

Irene Brings New Lines, Damage to Tuckerman Ravine

Contributed by Gwen Cameron

In August, Tropical Storm Irene brought severe rain and billions of dollars in damage to New England. New Hampshire's Mount Washington, and slopes of Tuckerman Ravine, also saw damage...along with new ski lines.

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The tail end of summer brought Tropical Storm Irene and torrential rains to New England. The precipitation overload tore through buildings and infrastructure, with damage costs estimated in the billions. Landslides in New York's Adirondacks--many of which offer great ski potential--were so numerous the government gave up counting. (Read more about the Adirondack slides on p. 32 of the November 2011 issue.)

On New Hampshire's Mount Washington, the storm created similar new-riding potential along with infrastructure woes. Nearly a foot of rain ripped out trails, roads and bridges along the Cutler River (a prominent river on Washington's east side), keeping the Forest Service busy through the fall, says Jeff Lane, Snow Ranger and Acting Trails, Backcountry and Wilderness Supervisor for the area.

The Forest Service, along with the organization Friends of Tuckerman Ravine, held trail work weekends in mid- and late-October and called on backcountry users to help with the repairs.

The floods damaged several bridges near Tuckerman Ravine, including one at Hermit Lake, making them too unstable for snowcat travel this winter--Forest Service officials regularly use a snowcat to access higher terrain. "Things are really unstable....The land can only cope with it so well," says Lane, who finished the last of the various repairs in the beginning of November.

While the rain did not open up much new terrain in the area, it did change some existing features, most notably Hillman's Highway. Hillman's is a popular, 1,500-vertical-foot line immediately south of Tuckerman Ravine. It's always banked left toward the bottom but now, it takes a much harder left-hand turn and runs an extra few hundred feet, almost to the John Sherburne ski trail. The recent slide also carved the gully deeper, says Lane, but the change will not be noticeable once snow fills it in.

The terrain is still shifty, says Lane, and may continue to be unstable into the winter, with freeze-thaw cycles setting off sporadic rock fall. Tempting as it is, hiking up to investigate the slide isn't recommended, Lane advises. So NH skiers will have to wait until the snow falls to get the full view of what Irene brought.

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