



Photo by Sue Bibeau

A skier crosses a frozen wetland in the Debar Mountain Wild Forest.

Get in the loop

Debar circuit offers skiers solitude and scenery

BY PHIL BROWN
EXPLORER STAFF

January had been depressing. We had more thaws than snowfalls. At the end of the month, we had less than six inches of snow in the woods around Saranac Lake. So when we got a few inches one day in early February, I figured I better go skiing before even this paltry offering melted.

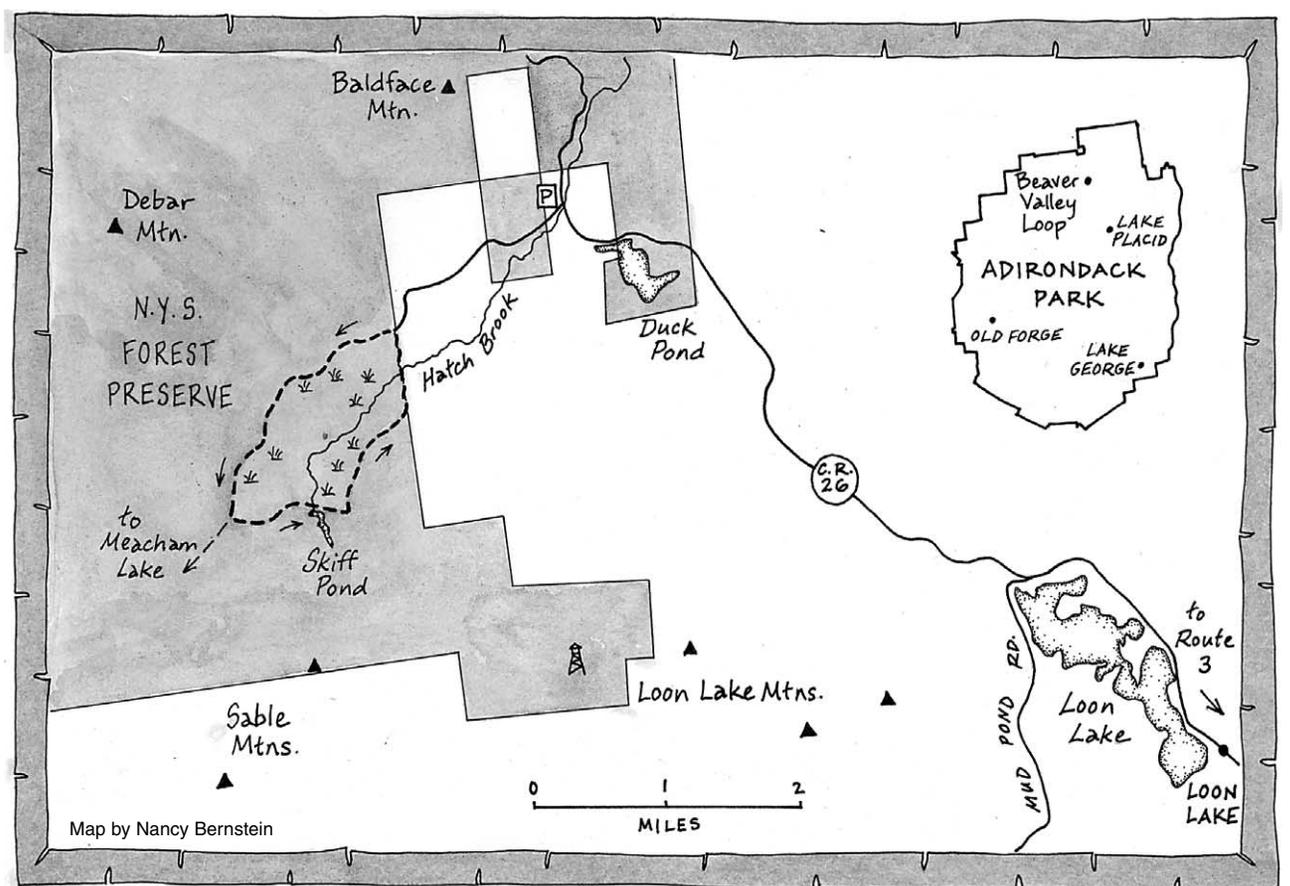
I decided to try an eight-mile loop along old woods roads in the Debar Mountain Wild Forest, about 20 miles north of Saranac Lake. It turned out to be a good choice: Not only does that region typically get more snow, but the trails don't require a lot of cover to be skiable. Conditions were fine.

The idea for this tour came from *Tony Goodwin's Ski and Snowshoe Trails in the Adirondacks*. Goodwin rates it as a novice-intermediate ski, but novices who can snowplow don't have much to worry about. The hills are gentle and the trails smooth and wide. In a variation of this tour, you can ski 10.2 miles to Meacham Lake, finishing there, but this requires a long car shuttle.

Goodwin calls the circuit the Beaver Valley Loop. Basically, it takes you around the headwaters of Hatch Brook, which apparently is hot real estate in the beaver world. The trip begins on a logging road off county Route 26, just past the bridge over Hatch Brook, which is located about five miles north of Loon Lake.

As I skied up the logging road, bordered by trees dusted with snow, I reflected that the state recently has bought recreational rights to hundreds of miles of similar roads in the northern Adirondacks and that these would make good skiing when snow is too sparse to cover rocky hiking trails.

The logging road and the main trail to Meacham Lake are a snowmobile route that pierces the heart of the ▶▶



DIRECTIONS

From the four corners in Bloomingdale, drive 9.3 miles east on NY 3 to County 26 (look for a sign for Loon Lake). Turn left and go 10.4 miles, passing Loon Lake en route. Park at the start of a logging road, which you'll see on the left immediately after crossing Hatch Brook. (The bridge over the brook is about a half-mile beyond Duck Pond, at the end of a downhill.)

