



Northeast Kingdom Ramblings



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The President's Corner

By John Predom

When I moved to Island Pond a few years go, I didn't know anyone and was only familiar with two NEK trails—the Bluff Mountain Community Trail and the South Trail up Pisgah. A longtime member of the Green Mountain Club, I knew the late Jean Haigh and was aware of the NEK Section, so I reached out to her and was welcomed into the section with open arms. I was quickly introduced to a happy group of new friends and learned of a new set of hiking trails, most on the map and some not.

Through this group I have learned some history of the area, about foraging, flora and fauna, and had fun and funny experiences on and off the trails. Through the Green Mountain Club, I have participated in group hikes and trail work days (it's not work if you're having fun) all over this state and made long lasting friendships. Some of those friends have traveled to the NEK to experience our hiking trails. For anyone reading this, I encourage you to join a group hike, seek out hikes with other sections, or participate in one of our trail maintenance or cabin work days. Becoming a member of the Green Mountain Club has been one of the best choices I could have ever made for myself.

Hikers are happy people! Join us



NEK Section Holds Annual Meeting; Sets Summer Meeting

On Sunday, April 11th, the NEK Section held its 2021 Annual Meeting under Covid rules. Cathi Brooks provided the sparsely attended Zoom meeting with a report from the GMC Board of Directors meeting and other officers and committee chairs also brought everyone up to date on their activities.

Luke O'Brien led lengthy discussions on State improvements to Willoughby South Beach sanitary and safety facilities and some early thinking about campsites along the Kingdom Heritage Trails. Beth Barnes and the group kicked around ideas for new member outreach events and Kevin Williamson reported that trail adoption seems to be in good shape for the coming season. These topics and more are in the full draft minutes and will soon be posted on our website at <nekgmc.org>.

The NEK Section would like to give a special shout-out to Section member Susana Johnston for her completion of the Long Trail in 25 day hikes this past winter. Susana is only the 11th person to complete a thru-hike of the Long Trail in winter. Quite an accomplishment and congratulations!

Save this Date! The Section's summer meeting has tentatively been set for Sunday, July 25th, at John Predom's meadow and woods near Island Pond. If Covid restrictions allow by then, we would like to have our usual outdoor cook-out party and meeting for members and their families. Details and directions will be posted on our website.

Featured Hike

Devil's Hill Trail

by Andrea Kane

The Devil's Hill Trail on the eastern side of Groton State Forest is the St. Bernard dog of Northeast Kingdom hikes—approachable, gentle, and much beloved. It's friendly to everyone and is particularly great for kids. You can run up and back in half an hour or less, or take your time and enjoy a slightly longer loop of about 2 miles.

The trail shares an entry road with camps along Martin's Pond. Unless you're going off-trail or looking hard, you might not see those buildings, but it's hard to miss the sign asking you not to block the camps' access gate. It lends a certain easy-does-it vibe just knowing you're a few minutes' walk from somebody's card table, paddle boat, or cold lemonade.

The trail has in recent years becomes very easy to follow. It's well marked and perfect for families—not only is it a short, shady hike, but the trail from the parking lot also follows a dirt road and snowmobile trail for the most part. It then darts left into the woods toward a final, short, steep section to the top, just enough to make you feel like you worked a little. Those who decide to take the loop rather than up and back on the road will find a continuation of the trail by turning 180 degrees from the viewpoint. The trail this way is narrower and has a longer steep section, but is still great for kids. At the bottom of the hill, turn left to continue on the loop to meet up with the main trail. This is a lovely site any time of year, but the view in the fall overlooking Peacham Pond is spectacular.

The Devil's Hill Trail is a sure way to decompress and slow down. In many ways the hike is a reflection of the pleasant Peacham community in which it is located. You are likely to do some reflection of your own while on the trail, and no matter how many times you hike it, the view is bound to make you feel good.

Directions: From Peacham Village, set an odometer and drive southwest on Church Street toward Mack Mountain Road, then straight on Academy Hill Road, and continue on Green Bay Loop Road. At about 2.1 miles from the start, turn right on Devil's Hill Rd.



