

Pharaoh Lake on skis

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Of the deer, there was little left. We were first humans to find it, a fact evident by the lack of ski trails or snowshoe prints. There was no warning of the carnage ahead—just an open clearing in the woods, and then the shouts of awe from my friend Jim, who was in the lead.

In the middle of the clearing, on top of a patch of matted snow, were a few splotches of blood, some hair and a single organ—a large intestine. That was it. The snow, though a few days old, was pristine enough to let us see the entire event, almost as if it were occurring in front of us: the deer tracks, coming from the woods, and the tracks of the coyotes zeroing in from different angles. And here, in front of us, the kill.

It's rare in the Adirondacks to come across such dramatic signs of nature's ferocity. But in the Pharaoh Lake Wilderness, anything is possible. It was early January, and Jim, Rick and I were attempting a north-south ski traverse of the region. The terrain here is perfect for cross-country skiing. Trails are plentiful and have mostly easy grades. If you have two cars, it's possible to plot a route that's almost all downhill. The hardest part is finding the trailhead.

"I think this is the road," Jim remarked as we drove past winter camps on the east shore of Brant Lake. There were ice-fisherman heading out onto the frozen surface. Most of the homes were boarded up. After a few U-turns, we left a car at the Pharaoh Road trailhead and took a second car north to the trailhead on Crane Pond Road.

Ours was the only car there. There were ski tracks going in, but they died out, giving us virgin powder in about 10 inches of snow. The traverse takes you east to Crane Pond, then south past Glidden Marsh to Pharaoh Lake. After a couple of miles of mostly flat skiing there is one large descent just before Pharaoh Lake. In three-tenths of a mile, the trail drops 300 feet. On this day, there wasn't much snow covering the rocks on the hill. Jim went first. Worried about his 25-year-old wooden skis, he gingerly made his way through the woods, traversing, stopping, turning, traversing back. To heck with that, I decided, and pointed my skis downhill, dropping into a telemark turn when I started going too fast. That was quicker than Jim's technique, but the scrape-scrape of my skis rubbing against rock was not exactly reassuring. I imagine that hitting this hill later in the year, say with about two more feet of snow, would be a lot more enjoyable.

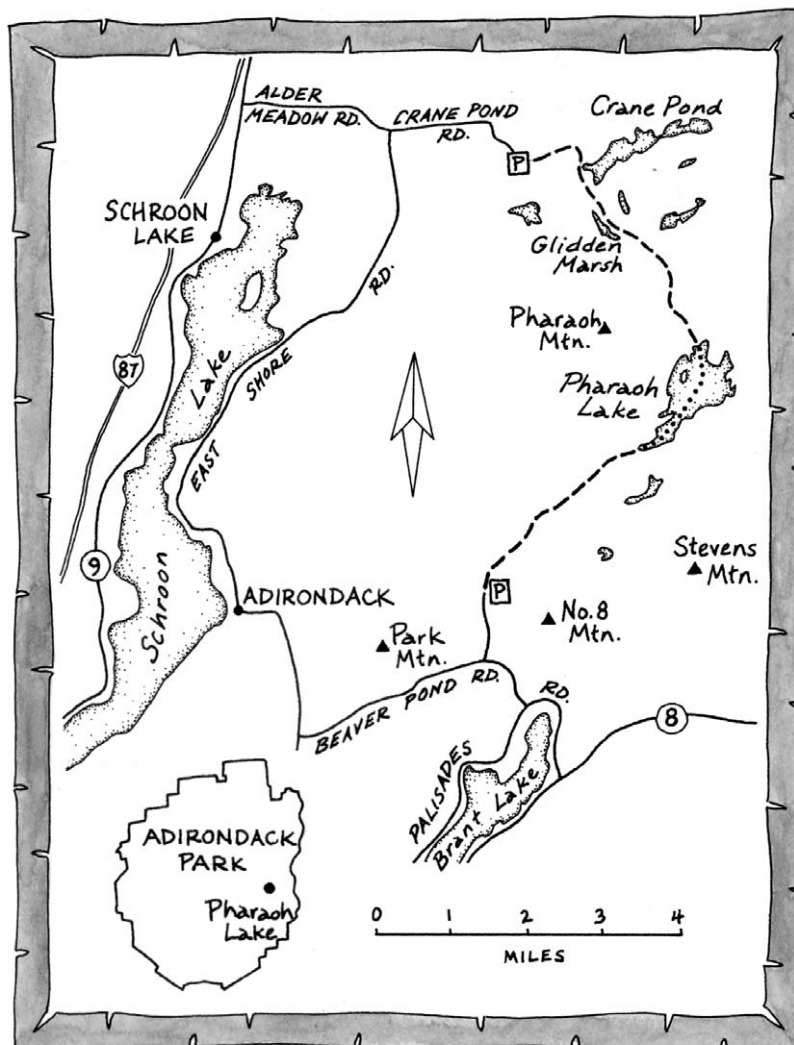
At the bottom, we had a stellar view of Pharaoh Lake, one of the largest wilderness lakes in the Adirondacks. After lunch on the shore, we stepped back into our skis and plowed onto the snow-covered ice. The sun was just beginning to peek out of clouds, and the air was warm. As we started skiing, wet glop beneath the snow started to ice up our skis, forcing us to stop a few times to scrape off the mess. But the beauty of Pharaoh Lake made us quit cursing and just enjoy the view. Off to the west, the bare summit of 2,556-foot-high Pharaoh Mountain sparkled. As we headed south, we passed peninsulas and tiny rock islands.

From the southern end of the lake, we reached the trail that led back to our other car. This route is much more popular, and the 2.5 miles to the trailhead was well packed and mostly downhill. The easy descent was awesome, with fun curves and occasional frozen bogs off to the side to make the forest interesting. We arrived back at the car in no time, making the last few miles seem like a wonderful blur.



Photo by Gary Randorf

Skiing across an Adirondack lake affords a different view of the winter landscape.



Directions

Southern trailhead: From Northway Exit 25, drive east on NY 8 about 8 miles to Palisades Road, at the east end of Brant Lake. Turn left and go about 1.5 miles to Beaver Pond Road. Take Beaver Pond Road about 2.5 miles to a sharp turn with a dirt road on the right. Follow the dirt road for a mile to a parking area. This is the start of the unplowed Pharaoh Lake Road.

Northern trailhead: Continue driving on Beaver Pond Road to the hamlet of Adirondack (the road takes a sharp right where it meets Johnson Road). From Adirondack, turn north at the general store and follow this road along the east side of Schroon Lake for several miles to Crane Pond Road. Turn right and drive 2.4 miles to parking lot.