

THE BLUE COLLAR ISSUE

THE UNTRACKED EXPERIENCE



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Microbursts and Matriarchs
Above the Arctic Circle

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TRAIN HERE. SKI ANYWHERE.

Small mountains can pack big adventures.

by Anneka Williams

In 2016, Andrew Drummond was skiing a sustained, 1,200-foot couloir near Alaska's Pika Glacier. "It felt like a new level of discomfort and fear that I hadn't experienced," he recalls. "It was a moment in time where I realized I really was just honing all these skills from the steep skiing I've done [in the Whites] but magnified on a bigger scale."

As a ski mountaineer and backcountry athlete, Drummond has pursued big mountain adventures all over the world. But his home base is New Hampshire's White Mountains. Though the Whites boast gnarly weather and steep skiing, the peaks, most of which hover around 4,000 feet, are relatively small in stature. At first glance, they may not seem like an obvious training ground for bigger expeditions, but their accessibility and proximity make them uniquely ideal.

Training for huge trips doesn't require massive mountains, it just demands you maximize opportunities in your backyard. This involves identifying what you're working with and leveraging that terrain to help you meet your goals and expedition plans.


Skiing Steeps

What Drummond found in Alaska was that the line he was skiing was just a longer version of familiar terrain from the Whites. Because steep and tall don't always go together, steep skiing is a great skill to train in your local mountains.

Steep terrain is subjective—it's relative to your prior experience and risk tolerance. However you define it, knowing how to tackle what's difficult to you is a vital ski mountaineering skill; especially when the risk of falling can come with serious, sometimes even fatal, consequences. >>

Tyler Ray catches air as he drops into Great Gulf, the largest cirque in New Hampshire's White Mountains. **Andrew Drummond**



Andrew Drummond navigates a narrow chute in Tuckerman Ravine on an early season tour.  Chris Shane

Start by learning your terrain: Use a mapping tool or inclinometer to measure the slope angle of some of your favorite local ski runs. Once you figure out what your “steep” is, pay attention to how you ski it. What’s the weight distribution between your uphill and downhill ski? How do you position your upper body to make turns? Are you using your edges effectively? Play around with different ways of skiing on a run you’re comfortable with to see what makes you feel more stable versus what throws you off. As you hone your technique, consider progressing to a more difficult slope if you have access to one.

In preparation for a bigger expedition, look at the lines you want to ski and their slope angles. Then, see if you can find a slope with a similar pitch near you to mimic what your expedition lines may feel like. Pay attention to snow quality, as steeps will ski differently depending on conditions. Throughout the winter, try your favorite local lines in different snow types (powder, corn, crust, etc.) to gain condition-specific skills. As you progress, consider what you might do if you find yourself on a slope that feels outside your comfort zone. A good sideslip can get you out of most terrain, making it a worthy skill to practice.

Off-Ski Skills

Whatever your backyard range has to offer, finding ways to use ropes, build anchors, rappel or try ice climbing can build familiarity with the gear you may need for bigger mountains. And these skills don’t require that you have skis on your feet to practice.

Start by getting your hands on the gear and practicing with it in your garage or yard. Build an anchor, make sure you can fit a harness over all your ski layers, test how efficiently you can put your ski boot crampons on and get comfortable tying knots. Then, if possible, bring these skills to your local backcountry spots.

“Dealing with exposure and more technical skills in your home mountains can feel contrived, but it’s all about getting to know your gear,” Drummond says. “I often find myself climbing or rappelling short technical pitches that are completely avoidable, but they allow me to test gear and refresh skills that often lay dormant.”

Practice building an anchor and rappelling with your skis on. Trade skins for crampons one day to make sure you feel comfortable climbing in them. Wear your harness to break it in. Test equipment and rope skills with your expedition team before heading into the mountains so you can make sure you’re all on the same page. Most importantly, if you’re building these skills from scratch, hire a guide or sign up for a class with a mountain guide service.

Technical mountain skills won’t help if you can’t weather the elements of alpine regions, so testing your winter camping

setup is an important part of off-skis training, too. Drummond recommends getting out in your home mountains to rehearse what a cold night in big mountains might feel like.

“You want to see if you can run your WhisperLite efficiently and to make sure you can stay warm and dry,” explains Drummond. Winter camping is also a great way to practice techniques for drying clothes in your tent at night and learn how to protect the gear in your pack from the elements during the day. Mountain weather can be unpredictable, and you want to be prepared for anything. Practicing camping in the cold offers you an opportunity to adjust your systems as needed so when your big trip rolls around your systems are dialed.

Know Your Snow

On Drummond’s most recent trip to Alaska, he was tracking the Pika Glacier’s snowfall and reading nearby avalanche reports in the months leading up to his trip. He and his team then used this knowledge and their own on-the-ground experience once they arrived to inform their decision-making and terrain choices. “We were looking at webcams as much as possible for visibility and reading all the avalanche reports,” he explains. These reports helped the group identify a snow layer of concern and change their terrain choices to more safer options.

Even if avalanches aren’t a problem in your home mountains, you can learn more about different avalanche problems and what to look for through digging snowpits. It’s also important to follow the avalanche center of places you want to visit so you can arrive as

informed as possible about snow and avalanche conditions prior to an expedition.

Use the Mountains Year-Round

Maintaining or improving baseline fitness throughout the year makes big ski days more enjoyable. Take stock of your backyard to figure out what you’re working with. Trail running, mountain biking, rock climbing and hiking are great options for building strength and aerobic capacity in the offseason. You don’t need massive trail systems or big mountains to be a phenomenal athlete. Hill repeats and endurance activities like running and biking can be performed anywhere and offer great opportunities to not just maintain but increase fitness. “Use offseason activities to keep sharp so that when it’s time to transition back to ski season, you’re ahead of where you left off,” says Drummond.

Training isn’t always glamorous. It’s a grind and can sometimes feel silly. But it is an important part of being an ambitious backcountry skier. So, go winter camping for fun, rappel an icy cliff for the hell of it or seek out mixed climbing to get ready for your next big adventure. ❄️

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