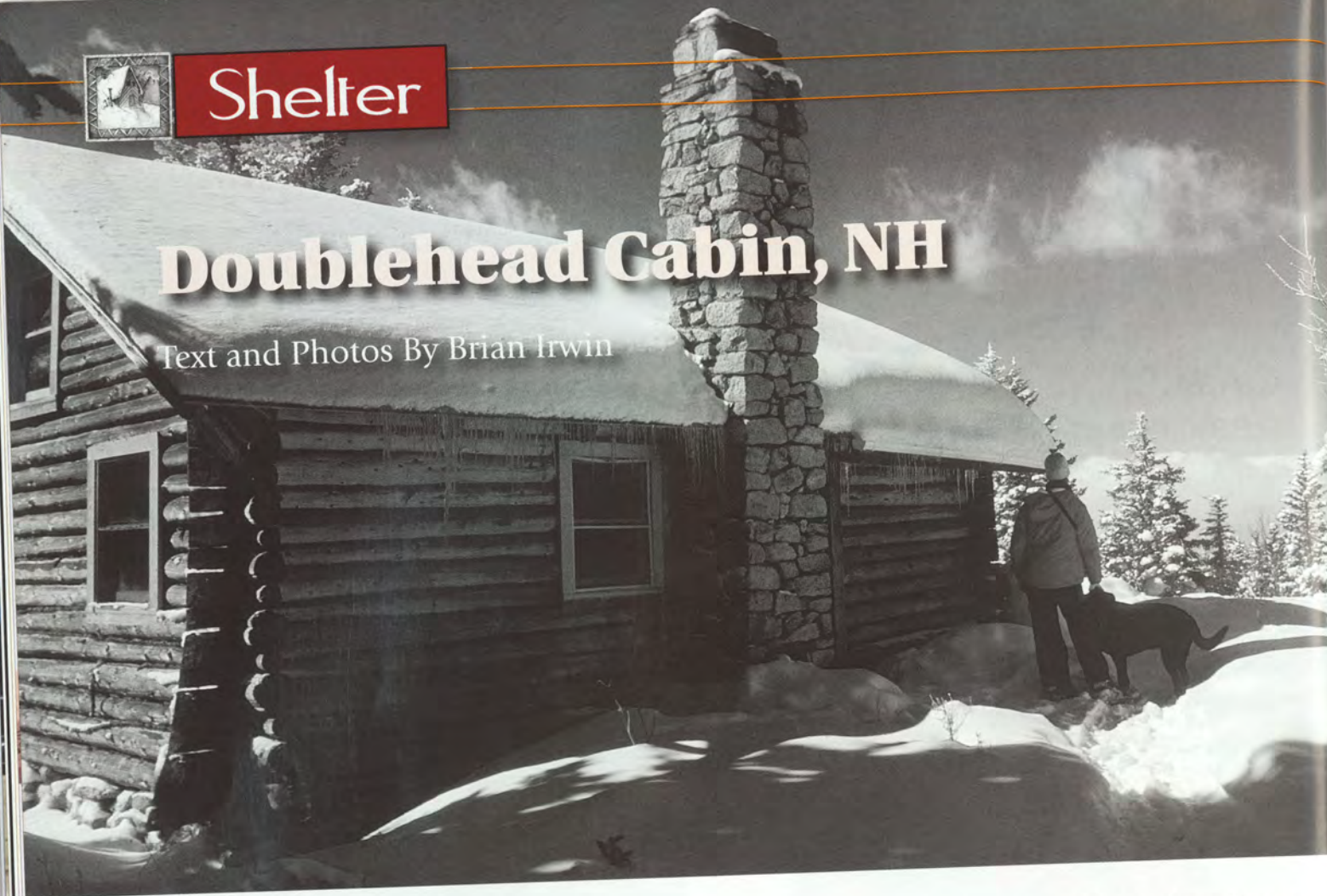


## Shelter

# Doublehead Cabin, NH

Text and Photos By Brian Irwin



Given the region's history as the birthplace of North American backcountry skiing, the Northeast has a surprising paucity of backcountry huts. Without the wide-open expanses of the west, the expansion of communities further into the tighter mountains of New England has forced an almost total absence of isolated backcountry like the elaborate Canadian lodges of Assiniboine or Lake O'Hara. No matter how far you are in the backcountry, you're usually no more than five miles as the crow flies from a hotel, pub or coffee shop. Organized hut systems like the 10th Mountain or San Juan Huts are present, but considering that the only long, sustained traverse in New England is the violent, wind-scoured Presidential range, most of these huts sit closed in winter. Though done by the dedicated, the ski traverse of the Presidentials is often a sufferfest, not a powderfest.

In New England most of our huts are isolated structures, usually not part of a system, and most—but not all—see more use as hiking shelters than as skiing shelters.

The Doublehead Cabin is no exception, though it is exceptional.

The Doublehead Cabin is an old, rather rickety log building that sits on the summit of North Doublehead, a peak just 15 minutes from the center of North Conway, NH. Built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930's, Doublehead served as a warming hut and shelter for skiers who came to run the Doublehead Ski Trail. Also cut by the CCC, the Doublehead Trail was created as part of a larger project to slice classic ski runs down the faces of the mountains surrounding the developing resort town of Jackson, NH.

