



MOUNTAIN STATS

Number of trails:
30

Skiable acres:
84

Longest trail:
1 mile

Snowmaking coverage:
80 percent

Summit elevation:
1,800 feet

Vertical drop:
700 feet

Skier visits per year:
5,500

GET INVOLVED!

For more information on the Whale's skiing and snowboarding programs, its volunteer needs, or to donate to the Upper Valley Snow Sports Foundation, go to www.whaleback.com.





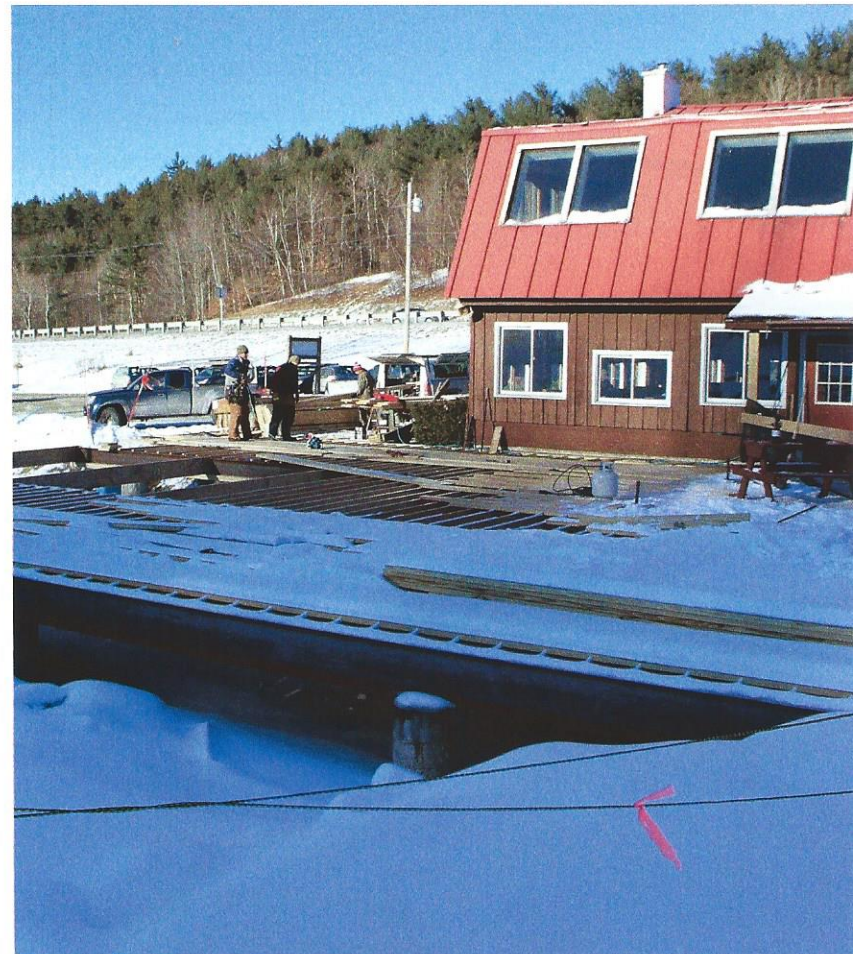
By Lisa Densmore Ballard

saving the **WHALE**

Whaleback Mountain's new incarnation as a nonprofit, community-run ski area

It's hard to miss the white hump next to Interstate 89 in Enfield, especially on a winter evening. The entire hill is moving. A colorfully painted chairlift carries equally colorfully clad skiers and snowboarders up the hill. More schuss down the white ribbons of snow through pools of whitish-gold light. A parade of minivans, SUVs, and a school bus or two go in and out of the parking lot as one group of kids heads home and another one arrives.

It's also hard to imagine a winter in the Upper Valley without Whaleback Mountain. However, this sea of activity nearly dried up in April 2013 when Whaleback's owners, two-time Olympian Evan Dybvig and Rutland skate park entrepreneurs Dylan Goodspeed and Frank Sparrow, shuttered the ski area and declared bankruptcy. Initially, they intended to sell off the mountain's assets to help repay its one-million-dollar debt. ▶▶▶



Generations of Upper Valley skiers have learned to ski and enjoyed the many competitions hosted by Whaleback each winter. The mountain hosts both racing and freestyle programs for local youth.



Opposite top: A volunteer repaints Whaleback Mountain's base lodge. Opposite bottom and above: Whaleback's deck gets much-needed repairs after damage by Tropical Storm Irene.