American Tree Sparrow in Victory Bog

On the Long Trail . . . in the Time of Covid

By Slow 'n Steady and App Man

This is the third in a series of articles recounting the experiences and challenges Janet Steinert (Slow n' Steady) and Jeff Morris (App Man) faced while thru-hiking the Long Trail during the Covid-19 pandemic in the summer of 2020. Of course, Covid changed the game—the face of the trail and the hikers who hike it, but despite the pandemic and its unique obstacles, Janet and Jeff were still awed by the simple joys and breathtaking beauty that will always be the Green Mountains and its “footpath in the wilderness.”

Day 2: Seth Warner Shelter to a motel(?)

Last time, we left App Man and Slow n' Steady settling in for their first night on the LT. They had had a great start to their journey, but things went downhill on Day 2. As Slow n' Steady awakens on Day 2 after a fitful night of little sleep . . .

I finally got up at 4:45 to begin the day. The first glimmer of light appeared as I crawled out of my tent. App Man was already awake—or maybe he didn't sleep much either. We coffee'd up, packed, and were on the trail within an hour.

Early morning hiking is my favorite. The trail is still sleeping and the quiet fills me with a peaceful appreciation for the clean beauty of the morning. App Man and I reached the viewpoint where we could see the town of Bennington just awakening with the battle monument piercing through the mist.

After a snack, we continued on our way. I knew what we had ahead of us and was looking forward to the split rock—a house-sized boulder split into two with the

(Continued on Next Page)

trail going right through it. I was also dreading the infamous drop down to Route 9 on steep and precarious rock steps. I'd almost fallen the last time I'd hiked down that part, which would have been a hike-ending fall as the entire path sends the hiker down a long stretch of boulder hopping to the valley below.

We reached the split boulder in good time, laughing and posing for silly pictures. As we approached the stairway to hell, we heard thunder rumbling in the distance. App Man warned me to keep my calm and to not rush. True to my trail name, I slowly picked my way down, becoming more and more fearful as we descended. Although he won't admit it, App Man had to be feeling some frustration at my pace.

After an hour of rock'n and luckily not roll'n, we finally reached the road where we high-fived each other in extreme relief. Across the road was a camper van and a few cars in the parking lot. We crossed the road safely (which is a challenge with speeding cars approaching as we high-stepped it with heavy packs). As we stood at the kiosk, contemplating the climb ahead of us, the occupant of the camper van yelled across the parking lot, "Are you thru-hikers? Would you like some ice cream?" I responded with my attempt at humor, "Does a fly have eyes?!?"

We approached the van to see a (ahem) very well muscled Adonis with long flowing curls still damp from his camper van shower. I think he might have only had a towel wrapped around him, but I couldn't be sure. Noticing my stunned state, App Man thanked our trail angel and led me to the trail encouraging me to eat my rapidly melting Eskimo pie.

More thunder and some sprinkles of rain warned us that we had better get a move on. It was already late afternoon and we had a steep climb and a few more miles to go. As the sprinkles turned to rain, we decided to set up our tents.

At home, App Man had practiced setting up his tent in the rain. He knew how to get his fly up first then set up his tent under the fly. He'd practiced this many times and warned me that I'd better try it out at least a few times. But I didn't. And now, I was left in the rain, madly trying to do what App Man had practiced for months. I looked wistfully at his tautly staked tent as the rain came down, wondering how I'd ever get my tent up without sending mud inside and outside my tent.

I managed to get the fly up but the zipper caught on the fabric and wouldn't close. I tried to hook my tent to my fly as the wind whipped my wildly flapping fly, and the rain-soaked ground sent rivulets of mud and rain across my ground tarp. I was getting soaked. And then I heard a sort of growling painful moan coming from App Man's tent.

"My leg is cramping up and I think I'm dying in here."



Bald Eagle Over Lake Willoughby

Dying?! He dying?!? He was warm and dry, while I was fighting the elements.

"And the rain has soaked through the tent!" he added. "We can't go on! We have to find a place to dry out!"

We'd only spent one night in the woods and we were packing it in already?!? But I had to agree; I was miserable too.

As the downpour turned to a light rain and App Man's pain subsided, we waded up our limp, mud-caked gear and stuffed them in their bags. Trudging back out to the parking lot, we passed two hikers and a dog getting into their car. I wanted to ask them for a ride, but I knew that no one would want our hiker mud in their nice warm car. Sigh. So out to the road we went to hitch a ride to who knows where.

Luckily, it didn't take long for a car to come to our rescue. A young guy offered to take us to the Catamount Motel, once a hostel for hikers, but now quietly allowing Vermonters to stay. I climbed in the back and App Man sat up front. The car was packed with stuff and one large pit bull puppy.