►► Debar Mountain Wild Forest. During my midweek ski, I did not see or hear any machines, but a friend who did the same circuit on a Saturday not long afterward encountered about 50 snowmobiles. The commotion disturbed one of the chief attractions of these remote woods—their utter quiet. The state has proposed moving snowmobile trails out of the interior of the Forest Preserve, and this seems a perfect candidate for relocation. Meanwhile, if you ski this on a weekend, prepare to share the trail with snowmobilers. Another option: You can avoid most of the snowmobile traffic by doing a round trip to Skiff Pond rather than doing the full circuit.

OK, back to skiing. After 1.5 miles, the road leads, with one short climb, to state land and the first of three major vistas to be savored along the Beaver Valley Loop. There is an open field here, dotted with shrubs and young trees, that offers wonderful views of Baldface Mountain to the north, Debar Mountain to the northwest and the Loon Lake Mountains to the south. Years ago, when the state tried to introduce elk to this region, the headquarters for the Debar Game Management Area were located in this field.

The snowmobile route continues south for 0.2 miles to a junction with three trails. You can follow the tracks, but it's more fun to ski among the trees. At the junction, you can continue on the snowmobile route, on the right, or take the middle trail. The trail on the left is your return route.

I chose the middle path. Soon I was gliding downhill through a stand of pines. When I got to the bottom of the hill, I discovered an open creek where once had been a bridge. The trail on the other side looked overgrown. Nevertheless, I decided to take my chances. I avoided the open water by skiing through a small, frozen wetland. On the other side, the trail turned out to be just fine. I followed it up a short hill and came out on the snowmobile trail again.

Over the next half-hour, I went up and down several other small hills, crossing streams on sturdy bridges maintained for snowmobiles. Much of the time I could see the Hatch Brook floodplain between the trees. Eventually, I arrived at a junction marked by two metal gateposts. The snowmobile route went straight, but I turned left onto a narrow trail through a hardwood forest. The snow on all the branches made a white latticework.

Now the only tracks were animal tracks.

In fact, a set of prints went right up the center of the trail. At first I assumed they were deer tracks, but when I stopped to examine them I saw that the prints had four toes, with claws. Must be coyote, I thought. I followed the tracks for quite a while, until they wandered off into the woods.

Less than a half-hour from the junction, I coasted down a hill to Skiff Pond, a man-made pond created in the game-management days. It drains like a bathtub into a six-foot-wide vertical pipe. Despite its artificial origins, the pond offers perhaps the most scenic vista of the trip: a view across the frozen surface toward the frosted Sable Mountains and Loon Lake Mountains.

Of course, this is when my digital camera failed, apparently because the batteries were cold. I spent some time trying to warm the camera in my armpit. When that didn't work, I put the batteries in my glove for a while, to no avail. I wasted 15 or 20 minutes in frustration, but just as I was about to leave, I got my reward: A coyote emerged from the woods and trotted onto the pond. It stopped, looked at me and then continued nonchalantly on its way. Because the coyote was limping, I thought maybe it had got its paw caught in a trap. After it went back into the woods, I skied across the ice to inspect its tracks, but I didn't see any blood.

Leaving the pond, I ascended two short, moderately steep hills—the only time I had to herringbone—and arrived in 10 minutes at an inconspicuous junction. You probably wouldn't even notice it if you weren't looking, but there is a trail on the right that leads to a pass between the Loon Lake and Sable ranges. I had taken that trail a few years earlier when I bushwhacked to the Loon Lake Mountain fire tower.

Just beyond the junction, I glided softly downhill to a half-frozen stream. After crossing the stream, I enjoyed two similar descents and then came to a pair of bridges over Hatch Brook. Here is the tour's third open vista—looking over the alders toward Debar Mountain in the northwest.

I next ascended through a stand of tall pines back to the four-way trail junction and the old field. Skiing through the clearing, I enjoyed for a second time the view of Baldface, which lay dead ahead. I paused to soak in the scenery a bit more, then headed down the logging road. What followed was the longest downhill of the day—an easy finish to a fun outing. ■



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Skiff Pond invites skiers to get off the trail to enjoy the view of the Loon Lake Mountains, on the left, and Sable Mountains, on the right.

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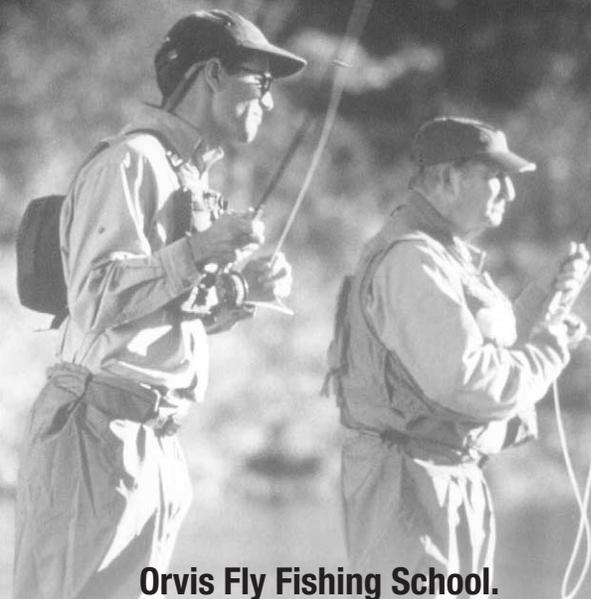
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