

A November to Remember

If there has ever been better backcountry skiing in November, it was way too long ago to recall. The snow began accruing mid-month, and by Thanksgiving there was two feet at the official snow stake on MT Mansfield. The day after found us traversing the summit cone of Bolton Mountain under a cobalt blue sky and over a sparkling white snowpack, with the Chin of Mt Mansfield glistening to the north.



The snow (should I say wintry mix) continued unabated and a week later the stake showed nearly four feet. We set off across Beaver Meadows on the east side of Whiteface to circumtrek that mountain. Higher elevations were in the clouds, and a distinct snow line on tree branches showed at about 2400'.



We ascended above that snow line where the mist-enshrouded trees seemed to glow despite the lack of sunshine.



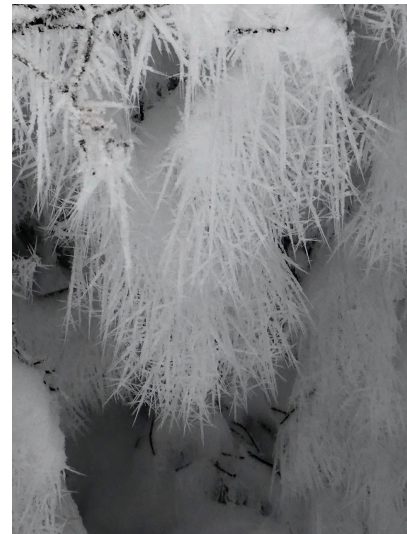
I am thinking the Eskimo word for this variety of snow would be translated as “plaster.” It cemented onto the hardwood branches forming a stubborn layer, and blanketed onto the conifers making the smaller ones bow. Scraping a ski on a hidden rock with a ground cover like this was not a concern.



We crossed the main ridge onto the west side, and at higher elevations hoarfrost appeared on the snowy branches as ubiquitous and varied as mushrooms after an autumn rain.



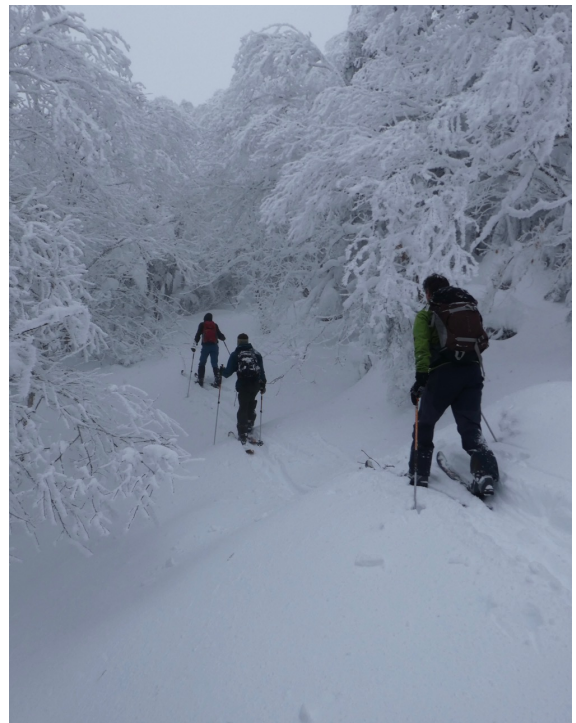
I have learned that hoarfrost is sublimation in reverse, where air-laden moisture cools directly into a solid without becoming liquid first. The forms it can take are mind-boggling. Here, some looked spiny, some resemble an old man's beard, and some are softer like shredded cotton.



On the west side we dropped into some glades scooting down through this frozen fairyland.



We followed patches of savanna around Whiteface's northern flank back onto the east side.



We soon came to an ancient and revered yellow birch that is named Born Again. The main trunk of this hillside oracle grows horizontally out of the bank for a good twelve feet before bolting upright into numerous smaller trunks. As we approached, a gleam formed in Ross's eyes, and he began looking like a kid in a candy store. He got right down to business stomping out a launch pad and in the blink of an eye soared into the mountain mist against a black-and-white maze of frosted branches.