"Don't worry about him," said our trail angel. "you just have to be firm with him or he will want to lick you to death."

It was a long ride to the motel and I was happy to climb out. We thanked our trail angel profusely and the motel owner offered to take our clothes and wash them while we tried to clean up our muddied gear.

I'd teased App Man about the added weight of extra clothes, but he had the last laugh as he changed into dry clothes and even offered an outfit to me. A shower, hot food, and clean clothes. Yeah, we'd only spent one night in the woods, but clean sheets and a full belly were what I needed for a good night's rest. Life is good.



Ramblings . . .

Editor's Note: This is where NEKers can report their adventures on or off the trail. Please post items to our FaceBook page or email them directly to the editor at <enkquest@gmail.com>. And please include pictures if you can, especially people pix. Thanks. —EJG

January 21. We went up Belvidere Mountain via the Long Trail North, 2.8 miles to the summit. Tough trail on snowshoes, but fortunately we had tracks to follow. —John Predom and Arvid Kalinen

January 23. A BIG Thank YOU to Beth Barnes and Maria Young for braving the cold at the Willoughby State Forest parking area to talk to skiers and hikers about the trails that NorthWoods Stewardship Center, the NEK Section, and NEK Backcountry Coalition support. —Cathi Brooks

January 24. The trails in Willoughby State Forest are beautiful right now! —Christina Cotnoir

February 11. It was an invigorating, exhilarating tromp through the Willoughby State Forest today on very well maintained trails. While visibility was very low when we started, by the time we hiked out we had great views and some blue sky. Impressive views of not only Pisgah and Hor, but also Moose Mountain and Sheffield Heights. It's worth doing the loop around lovely Bartlett Mountain to get an almost panoramic view in the process. A thoroughly enjoyable day. —Joanne Fedele

February 21. It was an amazing day breaking trail on Mad Brook to the summit of Bald Mountain with Paul Trojano, Cathi Brooks, and Beth Barnes. The new trailhead parking fits three vehicles and is about ¼-mile above the old trailhead parking. —John Predom

February 21. Sometimes the best views are right out your back door and into the nearby woods and fields. —Joanne Fedele

February 27. The Northeast Kingdom Snowshoe Expeditionary Force (NEKSEF) has been on the bench (or more accurately, lockdown) all winter. But being old-guys, we're close to completing our vaccinations and by mid-March ought to be able to resume walkabouts. Meanwhile, I did manage to get out on snowshoes and travel to Northwoods Stewardship Center. I had not been on their trails for some years, and I am happy to report that I enjoyed the trek. I've seen groomed trails in places like Craftsbury Center and even up to Mt. Hor, so I'd characterize Northwood trails as cleared rather than groomed, which I think is better. A donation is suggested to use the trail. Go to northwoodscenter.org/.../conservation.../trails/ for details. —Chris Rice

February 27. It was a winter wonderland this morning at Damons Crossing on the Moose River, Victory Basin Wildlife Management Area. —Tina and Jamie Eaton

March 9. I was at Moose Bog today; didn't see the friendly Canada Jays, but still had a lovely walk. Such a peaceful place. —Joanne Fedele

March 10. What a spectacular day! Temperatures in the 40's, bright sunshine, and we had the entire Willoughby State Forest to ourselves. And to top it off, we stopped and watched an eagle circle slowly over one of our favorite paddling lakes (picture on page 3). I think he was scouting for open water! —Sheila Bergin Goss

March 13. A tough slog on Brousseau Mountain and the last mile before parking is a snow machine trail. The snow was rotten and I followed someone's tracks that ended in a bushwhack, post-holing with snowshoes. A nice summit though and a beautiful day. —Doug Houston

March 13. We thought about just wearing micro-spikes on our hike yesterday. We thought the temperature drop would give us a hard-packed surface. We decided to wear snowshoes because of the few inches of fresh snow and we were glad we did. The old snow has no base and we were breaking through with snowshoes. The snow is still deep in places. —John Predom with Susan Winsor and Jill Lillis.



