

# DOWN HOME SKIING



Eight ski areas on a 10-day road trip served up the best of Atlantic Canada.

**I** was riding the chair at Nova Scotia's largest ski area with new friends Thor Durning and Connor Scallion when I noticed what appeared to be the crown fracture of an avalanche across the top of a run called Headwall. Headwall is one of Wentworth ski area's steepest runs and is tipped at perhaps 40 degrees for 50 metres or so. Avalanches may be a common hazard at resorts in western Canada, but I never thought I would see one in Nova Scotia.

"That happened a few days ago," said Thor. "The snowmaking crew left the guns on that slope all night. The temperature warmed up and the new wet snow was too much for the bottom layer to take, so the top layer let go and slid." Fortunately, the area was closed at the time so no one was hurt. You never know quite what to expect when on a ski trip through Atlantic Canada.



Crabbe Mountain

It seemed like a good idea at the time, but many of our ski friends thought otherwise when my wife, Heather, and I mentioned that we planned an epic road trip to visit eight ski areas in Atlantic Canada in a 10-day period. "But why?" they rejoined in unison. "What about the weather, snowstorms and who knows what else?"

Up to now the only Atlantic Canadian resort we'd skied was Marble Mountain, near Corner Brook, Newfoundland, and it's certainly a more than respectable ski resort by eastern Canada standards. Marble has as much vertical as many Quebec ski resorts, and is known for its steep pitches and abundant snowfall. However, having lived in Corner Brook for the last 25 years, we knew Marble's twists and turns by heart. We knew nothing of the other ski areas that dot Nova Scotia's and New Brunswick's landscape, however, so last winter we decided on a road trip to see what these other areas had to offer.

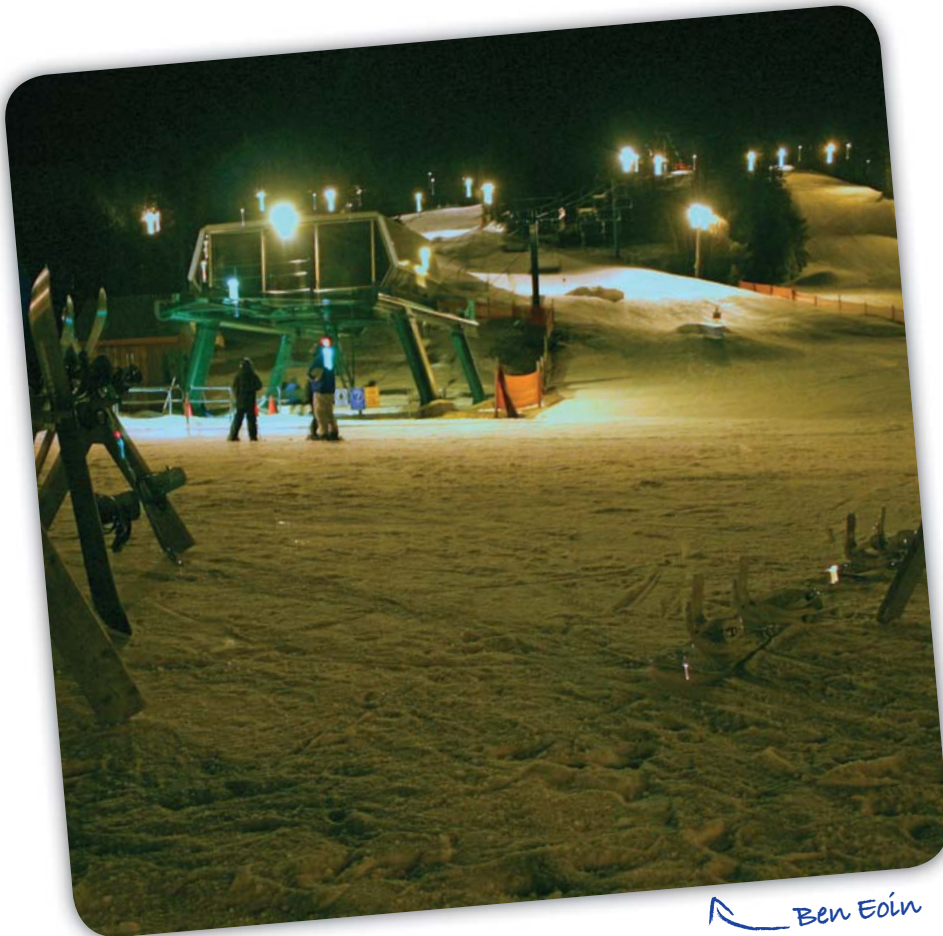
Limiting ski areas to those on or near the Trans-Canada Highway, the first one we came upon heading south from Quebec was **Mont Farlagne**, near Edmundston, N.B. We arrived at the Auberge Les Jardins on a Monday evening in late January and owner Val Martin called out before we even had a chance to put down our bags.

