



Left to right »
Chris Searles, Chris Belby, and Michelle Zimmerman at the base of Peak 8 at Breckenridge.

LET MY PEOPLE SKI (UPHILL)

DESPITE LITIGATION FEARS, MANY U.S. RESORTS EMBRACE UPHILL SKIERS. By Brian Irwin

The summit patrol

shack at New Hampshire's Cranmore Mountain Resort looks a bit like a dorm room. As bacon pops on the George Foreman panini press, I sip stale coffee and look through the steamy window toward the bullwheel. Through the morning fog an uphill skier appears. He flashes his pass to me, the patroller on duty, and strips off his climbing skins, and glides away.

Seeing alpine-touring equipment in-area was once as rare as spotting a monoskier, but as fitness-minded skiers look for convenient places to earn turns, the popularity of

skinning up the slopes of areas like Cranmore has risen. Many areas have seen such an increase in uphill traffic that they've established policies to protect themselves from liability and ensure mountain safety.

The rules differ widely from mountain to mountain. Cranmore allows climbing only during operating hours and requires passes. Wildcat Mountain, just north on Route 16 and across from Mount Washington's Tuckerman Ravine Trail—arguably the most frequently skinned trail in the country—takes a similar approach but

allows climbing only on one designated route.

According to Tomas Prindle, director of marketing for Wildcat and Attitash, which share owners, the lift pass protects the resort from litigation by

titash does not," he says.

Indeed, uphill-access policy often depends on who owns the land, and even then it's unpredictable. Cannon Mountain, about an hour west of Wildcat, firmly opposes

believe...skinning is an out-of-bounds, off-piste, somewhere-else pursuit. We do not wish to incur any liability for non-lift accessed user groups."

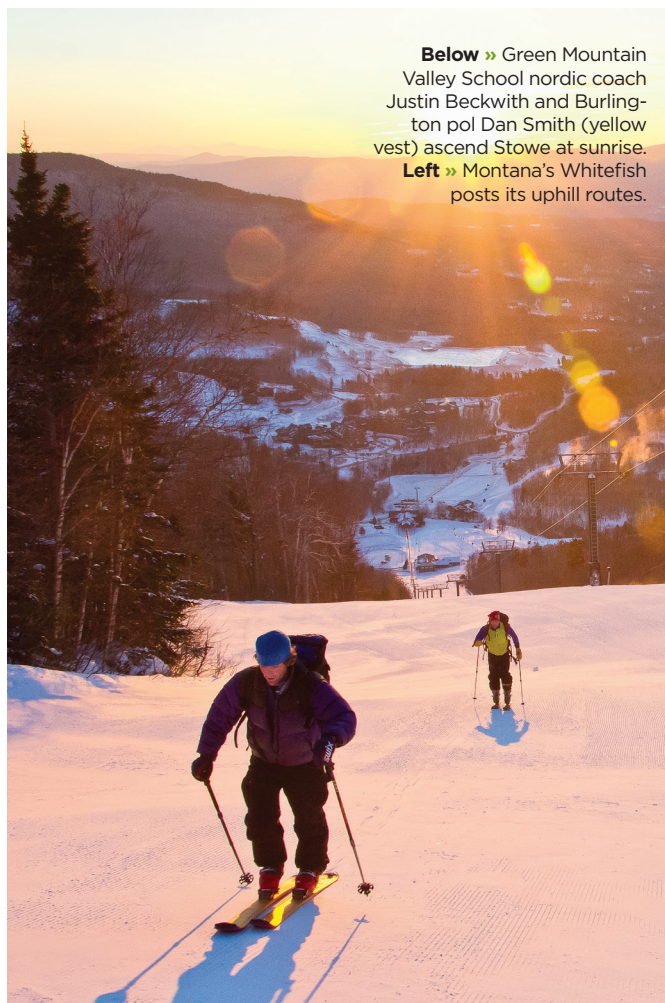
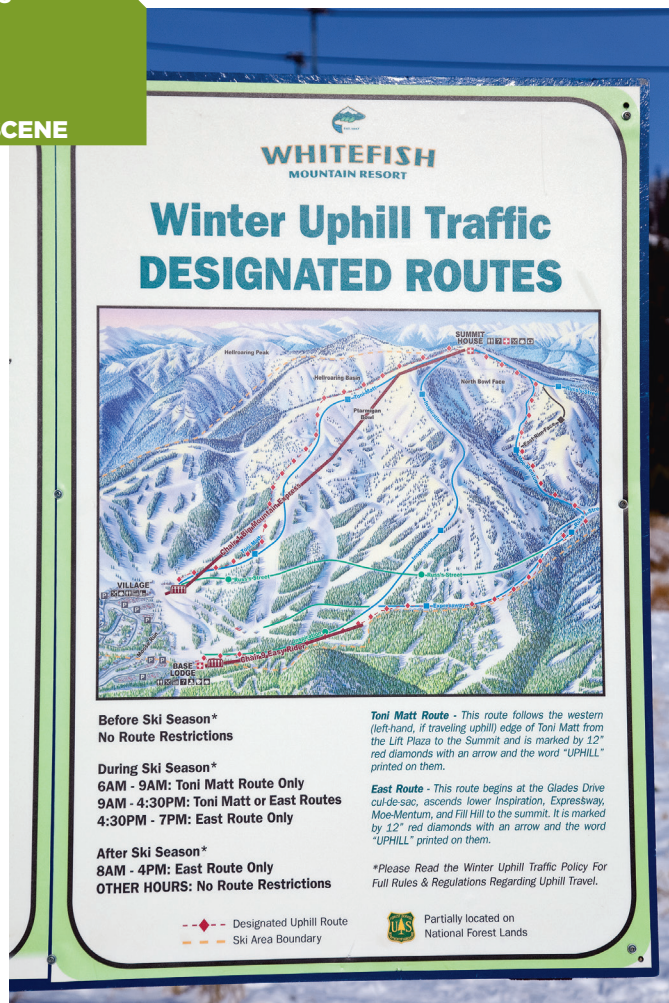
Such a defensive approach may someday save

