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AMC Offers Tips for Safe Spring Skiing in Tuckerman Ravine

MT. WASHINGTON, N.H.— As skiers begin the annual spring trek to Tuckerman Ravine, the Appalachian Mountain Club advises skiers and hikers to be aware of the hazards of avalanches, open crevasses, falling ice, and extreme weather in the ravine.

Because of varied snow conditions and the ravine's steepness, it's important for skiers to be familiar with the terrain they plan to ski, according to Josh Fishkin, the Appalachian Mountain Club's Hermit Lake Shelters caretaker, who is stationed at Tuckerman Ravine. "Hike up what you're going to ski down," said Fishkin.

Fishkin said it is nearly impossible to predict the length of the spring skiing season, which varies from year to year, depending on the weather. Weather on the mountain can change quickly and dramatically. Fishkin said the ravine saw 40 inches of new snow last May. In 1997, eight feet of new snow was recorded on the mountain in the month of May alone.

In addition, early afternoon shadows can quickly turn soft corn snow into hard, icy snow pack. U.S. Forest Service snow rangers who patrol the ravine urge skiers to descend below the ravine's headwall before those shadows fall. The ravine loses direct sun behind surrounding peaks around 2:30 p.m.

Skiers and hikers heading up to Tuckerman Ravine are advised to stop at the AMC's Pinkham Notch Visitor Center at the trailhead in Pinkham Notch to check weather conditions and U.S. Forest Service avalanche advisories before heading up the trail.

"Our experienced staff has the latest information on skiing and trail conditions, and we post weather reports and U.S. Forest Service avalanche advisories daily," said Rob Burbank, AMC public affairs director. "A day on the mountain can be a lot of fun, but there are hazards, and skiers and hikers really need to be prepared for changing weather and variable terrain," he noted.

The ravine is located in the White Mountain National Forest on the shoulder of 6,288-foot Mount Washington, the tallest mountain in the Northeast. This backcountry ski area is managed by the U.S. Forest Service. It is undeveloped and has no ski lifts, no snowmaking capability, and no grooming. Skiers reach the ravine by carrying their skis as they hike up a 2.4-mile footpath. The climb up the ravine's headwall is even more rugged.

The steep pitch of Tuckerman Ravine is legendary, and the three-hour climb to reach the bowl serves as a test of one's dedication to ski the most challenging terrain in the East.

Many are tempted by the challenge of skiing Tuckerman Ravine, but its steep slopes — which can reach a pitch of 55 degrees — and narrow runs, are best suited for expert skiers. Reaching the steep ski runs requires mountaineering skill, and climbers may need to use winter mountaineering equipment, such as crampons and an ice ax.

Skiers rarely attempt the challenging ravine before late March, due to frequent avalanche danger in the winter months.

The mountain is home to some of the world's harshest and most unpredictable weather. The highest wind ever recorded on the surface of the Earth — an incredible 231 miles per hour — was recorded by workers in the Mount Washington Observatory on the summit in April 1934.

Aside from the steepness of the terrain, other potential dangers in the ravine of which visitors should be aware include:

- Falling ice.* Warming spring temperatures and strengthening sunshine combine to weaken layers of ice that cling to the ravine's ledges in winter. It is not uncommon for car-sized chunks of ice to break away from the top of the ravine and hurtle into the bowl below. Skiers and others in the ravine must be aware of the danger of falling ice and be alert to get out of its way.

- Severe weather.* Weather in the ravine is unpredictable. Due to Mount Washington's location in the midst of three major storm tracks, sunny skies can be replaced by heavy overcast, fog, snow, rain, or bitterly cold winds in a matter of minutes. There is no shelter in Tuckerman Ravine, and visitors should be equipped with rain gear and several layers of warm, winter clothing made of wool or synthetic fibers. Cotton should not be worn because it dries slowly and steals heat from the body when wet with perspiration.

•*Avalanches*. Avalanches are frequent on Tuckerman Ravine's steep, windswept slopes. Skiers should check the USFS avalanche advisories posted at the AMC's Pinkham Notch Visitor Center and at the Hermit Lake caretaker's cabin before heading into the ravine. Forest Service snow rangers are stationed in the ravine to provide information on snow conditions, avalanche danger, and other hazards. Along with the snow rangers, members of the Mount Washington Volunteer Ski Patrol, and AMC staff are good sources of safety information.

Skiers should heed posted avalanche advisories, and should check for avalanche hazards in areas where conditions may not be posted.

Avalanches can be deadly. After 30 minutes, a person buried in an avalanche has less than a 50 percent chance of survival.

•*Open crevasses*. Melting snow can cause deep crevasses to open up. Skiers should stay clear of them.

•*Undermined snow*. Water running beneath the snow weakens it and it can give way. Skiers should be alert for areas that may be prone to such undermining.

•*Sunburn*. Because the highly reflective snow in the ravine increases the risk of sunburn, skiers should wear sunscreen.

Other important considerations include:

•*Lodging*. The Forest Service prohibits camping in the Cutler River Drainage, which includes Tuckerman Ravine and the land between N.H. Route 16 and the summit of Mount Washington. Overnight shelter is available at the Hermit Lake Shelters, located at the base of the ravine.

The AMC operates these rustic lean-tos, which can accommodate up to 86 overnight guests. Visitors must provide their own food, cookstoves, and sleeping bags. The rate is \$10 per person per night. Tickets must be purchased at the Pinkham Notch Visitor Center, and are available on a first-come, first-served basis.

•*Gear*. In addition to the mountaineering equipment and clothing requirements noted above, winter hiking boots should be worn to hike to the ravine. Ski boots are inappropriate for hiking.

•*Provisions*. Hikers and skiers should also carry snacks and plenty of water. The AMC recommends that hikers and skiers consume from two to four quarts of water per day.

•*Forecasts*. For White Mountain weather reports and information on avalanche conditions, call the AMC at (603) 466-2721, or the U.S. Forest Service Androscoggin Ranger District at (603) 466-2713. Or, check the web at <http://www.tuckerman.org>.

With more than 90,000 members in the Northeast and beyond, the Appalachian Mountain Club promotes natural resource conservation through responsible recreation, based on the philosophy that successful, long-term conservation depends upon first-hand enjoyment of the natural environment.

Founded in 1876, the nonprofit Appalachian Mountain Club is the oldest conservation and recreation organization in the United States. The AMC's programs and facilities are open to members and nonmembers alike. More information on the AMC is available on the Web at <http://www.outdoors.org>.

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