"How did you know our names?" I asked in amazement.

"You look like skiers," Martin said matter-of-factly. This introduction to skiing in the Maritimes pretty much set the friendly tone for the rest of our trip. Val and his wife, Francine, joined us for a fine dinner and proudly told us what the area had to offer the winter visitor.

The next day was sunny and we explored two cross-country trail systems since Mont Farlagne was open only for nightskiing on Tuesdays. For lunch we sampled "poyes," a delicious buckwheat pancake that's unique to this area of New Brunswick. Later in the day we headed to Mont Farlagne for a fine evening of skiing with some

Story by Keith Nicol // Photography by Heather Nicol



Ben Eoin

of the local telemarkers and ski instructors. Farlagne had been having a good season so far and the packed powder turned out to be some of the best snow of our trip. The lights of Edmundston and nearby St. Jacques twinkled in the valley below, and I could easily understand why the locals were pleased to have this ski area on their doorstep.

As we packed up our car the following morning, we adapted a weather expression used in various parts of the country: "If you like the weather, don't count on it lasting." As far as the drive went, the freezing rain fortunately turned to plain old rain for the two-hour trip to **Crabbe Mountain** near Fredericton. We dodged ice storms, since the radio reported that in parts of southern New Brunswick and P.E.I., thousands of people were without electricity from an ice storm the previous day and now Edmundston and northern New Brunswick were being hit as we drove south to Crabbe.

We arrived at the ski hill in dense fog, but fortunately the rain had stopped and the skiing turned out to be very good, especially on the lower slopes where the fog had lifted. I was joined by Marketing Manager Stefan Billings and GM Jason Crawford. Energetic and enthusiastic about what Crabbe had to offer, they took turns extolling its virtues. "We think we have the most difficult hill in the Maritimes, with good glade skiing and a terrain park with 19 features that stretches for one continuous run." "We've had more than 200 cm of snow this year so far, and we always leave some runs ungroomed for those who like powder." "Our vertical is more than 260 metres—the biggest in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick." That's more than almost all ski hills in Ontario.

A stay at the romantic Larsen's Log Lodge, with its private sauna, hot tub and intimate dining, was the perfect way to wrap up our visit to Crabbe Mountain. By the next morning the fog and rain were gone and replaced with blue and sunny skies. Next stop and a welcome addition to our trip was **Poley Mountain** near Sussex, N.B., two hours south of Crabbe. It turned out that 2008 was a big anniversary year for ski areas in the east and gives an idea how long people here have been cutting runs and building lifts in this part of Canadian ski country. Poley celebrated its 50th anniversary last season and introduced some big expansion



Wentworth

plans, which included a welcome new triple chair added for this season. As GM Cathy Cote also pointed out, "We want to be known as a beginner-intermediate area and last year we installed a Magic Carpet, which is great for new skiers. I don't know where all the three- to five-year-olds are coming from, but we've seen a huge growth in that age group."

Again I had no trouble finding some locals to show me their favourite runs. "We have a big school program," instructor Jim Olive told me proudly as we rode the lift and I could see a steady stream of yellow buses picking up and dropping off kids all afternoon. With more than 3,000 season's pass holders, up 10 per cent over last season, alpine skiing seems to be doing well in this part of southern New Brunswick.

From Poley we drove on into Nova Scotia and in two hours we were having supper at the base of **Wentworth** ski area, the largest in the province with a vertical of 248 metres. Wentworth is the granddaddy of Atlantic Canadian ski resorts and was celebrating its 75th anniversary last season. After supper we enjoyed viewing old photos, including ski trains from Halifax and, our favourite, one of a horse pulling a skier up the slope.

The next day was sunny with temperatures just below freezing and I joined Thor Durning, Connor Scallion and Melanie Edwards, who showed me the hill. We skied some of the groomers in front of the lodge, while I looked on enviously at the glade skiing. The spacing in the open birch forest was just right, but unfortunately the recent ice storm left a shiny layer of beautiful but unskiable ice in its wake.

Volunteerism is big at most ski areas in the Maritimes and Wentworth is no different. "Every fall we have members with brush saws and clippers clean up the glades so they're good for winter," Thor explained. He also took pride in showing me the large terrain park, which is front and centre at Wentworth. At just over an hour from Moncton and about 80 minutes from Halifax, Wentworth is an easy drive for skiers in Atlantic Canada's two largest cities.

With Wentworth in our rearview mirror, we set our sites on **Martock** ski area, just 45 minutes from Halifax, where we stayed that night. The evening weather forecast wasn't what we wanted to hear: "40 to 50 mm of

rain overnight ending tomorrow around noon with strong southerly winds and highs of six degrees." The next morning the warm weather and driving rain proved the forecast to be right on and we wondered if Martock would even open. Then the rain stopped as we pulled into the parking lot and the skiing turned out to be very good. Slippery when wet! This was also

year with 2,600 season's passes sold. "Now that Cape Smokey is closed we're attracting skiers from a big area," Rob explained.

