

For Daredevil Skiing, The Season Is Now

By ETHAN TODRAS-WHITEHILL

AS ski season vanishes to slush in much of the country, it's only just beginning at Tuckerman Ravine in New Hampshire. Tens of thousands of skiers, boarders and adventurers from all over the world start arriving there in late April, and work and worry the snowy proving ground until at least June and sometimes into July.

They lug their poles, skis and boards up the mushy three-mile path to the base of the ravine, which lies on the southeast slope of Mount Washington and is one of the oldest, best-known and most difficult backcountry skiing spots in North America. Then they put on their gear, pick a run, climb it, ski it (more or less), then repeat. They come for a range of reasons, from a rite of passage to prove their skiing chops, to a rite of spring they perform with their fathers, mothers, sons and daughters.

A vast, inverted half-dome, Tuckerman is the kind of place that you photograph with a panoramic lens but still can't capture. Its volume of snowfall (it averages 55 feet in its deepest spot) and the mountain's altitude — it's the highest peak in the Northeast at 6,288 feet — makes the area too dangerous to ski in winter. But it also keeps the snow around deep into spring. It is an anomaly, a piece of the Rockies transplanted back East.

As his friends mowed their lawns and coddled spring flowers one Sunday earlier this month, Jay Wilkinson climbed the steepest ski slope he had ever seen. He had been determined to ski Tuckerman since he moved to Exeter, N.H., in 2002. Last spring, he hiked up in a foggy snowstorm, tried to ski down anyway, and tore ligaments in both his knees.

But this year he came back, on a day when the temperature neared 60 degrees and the sky shimmered bluebird blue. As Mr. Wilkinson ascended, dig-

Continued on Page 8

ging his ski boots into the steps left by the skiers above, leaning his body against the slope before him that felt at times almost vertical, he gave himself a little lecture:

"There's only one way down. There's no steps. There's no chair lift. You've got to get down, or you're going to fall down."

When he finally got to his launching point on a giant boulder — and *launch* is the right word at this backcountry bowl — he stood in line as the skiers before him gulped and jumped the 15-foot cliff that starts the run. Two skiers ahead of him chose good spots, and Mr. Wilkinson, 39, who has been skiing for 20 years in Europe, Utah and the Northeast, made a mental note to imitate their lines. The woman in front of him, sensing his anxiety, gave him some encouragement:

"Have confidence in yourself! It's all a matter of just thinking you can do it. Think positive, know where you're going to make your turn — and watch me," Mr. Wilkinson said she said. "Then she just shot off and . . . wiped out. In fine style, actually. But the pep talk was really useful."

Normal spring skiing usually involves a little jump at each turn to get your skis around in the heavy wet snow — so-called hop turns. Skiing Tuckerman involves something more like "leap turns." The best run that Sunday was made by a man who flew several feet into the air before each turn, his skis cutting into the mountainside at such a sharp angle that his cheeks looked to be touching the snow.

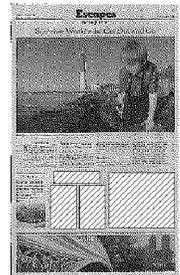
THE balmy spring temperatures encourage a more relaxed attitude among the skiers. At the base of the ravine that Sunday, a group of guys stood around playing a game that involved balancing a beer bottle on a ski pole, then flinging a pot lid at it (they had left the Frisbee at home).

On warm days, spectators can be found suntanning on the rocks and watching the ant lines ascend faces of the bowl that have names like the Chute, the Icefall and the Sluice. Skiers make their runs in less-than-wintery clothing, like the man wearing Daisy Duke cut-offs and another who had a rubber chicken strapped to his helmet.

A woman walked up to the gentlemen frolicking with the beer bottle, the ski pole and the pot lid and asked, "Have you guys seen any naked people?"

"Not yet," one of them replied. "I'm hoping."

Erin Connery and Ben Siek from Holderness, N.H., Mr. Siek's skis having broken the week before, repeatedly climbed up the



center gully and careered down the hill on a pink plastic toboggan and a neon green snow saucer. Their runs, enacted at terrifying speeds that sent them airborne with each tiny bump, drew echoing hoots and hollers from the spectators lounging on rocks around the bowl. Throughout the day, such cries of approval were reserved for two distinct groups: truly extraordinary skiers or yahoos who looked as if they had death wishes.

Tuckerman Ravine was one of the original spring-skiing spots. It was named after a 19th-century botanist, Edward Tuckerman, who studied the region's plants. In the 1920s and '30s, when skiing first became popular in the United States but before chairlifts and rope tows, Tuckerman was frequented by skiers from local colleges like Dartmouth and by members of the Appalachian Mountain Club.

But as skiing exploded in popularity in the second half of the 20th century with resorts, gondolas, restaurants and other amenities to make the casual skier comfortable, Tuckerman became a throwback. In a sport revered by many for its extreme contact with nature, the ravine gives skiers the chance to test themselves against the mountain, with no namby-pamby mugs of hot chocolate waiting if they get tired halfway through the run.