Envisioned as a mecca for wealthy and adventurous visitors from Boston and New York, the region surrounding Pinkham Notch and Franconia Notch contained a vast number of historic backcountry ski trails that later went on to develop into commercial ski areas like Cannon Mountain, Wildcat Mountain and Black Mountain. While these areas still have backcountry trails (see the Cannon/Mittersill Open Boundaries on page 24), they often abut or overlook the

modern lifts or parking lots of these ski areas. Doublehead, however, was almost forgotten and never saw modern development on its faces or surrounding land.

Today the Doublehead Ski Trail is not forgotten, but it's far from crowded. It's more of an escape for local backcountry skiers who seek refuge from the crowded Sherburne Ski Trail, Gulf of Slides and Tuckerman Ravine. It's also a much different experience.

The trail is relatively short, only 1.8 miles from summit to trailhead, but sports a 1,600-foot vertical drop. Its moderately steep grade makes it somewhat challenging but not overly so. The upper 800 vertical feet are the steepest, traversing northeast with double fall lines that give way to quick drops and winding switchbacks with plenty of width for turning, snowplowing or bailing out. The trail continues down the lower half, winding due west and directly facing the scenic views of Mount Chocura before dumping out on a logging road 100 feet from your car, without having to walk or pole at all.

Like all backcountry skiing in New

England, conditions are fickle, and skiing requires adequate coverage to hide some of the waterbars and rocks. But while other areas often demand six feet of snow to hide the enormous boulders and glacial moraine, the Doublehead Trail needs only a few feet of snow. A good year can bring a deep base of over 60 inches or more, which often stays well into spring under the shaded protection of the forest, long after the lift-served areas have melted out.

While fit parties can skin and ski Doublehead in a few hours after work, the best way to soak up the atmosphere and history of Doublehead is to stay in the cabin. Doublehead's old structure has its share of creaks, drafts and all of the elements of small cabins that make them, in essence, perfect.

Its rocky perch faces northwest, with a view from the front step—and the window next to the top bunk—opening across a treeless area to New Hampshire's granite wonders. Mount Washington and its famed ravines appear so close you'd think you could hit them with a thrown stone.

The cabin sleeps eight, with a center living area complete with table and woodstove, which surprisingly throws off enough heat to allow you to play cribbage comfortably in only a fleece on even the coldest nights. There is a privy, but no running water or propane, so you'll need to melt snow to cook. But for only \$20 per night (for the entire cabin!), it's a pretty good deal.

You can approach the cabin by skinning up the Doublehead Ski Trail, up the Old Path (which branches off the Ski Trail after 0.6 miles, or from the col between North and South Doublehead peaks. All of the circuits are about three and a half miles round trip, so you can squeeze in a few laps in a day if you're motivated. Even if you're not, it's well worth the effort for a single run. To glide the twisted, convoluted trail, to imagine the leather boot and derby hat clad men and women of the 1930's Dartmouth Outdoor Club and to sip wine by a crackling fire as the sun sets on the Yale Headwall is an experience that you'll never forget.

## Beta

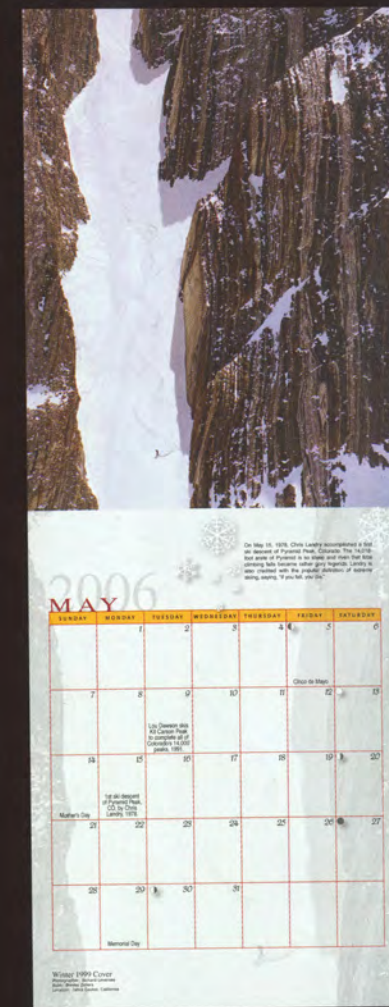
**Directions:** The Doublehead trailhead is located off of Dundee Road. To get there from North Conway take Route 16 north until you see a railroad museum on your right. Turn right onto Town Line Road. Take your first left and an immediate right onto Dundee Road. Go for about 10 minutes, and you'll see the sign on your right. The gate there is sometimes (and unpredictably) closed, so if you need to you can access Dundee Road directly off 16B from Jackson. Turn right onto Dundee Road. The trailhead will be a few miles down on your left.

**Reservations:** To reserve the cabin, call the Saco Ranger Station of the White Mountain National Forest at (603) 447-5448. The fee is \$20 per night. The cabin is kept locked; you pick up the key on the first day of your reservation.

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