That night we stayed at The Birches and were again impressed with the accommodations near some of these ski areas. The Birches Country Inn, like Larsen's Log Lodge and Auberge des Jardins, is a standout and is just a

*"We've had more than 200 cm of snow this year so far, and we always leave some runs ungroomed for those who like powder."*

good news for the organizers of the Rider's Cup, who were having their first event of the season. It shows how well-regarded Martock is for its snowboarding program and terrain park, since the next Rider's Cup event was at Mont Tremblant the following weekend and the series finished up at Sun Peaks in March.

But there's more to Martock than snowboarding, and I fell in with a group of telemarkers who were part of Atlantic Canada's only telemark instructional program. It was like spring skiing in early February and our group took full advantage of the corn snow.

Our next stop was **Ben Eoin**, located near Sydney on Cape Breton Island. Whereas most of the other ski areas in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick were located a couple of hours apart, Ben Eoin was a five-hour drive and we arrived just after noon. Ben Eoin is the smallest of the ski areas we visited, but still has a vertical drop of more than 155 metres. It has a great setting overlooking East Bay, part of the beautiful Bras d'Or Lakes, and the runs were challenging with lots of twists and rolls. Most of the runs are named for birds and my favourites were Loon Back and Sandpiper.

I was also impressed with the skills of an enthusiastic group led by Ned English, who were doing some big jumps for the camera. I joined skiers Rob Carmichael and Melissa MacDonald, who mentioned that the hill was having a great

two-minute drive to the hill.

We caught the midday ferry to Newfoundland with two more ski areas to visit. The weather forecast was again looking ominous with a major snowstorm heading for western Newfoundland. As we drove out of the ferry terminal at Port aux Basques at 7:00 p.m., with Corner Brook just over 200 clicks away, we hoped we'd make it home before the storm. It turned out we arrived just before the blizzard hit later that evening. Winds gusted to 80 kph through the night and snow was whipped horizontally. By morning the system had left behind 25 cm of snow with drifts up to a metre in places. A call to **Marble Mountain** reported that they were still digging out the lifts and hoped to open by noon. I was in touch with a telemarking buddy and we arranged to be there as the lifts opened. As we suspected, the winds had hammered the upper slopes but there was still good powder to be had on the lower slopes and in the trees. And as usual at Marble, we had the place, and the powder, to ourselves. The sun even popped out later in the afternoon and I checked out the terrain park action with some younger skiers.

So far we had visited seven ski areas in eight days, and a day at home in Corner Brook resting and catching up was in order. But the following day the sun was shining and with bare pavement under our wheels, it took about

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# DOWN HOME SKIING

five hours to reach **White Hills** near Clarendville to complete our tour. The storm that had dumped snow on Marble, however, had tracked to the north as it crossed the island and left snow mixed with rain for White Hills.

I met Larry Reid and Travis Warren and they agreed to show me some of their favourite runs. The scenery from the top of the mountain was impressive with views of Random Island, Northern Arm and the town of Clarendville. As with most places in the Atlantic provinces last year, White Hills was having a good season but the recent rain had cut into the snowpack. As we rode the lifts, Larry showed me the runs they had skied the past weekend when they had 20 cm of fresh powder. "People could ski everywhere," he said. White Hills is the most easterly ski resort in Canada and is a two-hour drive from St. John's, so it welcomes many of its skiers from that area and indeed the entire Avalon Peninsula.

When thinking back on these ski areas and our experiences, what stood out was how easy it was to meet people and how enthused they were about their local hills. We also met skiers from a group called the Ski Atlantic Seniors Club (902/826-9199), which has an innovative program that encourages older skiers to travel to the various Atlantic region ski areas. With a \$170 membership, skiers can travel to all the places we visited (except those in Newfoundland) and ski for free. Since many of the ski areas are within a few hours' drive of one another, this program seems to work very well. As one member of the group told me, "We may not have big mountains like those in the west, but this area has better skiing than you might think and it's the camaraderie that makes this an enjoyable place to ski for young and old." We couldn't agree more. ☘

## Down East Roundup

SKI AREA	WEBSITE	VERTICAL DROP, RUNS
Mont Farlagne, N.B.	www.montfarlagne.com	175 m, 22 runs
Crabbe Mountain, N.B.	www.crabbemountain.com	260 m, 22 runs
Poley Mountain, N.B.	www.poleymountain.com	201 m, 30 runs
Wentworth, N.S.	www.skiwentworth.ca	248 m, 19 runs
Martock, N.S.	www.martock.com	182 m, 7 runs
Ben Eoin, N.S.	www.skibeneoin.com	155 m, 11 runs
Marble Mountain, Nfld.	www.skimarble.com	518 m, 35 runs
White Hills, Nfld.	www.discoverwhitehills.com	230 m, 18 runs