER ON THE EXPOSED SUMMIT, AND DON'T ATTEMPT IT IF VISIBILITY IS POOR OR CONDITIONS ARE DETERIORATING.

about one hundred feet down with a geologically rare right-angle corner on it. It's as if Heart Lake and the rock are pointing at each other. Walk down off the summit ridge to this rock. Just above it, turn right, scramble over a small ridge, and see a narrow chute that heads downhill. Ski this chute about eighty feet until it ends, then look for where a six- to eight-foot-wide trail breaks right. Follow this trail as it contours east (toward Marcy), then begins gently descending.

The trail has benefited in recent years from the efforts of volunteers who have clipped, maintained, and slightly widened it. From the top, the trail opens gradually and maintains a double fall line. It repeatedly traverses and drops, with the downhill sections getting progressively longer and wider. The trail widens to about fifteen feet, and the skiing becomes steadily better.

The trail enters the huge birch glade that you saw from the hiking trail. This is a scenic and skiing highlight, as the fall line shots get longer through this gorgeous forest. The trail snaps back and forth numerous times throughout its downhill journey, like a snake scrambling for cover.

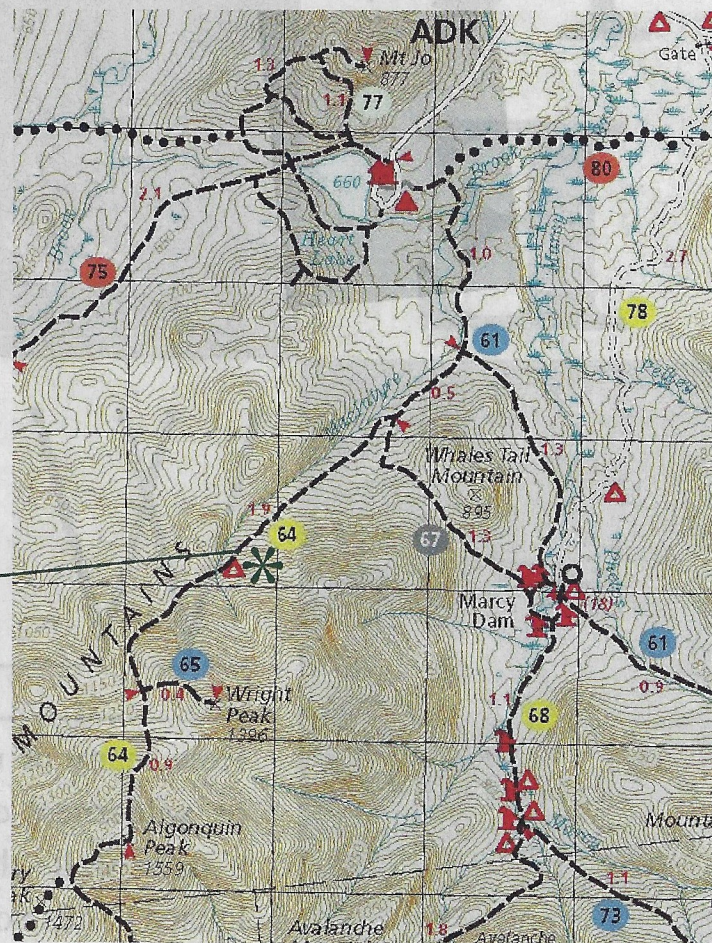
After about a mile, you reach the Algonquin Trail. As you continue swinging turns down the hiking trail, you may have the sense that you are still on the ski trail. That's because you are: The original Wright Peak Ski Trail continued all the way to the junction with

the Whales Tail Ski Trail. In 1974, the Algonquin Trail was relocated to this lower section of the Wright Peak Ski Trail. The result is that there is plenty of room for turns on the footpath.

Beware of several stream crossings as you head lower. In low snow, the hiking trail is rocky, and you must take extra care on the descent.

Below the junction with the Whales Tail Ski Trail, the Algonquin Trail rolls

*** Starting at the Adirondak Loj, just south of Lake Placid on the Adirondack Lodge Road, follow the trail to Wright Peak and Algonquin. Approximately 0.5 mile below the col of these two summits, you will see a sign for the Wright Peak Trail on your left. Ski uphill from here, giving downhillers the right-of-way. Or for a summit descent, continue up the Wright Peak hiking trail to the summit.**



gently up and down. Continue to retrace your route back to the HPIC.

The Wright Peak Ski Trail captures the spirit of the best 1930s-era trails. It rolls with the terrain, twisting and turning all the way down, constantly surprising you. The hiking trail offers a rousing finish to the ski trail. You do not need to be an expert skier for this route—a good snowplow and the ability to stop when needed will see you through. The highlights are the dramatic alpine terrain and vistas on the summit, and the powder you can enjoy all the way down. ▲

David Goodman is the author of Best Backcountry Skiing in the Northeast: 50 Classic Ski and Snowboard Tours in New England and New York (AMC Books, 2020, bestbackcountryskiing.com), which is reviewed on page 20, and from which this article is adapted with permission. He hosts "The Vermont Conversation," a public affairs radio show and podcast of VTDigger.org.