"It's like skiing of old, when skiing was a really risky thing to do," said Martin Silverstone, 53, a writer from Montreal who has been coming to Tuckerman for 30 years. "Back in the beginning, skiers were known as wackos. And this goes back to that, because you are a wacko to ski this."

For a backcountry bowl, though, the ravine has a surprising amount of infrastructure. Two and a half miles up the Tuckerman trail, skiers reach HoJo's, the Appalachian Mountain Club hut named for its resemblance to a Howard Johnson motel. HoJo's sells snacks and T-shirts and provides hikers with a veranda on which to lounge and contemplate the skiing they have completed or will be attempting. On a sunny spring day, the area buzzes with activity, as skiers and boarders put on their boots or just take a break from the slushy slog. Campsites and restrooms are nearby, and many take advantage, staying up at the bowl for days at a time.

The United States Forest Service keeps another hut just a few feet away, and several snow rangers, as they are called, provide the most recent reports on potential hazards. It's another steep half-mile up to the base of the bowl, but even there, the red coats emblazoned with the white cross of the

Mount Washington Volunteer Ski Patrol make skiers feel secure, if only in the notion that if they break a leg they won't have long to wait for a ride down.

Despite the ski patrol, rangers and crowds, the backcountry dangers at Tuckerman are very real. Volkswagen-size chunks of blue ice hung from the headwall that Sunday, threatening to fall and shatter on the

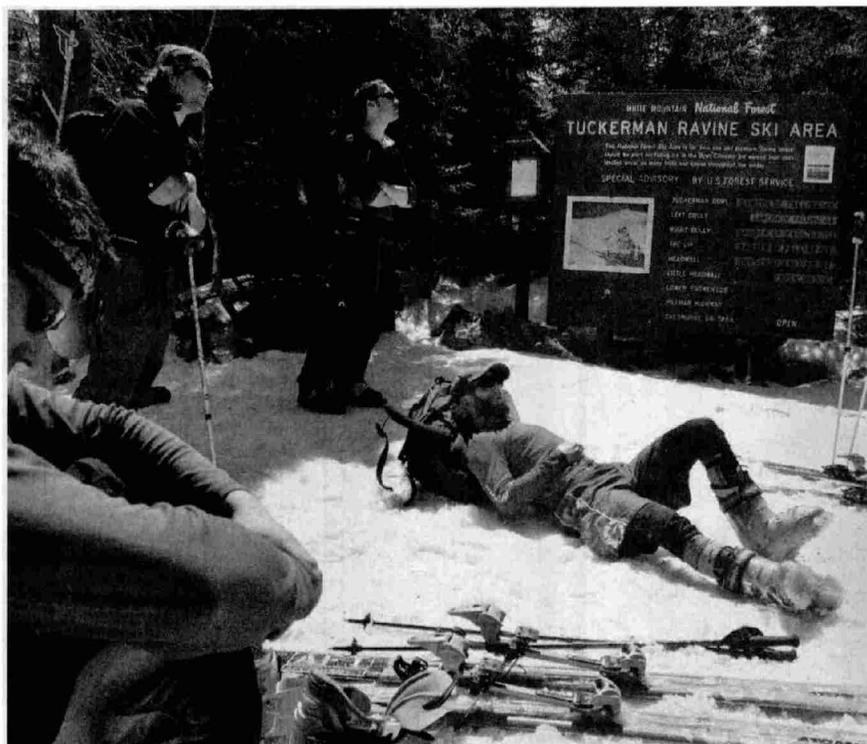
boulder field below. The snow rangers post a daily avalanche update on their Web site (www.tuckerman.org), and despite their best efforts, an average of 24 skiers need to be carried out on a litter each year — with the occasional death.

Crevasses and undermined snow — in the summer, Tuckerman is a waterfall — pose additional dangers. And all the infrastructure can give visitors a false sense of confidence. "Yes, if they got hurt, there's more people here to help them," said Chris Joosen, the lead snow ranger, "but maybe they wouldn't do the things they do if they were here alone."

But they keep coming back. On Jay Wilkinson's hike up to Tuckerman that day, he had said that he was only going to ski the mountain one day, just to get it out of his system. He would do two runs, he figured, and that would be enough. But as he sat on the rocks afterward in the waning sun, packing his gear for the hike down, he found himself reconsidering.

"My first run was good, and my second run was better; my next run might be even better," he said. "Even though I said I was only going to do it once, I may have to do it again."





Photographs by Lori Duff for The New York Times

ON THE SLOPES Skiers, left, taking a break from the climb toward Tuckerman Ravine. Right, falling down a wall of snow.



Lori Duff for The New York Times

NEW HAMPSHIRE Skiing continues at Tuckerman Ravine into early summer.