Bald Mountain Summit in February

My Wonderful World of Hiking

By Beth Barnes

Membership Coordinator

What's the difference between a hike up Mt. Hor with panoramic views of beautiful Lake Willoughby and a walk up Egypt's Mt. Sinai with unending views of a parched desert below? Well, the answer is—very little and a whole heck of a lot! Both are commanding granite peaks rising high above humbling terrains that, if they could speak, would tell tales far beyond our comprehension. A hike up Mt. Hor may well reveal remnants of CCC camps established in the 1930s to put men to work during the Great Depression, but on the way to the base of Mt. Sinai one might see remnants of rusting Sherman tanks, grim reminders of an historic 6-day battle in 1967.

Regardless of their histories, Mt. Hor and Mt. Sinai, two peaks I have scaled, have more than one thing in common. These two granite peaks are without question beautiful, grand, and welcoming to those who are looking for adventure. No matter where you choose to hike, being prepared is an important factor before taking your first steps up the mountain and I learned this the hard way, more than once and in more than one country.

When I hiked Mt. Sinai it was before search engines, e-mails and the web so I had no idea what to expect. I was on 13-month world pilgrimage with nothing more than a backpack and a vow not to use tourist guide books, only going where the wind blew me from one continent to the next. I had an insatiable urge to see how the rest of the world lived outside of southern California so I sold everything, quit my corporate job, and just left. One day that wind blew me to St. Catherine's Monastery at the foot of Mt. Sinai somewhere between Egypt and Israel. I set off alone, pre-dawn up the famous mountain following a vague trail through massive boulders, and not long into my journey my only pair of shoes (rubber flip flops!) broke. I carried on barefoot and when I reached the top there was an old Bedouin man with a rusted kettle over an open flame boiling water for tea. It was just the two of us sharing hot tea as the sun rose, and despite the language barrier we understood the magic that unfolded in the sunrise. I walked down barefoot and never passed a single soul either way. I learned years

later that the route I took is called the “steps of penitence,” and didn't I know it! Moral of the story? Always savor the destination despite the journey, and never hike in flip flops.

Fast forward to Vermont many years later where I learned that being prepared really is paramount to a fun and safe hike. Gone were the youthful days of throwing caution to the wind. Thanks to my membership in the Green Mountain Club, lots of people showed me a new way of hiking, most notably Jean Haigh, my mountain mentor. I learned that hiking with others was a lot more fun, but with proper preparation even solo hikes could still be great—and safe. I learned that proper foot wear is crucial and since I had never lived in four seasons, my first hard lesson was the importance of a winter and a summer pair of hiking boots. I struggled through my first full year with hiking



Mt. Sinai, The Sinai Peninsula, Egypt

boots that were actually designed for dry weather until I was gently encouraged to consider winter boots. WOW, what a difference! I learned about trail etiquette and although I was already very respectful of nature it's always great to be reminded to take only pictures and leave only footprints. Carrying ample water and food was a lesson I learned over time, never really giving much thought to hydration before joining my GMC companions. One very important lesson I learned from Jean Haigh, was never leave home without a headlamp in your backpack. Even a simple hike can sometimes go wrong, or be delayed so being able to navigate in the dusk or even dark is crucial. The truth is, I am always learning thanks to those I hike with, but the memory of Jean always hikes with me.

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Even though we have no sections of the Long Trail in the Northeast Kingdom, we can boast over 38 stunning trails that we love and maintain—and that we are anxious to share with new members. When I moved to Newport I was surrounded by beauty and I knew there were trails just waiting to be hiked, I just didn't know how to find them on my own, and I also knew that as a newcomer, hiking alone probably wasn't a great idea. Thanks to my membership in the GMC, I gained many new friends and started to chalk up many new adventures. There are trails in the Northeast Kingdom for every ability, so I would encourage charting your own course to local adventure.

As the NEK Section's Membership Coordinator it would be my pleasure to talk to you about your abilities and suggest suitable places you might like to explore.

Join us—we all were rookies at one time or another. Contact me at [<gotwaveslb@ymail.com>](mailto:gotwaveslb@ymail.com).



Mt. Hor (left) and Mt. Pisgah, Vermont (both Biblical names, but no Mt. Sinai)

“In every walk with nature one receives far more than he seeks.” —John Muir

NEK Flora, Fauna, and Foraging

The Domain of the Wild Onion

By Paul Trojano

"I smell onions," one hiker said to another.