But its skiers couldn't stand to see the Whale permanently beached. At the eleventh hour, they formed the Upper Valley Snow Sports Foundation (UVSSF), giving the mountain another chance.

"It happened fast and furiously," recalls Cornelia Purcell, a member of the UVSSF board who has spent many winter evenings at Whaleback with her husband and two sons through the Ford Sayre Memorial Ski Council. "We got the paperwork done [for nonprofit status] before the auction, which we were able to delay so it could sell as one big lot. If the lifts and its parts had been sold separately, the ski area would probably have never run again."

A Mission

Randolph National Bank of Vermont foreclosed on the ski area during August 2013 and put it up for auction. When no one bid, the UVSSF obtained an operating lease, and then,

through an intense fundraising effort, purchased it for \$300,000 in December 2013—well, 95 percent of it. The ski area is actually on two pieces of land. The one purchased by the UVSSF (145 acres) has the chairlift, trails, and base lodge. The other parcel (9 acres), controlled by Tim Herbert, the owner of Whaleback prior to Evan Dybvig's group, has the maintenance garage and the parking lot.

The purchase of the main ski area was just the beginning of a complex series of negotiations. To obtain the second parcel, the UVSSF acquired an operating lease while ownership of it went into a trust.

"It gives us time," explains Cornelia. "The UVSSF controls the second lot thanks to the trust. Through anonymous donations, we were able to create a trust agreement that we'll have to pay back in three to four years. . . . Our mission is to keep the ski area intact and in the community. We need the second lot to protect that." ▶

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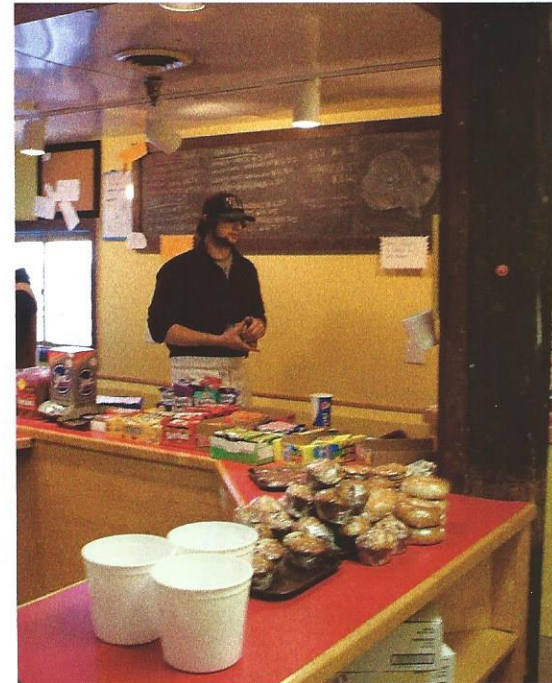
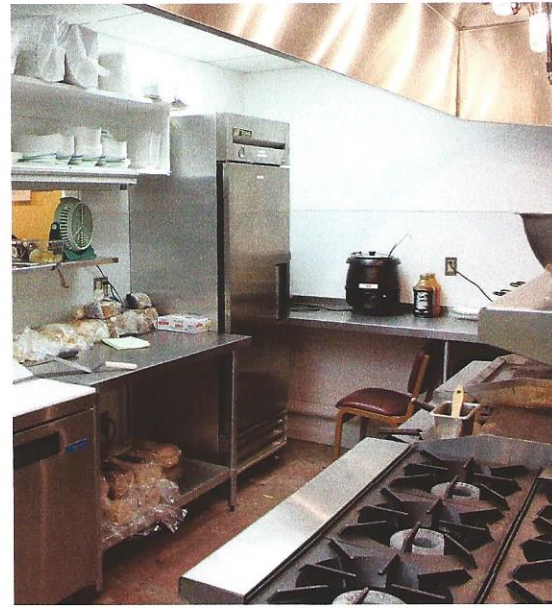
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As a result, the Upper Valley is now home to one of only a handful of community owned and operated nonprofit ski operations in the United States, which include Cochran's Ski Area in Vermont, the country's first 501(c)(3) ski area, and the Jackson Ski Touring Center in New Hampshire.

