

# Back Trails

Perspectives on People and Nature

## Skiing Into Nature

by Frank Knight

Tall, skinny and awkward—not a promising beginning for an athlete. Certainly not for success in competitive team sports, but my “handicaps” served me well for a long and healthy life outdoors. Neither comfortable nor welcome on teams, I turned to such solo pursuits as biking, hiking and swimming.

During the long winters in my hilly Southern Tier hometown, ice skating, sledding and tobogganing were great fun. Skiing wasn’t a top choice—but we did manage to survive barreling downhill on crude skis with a single toe strap. Cross-country skiing wouldn’t become popular for decades.

My parents chose to spare their

son into my first high school summer job as a nature counselor at a boys’ camp in the Finger Lakes. After that, college majors in biology and botany led to an environmental education career where teaching often occurred outside. Many outdoor educators use canoes and snowshoes (or even skis) in public programming where getting there is half the fun.

One of my proudest outdoor accomplishments was finally learning to ski better after 60 years of practice. I took a lesson at Belleayre Mountain, and just by luck was assigned an instructor who had just taken a workshop on how to teach seniors. I was his guinea pig and he succeeded. What a rejuvenating experience! I felt as young as

Janet. She just retired, but is not a skier, so was eager to find a summer activity we might share. We rented kayaks and she became an instant enthusiast. After trying a variety of craft, we bought our own kayaks this summer and explore new ponds regularly. She happily fills her sketch pad while my camera and I get closer to wildlife. We’ve also learned that this fulfilling activity is highly self-motivating; exercise and a healthy diet enable us to continue kayaking, snowshoeing and skiing.

I’ve come a long way from the awkward boy who didn’t know how to ski. Today it’s one of the many outdoor activities I can’t imagine being without. Janet and I joke that we’ve found the perfect senior sports; downhill skiing requires no walking and we paddle sitting down.

Retired DEC environmental educator **Frank Knight** enjoys wildflower photography and identification when not answering letters from *Conservationist* subscribers.



The author, Frank Knight, in 1951.

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son serious injury from this primitive form of skiing. They outfitted me with state-of-the-art wooden skis with spring bindings on leather boots and we went to nearby Harris Hill, modestly touted “Glider Capital of the World.” In summer, sailplanes were launched by pickup trucks. In winter, a rope tow pulled skiers to the hilltop near the glider launch. To teach me the basics, a WWII veteran ski trooper helped me earn scouting’s ski badge. Inspired by my ski instructor, I stuck with skiing over the years, but never became proficient.

Scouting’s merit badge quest also got me fascinated with nature. My interest in trees and birds, flowers and bees parlayed

the 15-year-old in the photo. I could ski the whole slope without stopping to catch my breath. I could relax and daydream instead of concentrating on staying upright.

As I enjoy outdoor activity well into my senior years, I wish everyone could. Many people seem to be losing or have already lost touch with nature. To counter this trend, environmental educators are using a number of popular programs to engage children in the outdoors. Some inspire entire families to investigate unmowed fields for insects, search for critters under logs, and explore pond and streamside aquatic life.

Thankfully, though, my love of outdoor activities is shared by my wife