In the middle of a hardwood forest, sometimes deep in the woods, sometimes right by the road, but yes, it's true. Scattered or sometimes in great abundance among hardwood forests, preferably on a slope, is the much sought after *allium tricoccum* also known as ramp, ramson, wild onion, wild leek, wild garlic, and other names. And it's a perfect choice for this spring edition of the *Ramblings* newsletter as the ramps should be rising soon and foragers and collectors delight in this early spring wild edible.

The onion smell is a dead giveaway and that definitely means you're among a good patch. Otherwise ramps look like (but please don't confuse with!) young lily of the valley. And they thrive in undisturbed old growth forests of deciduous trees, especially maple and ash. The leaf litter every fall is the perfect organic fertilizer as the ramps crave rich, loamy soil. Ramps can be transplanted and grown elsewhere, but can be challenging. As spring buds turn to full, the ramps prefer the shade the early season foliage provides.



Harvesting Ramps on a Slope



Ready for the Pan

happiness ensues. Spreading the pesto on egg salad is life changing as well! And the pesto freezes quite well. Enjoy the hunt and happy hiking!

When it comes to picking and eating, the entire plant is usable. It's advisable to harvest just the leaves as ramps are endangered in places like Quebec and Tennessee, where the ramps were commercially exploited. The bulbs have a mild onion flavor and are a delicacy when pickled, but can be used in any recipe that calls for leek or shallot. The greens sautéed or blanched would make even Popeye forget about his love for spinach! As for the stems, they are great grilled (the whole plant can be grilled) or used in stocks and sauces. The ramp stems can be red or white. There is an academic argument whether this makes them wild leek or wild garlic; as well as a variation, *allium burdickii*. The stems of the *burdickii* variant will be white and the *tricoccum* will be reddish. Whether a true flavor distinction is discernible is for a woodland argument!

A simple but delicious preparation is to make a pesto from just the leaves. In a blender place chopped leaves (you have to chop ramp leaves or the blender will bind up!) and add oil until a loose paste forms. Toss with pasta and cheese and a little butter and



A Healthy Patch

The FPR Report

By Luke O'Brien

Department of Forest, Parks, and Recreation

Recreation activity has seen a sharp increase since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, putting increased pressure on public trails, parking lots, and backcountry sites. Despite this, Vermont has managed to remain a (relatively) safe refuge and public lands and trails played an important role in supporting mental and physical health in 2020. We expect this trend to continue into 2021 and perhaps indefinitely as the throngs of outdoor enthusiasts make recreation a bigger part of their health and wellness goals.

What does this mean for state and other public lands? It means increased pressure and more feet on the trail, paddles in the water, and wheels on the ground—all of which creates a changed environment on Vermont's trail lands. Trail users will experience more traffic; parking lots will remain busy; and it will be increasingly difficult to find solitude. Trail maintainers will find telltale signs of erosion, compaction, widening and litter. It also means that trail organizations need to redouble efforts to educate visitors and spread Vermont's Trail Ethic. Ours is a resilient landscape and if we foster greater learning, respect, and stewardship we can all enjoy our mountains, woods, waters, and trails.



Mt. Pisgah Ice Cliffs



Lone Skier on Willoughby State Forest Trail

This summer Vermont FPR will be investing in numerous trail stewardship projects in the Northeast Kingdom, starting a system-wide roving of trails in Groton State Forest, focused trail restoration work on portions of the Willoughby South Shore Trail, trail maintenance on the Pisgah North and Brousseau Mountain Trails, and general maintenance and roving throughout Willoughby State Forest, the Kingdom Heritage Lands, Holbrook State Park, and at Maidstone State Forest. Also noteworthy will be the maintenance of several wheelchair-accessible trails in the NEK, including those at Moose Bog, Sentinel Rock, Victory Basin, and Burke Mountain.

FPR staff will be working with GMC to explore potential overnight campsites on the Kingdom Heritage Trail and assisting the Vermont Chapter of Climbing Resource Access Group (CRAG-VT) manage trail access and rock climbing routes at Black Mountain. Thanks to Kevin Williamson and all of the NEK Trail Adopters for your good work. And please do not hesitate to reach out to me for assistance at 802-751-0110 or <Luke.O'Brien@vermontl.gov>.

The Grandson Trail Network

By Edmund J. Guest

Every quarter in this newsletter we offer a featured hike about a member's favorite trail or a "brag" from one of our trail adopters. This time it was Andrea Kane's love letter to her family's favorite hike in Peacham.