Whaleback's History

The Whale has come close to extinction several times during its 59-year history. Originally called Snow Crest Ski Area, it was founded in 1956 by Ernest Dion, a standout ski jumper with the Lebanon Outing Club. Dion was later inducted into the US Ski Hall of Fame for his work on developing early



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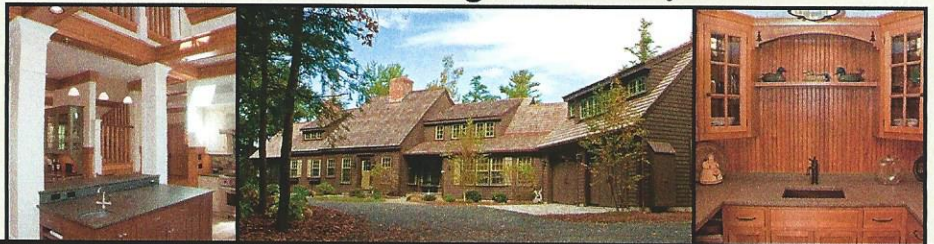


The updated kitchen and cafeteria's serving counters inside Whaleback's base lodge.

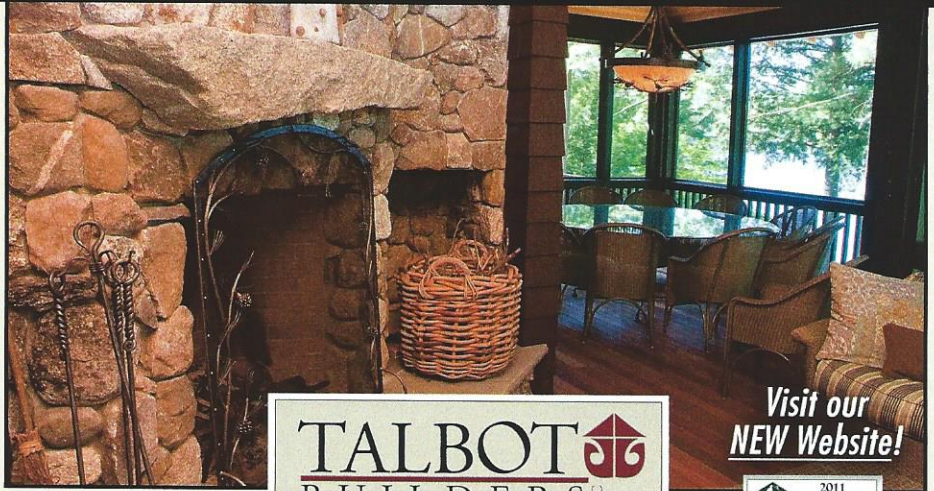
laminated skis and as a charter member of SnowSports Industries America (SIA), the national trade association of the ski and snowboard industry. A T-bar and a rope tow hauled skiers up Snow Crest's slopes until 1968, when the ski area closed for the first time.

Ernest Dion sold Snow Crest to a group of investors that included Jim and Clark Griffiths, who bought out their other partners, cut more trails, and renamed it Whaleback Mountain. Jim Griffiths managed the ski area until 1985, when it was purchased by Thomas Kent and Jeffrey Reed. Kent and Reed added snowmaking and lights for night skiing, but after several warm winters, the ski area was forced to close again. A couple of years later, Jim Griffiths' son-in-law Tim Herbert reopened the mountain and ran it until 2001. ▶

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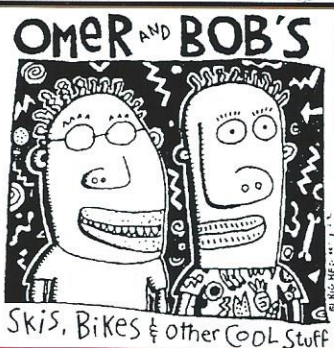


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The lifts lay dormant another five years. During that time, Tim sold Whaleback to Evan Dybvig and his partners, who intended to turn it into a freestyle sports center. They reopened the mountain for the 2006 ski season with plans to add an indoor training facility, but a strong economic current overwhelmed the Whale once again, and the plan never materialized.

Old Man Winter was thin on snow the first two ski seasons, and several investors dropped out. A loan from the Small Business Administration failed to come through, and the economy slipped into recession. It was more than the local ski area could bear.

A New Era

By resuscitating Whaleback Mountain as a community nonprofit ski area, the UVSSF has breathed new life into snow sports in the Upper Valley, but it's a different life than before.

"We need to get people in the mode that we're a nonprofit now," says Cornelia. "The community has to feel ownership. The mountain is open. We got the critical stuff done, such as repainting the lodge, redoing the deck, which was damaged during Tropical Storm Irene, and updating the kitchen. Brad Hastings with Golf and Ski Warehouse is organizing the rentals. There's a lot of sweat equity already in it, but there's a lot of fundraising and work still to do."

The UVSSF needs to raise about a million dollars to cover key short-term needs, including making the snowmaking and lighting systems more efficient and adding a surface lift in case the circa 1968 chairlift needs repairs.