"We believe...skinning is an out-of-bounds, off-piste, somewhere-else pursuit," Cannon's DeVivio says. "We do not wish to incur any liability for non-lift accessed user groups."

virtue of the liability waiver it carries. Yet at Attitash skinning is forbidden. Prindle cites landownership as the differentiating factor. "Wildcat operates within the White Mountain National Forest and At-

skinning despite being located in a state park where the mission is "to provide New Hampshire's citizens and guests with outstanding recreational...experiences." John DeVivio, GM of Cannon, says, "We

DeVivio's area millions in litigation, yet it seems fear of litigation is expressed differently from region to region—and Western areas seem to be more liberal about uphill traffic than Eastern ones. In Colorado,



Below » Green Mountain Valley School nordic coach Justin Beckwith and Burlington pol Dan Smith (yellow vest) ascend Stowe at sunrise.
Left » Montana's Whitefish posts its uphill routes.

An Upwardly Mobile Pursuit

\$17.8

Sales, in millions, of AT and randonnée equipment in 2012-13 (up 22 percent over 2011-12)

43

Percentage increase in AT-boot sales from 2011-12 to 2012-13
 Source: SIA Industry Research

The United States Ski Mountaineering Association promotes uphill skiing of all kinds across the country and publishes an up-to-date list of resorts' uphill policies. Information about these evolving regulations, as well as information about avalanche-education programs, can be found at ussma.org.

Aspen Skiing Company allows skinning on all four of its properties, tailoring rules to suit each hill. Copper allows skinning all season during non-operating hours with a free uphill pass that carries a liability waiver. And Montana's Whitefish gives the nod to uphill traffic in the morning and evening and even permits skinning and skiing for two weeks after closing. An exception is Wyoming's Jackson Hole, which, despite hosting a popular randonnée race, bans skinning and even had a 78-year-old physician arrested in 2011 for skinning up to watch his daughter race.

But the best example of the Western approach may be Steamboat, Colorado. According to Loryn Kasten,

who handles the resort's communications, embracing this burgeoning pursuit is simply good PR. Skinning, she says, "supports

Skinning "supports excitement for enjoying our winter playground," says Steamboat's Loryn Kasten.

excitement for enjoying our winter playground. Accessing the mountain before and after hours has been a popular activity in Steamboat for many years."

Steamboat's friendliness has fostered a collaboration between locals and the resort. Its policy simply encourages (but doesn't require) skinnors to talk with ski patrol about safe route selection. Patrol then grants them reflective armbands to

sport while ascending.

While fear of litigation drives policy at most areas, they're dealing largely with hypothetical situations:

Skiers flossing themselves on winch-cat cables. Uphill-downhill collisions. Uphillers ditched in the glades after sweep, left for dead.

But none of these things has happened yet, according to an executive from a major ski-area insurance company, who spoke anonymously. "Although there is risk, we don't know exactly how to measure it at this point. It's never been tested. But make no

mistake. There's liability in this endeavor."

It's too early to know where the real risks lie and how to confront them. Even though areas with relatively relaxed policies have escaped negative consequences, only time will unveil the safest, fairest solution. Until then, the industry's approach will likely remain tentative. But while uphill skiers will need to be selective about where they slap skins to groomed snow, they've still got welcoming venues across the country.

"Overall," says Ben Wilcox, Cranmore's GM, "we are very supportive of this sport." ♦

Brian Irwin, a patroller and family physician in New Hampshire, writes about Huntington Ravine on page 58.