In the time of Covid, however, gathering with friends even for a hike outdoors can be challenging. Can we carpool to the trailhead? Who's vaccinated? Who's got a compromised condition? Sorry, we reached our numbers limit of hikers for this outing.

So, for several months, my favorite socially-distanced hike has been an hour so of snowshoe tromping through the woods behind our home on Burke Mountain. One Christmas many years ago, I cleared some woods pathways and named them after our toddler grandsons. I hung candy canes on signs at the beginning of each trail and told the boys to find the trail sign with their name to get a candy reward. The trails are mostly connected loops with little chance of getting lost and it got the kids away from their indoor Christmas toys and out in the woods.

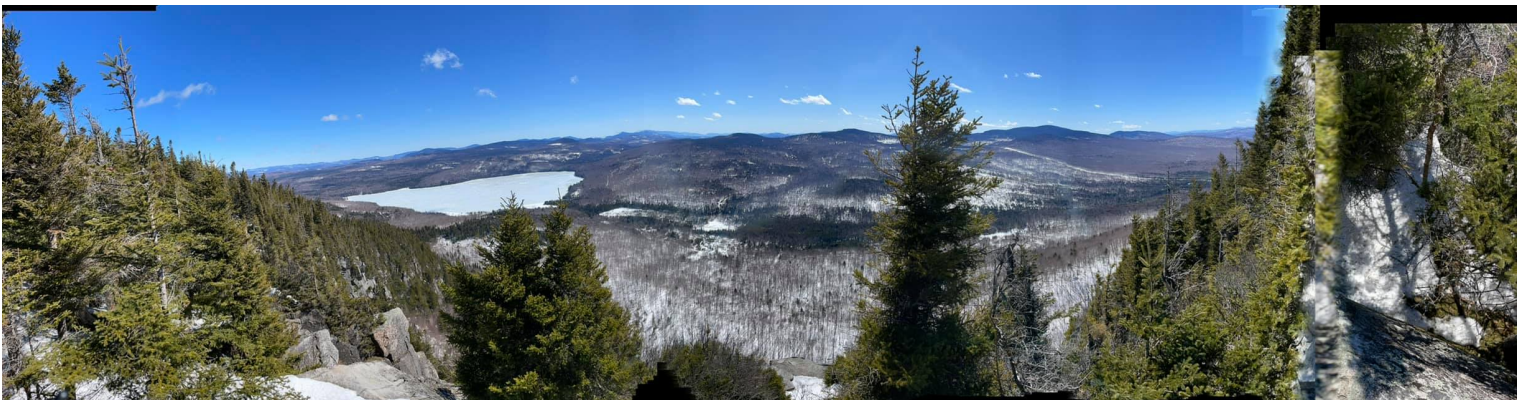
Years later, I've kept those trails clear of deadfall and still use them for my daily exercise. We have only about three mostly wooded acres of our own land, but I can extend my walks to the connecting trails of two neighbors or to Burke Mountain's Nordic trails that abut our property. And it's amazing what you can experience in even a few acres of woods—active or abandoned bird and wasp nests, access holes for chipmunk and vole dens, bear and deer and the occasion moose tracks and scat, and once, a rare bobcat track in the snow less than a hundred yards from our house.

Until we can get back to unrestricted group hiking, we can still get outside and ramble anywhere, be it a country lane or your own backwoods. After all, while the camaraderie of friends is sorely missed, one satisfaction of hiking and snowshoeing comes from getting outdoors and filling your lungs with some of fresh air.

Sometimes a favorite hike may be closer than you think.



Northeast Kingdom Gallery



Brousseau Mountain View



**North Branch,
Nulhegan River**

**Silvio O. Conte
National Fish and
Wildlife Refuge**

**Moose River
Victory Wildlife
Management Area**



**Do You Have the
Feeling Someone is
Watching You?**



**A
Pristine
Mad Brook Trail**

Along the Nulhegan North Branch Trail



**Climbers on the Pisgah Ice Cliffs
(can you find them?)**



Beth Barnes and Maria Young Do a Little Outreach at Willoughby State Forest



Skiers at the Willoughby Overlook



John Predom is at it Again!

Snowshoe Art in 9.2 miles of Tromping



But Spring is Coming!

And thanks to all our contributors for the informative reports, wonderful stories, and stunning pictures. You make this newsletter what it is and it's a joy to work with such great content! —EJG

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