"Once we uncovered what's there, there were so many needs," says Cornelia. "The kitchen and deck cost more than we anticipated. The wiring needs updating. The valves on the snowmaking system need to be replaced. We're pretty Yankee about it, but it still takes money. . . . The enthusiasm is greater than the money raised. We would love to do everything now, but we can't. Instead we're trying to show improvement and move ahead in a logical way."

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For the Kids

Thanks to the UVSSF's efforts, Whaleback remains a busy place with 600 kids on its slopes each week, about 300 from 11 after-school programs and the rest from local ski and snowboard teams including Kimball Union Academy, Cardigan Mountain School, Ford Sayre, and the Whaleback Mountain Club.

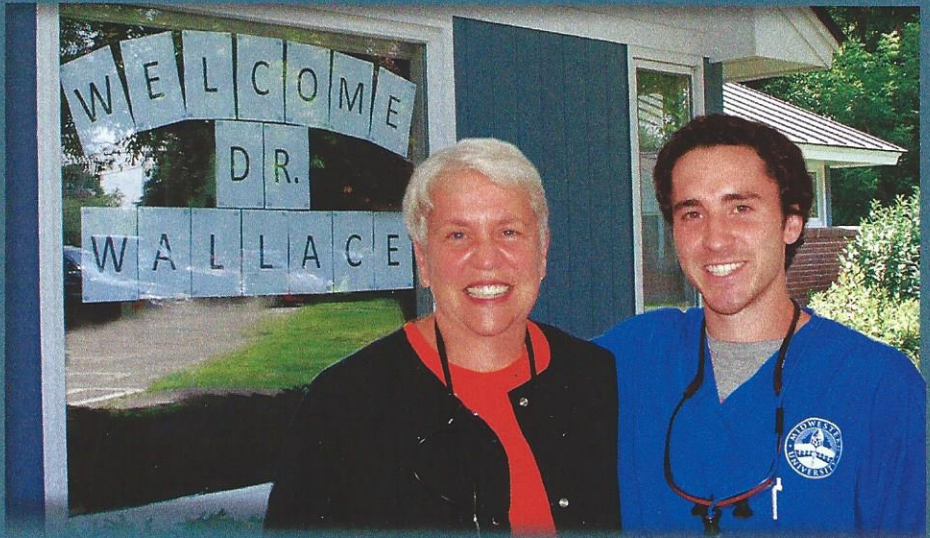
"If Whaleback wasn't here, most of these kids wouldn't ski," says Cornelia. "Imagine if all those kids were inactive! Skiing is a traditional New England activity. Kids learn independence and a respect for nature on the slopes. They're out there in the rain and snow."

To be viable long term, Whaleback still has a ways to go, not only to find the capital and manpower to maintain and upgrade its facilities but also to create non-winter uses for them. Adding a five-kilometer Nordic skiing loop with lights and snowmaking on its flat summit is among the long-term goals.

However, for this winter, it remains a place where skiers can take a couple of runs after work, join the Thursday night race league, give their kids an opportunity for fun and competition, or ski safely with small children. It is a community resource and outdoor recreational facility—and a bargain. A season's pass at Whaleback runs from \$210 to \$399 per winter depending on age and whether you want to ski weekends or just midweek. Day tickets range from \$15 for a two-hour pass to \$40 for a full-price all-day adult ticket.

"Destination skiers aren't going to choose Whaleback over Killington," says Cornelia, "but if you want low crowds and a high volume of skiing, Whaleback is a good value." It's also an example of how Upper Valley residents band together to support local nonprofits. "It's not without its trials and tribulations," says Cornelia. "We've got a long list of things to do. We need manpower and money, but it's all good." 🍃

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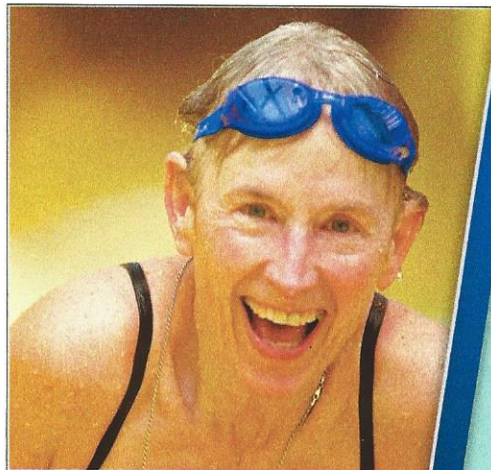
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