

Alpine Island

From the Forbidden Plateau to Mount Washington, skiing on central Vancouver Island dates to the 1920s. **BY JENNY CLAYTON**



PHOTOS THIS PAGE COURTESY MOUNT WASHINGTON

Mount Washington provides challenging runs and Olympic-standard training facilities for expert skiers and safe learning spaces for novices. During the 2011–2012 season, the resort received a total snowfall of 62 feet.



In the aftermath of the 2010 Winter Olympics, Whistler may be the best known ski destination in British Columbia, but Mount Washington Alpine Resort, located on Vancouver Island, hosted many Olympians for their training in the weeks leading up to the Games. Established in 1979, Mount Washington is one of the most popular ski resorts in this western Canadian province, attracting about 350,000 skier visits per year to its challenging expert and accessible novice slopes. About 90 percent of the skiers come from Vancouver Island for the day or weekend, while the other ten percent come from Vancouver, Alberta, Ontario and the United States.

Though the modern alpine resort is relatively new, skiing at Mount Washington, and on central Vancouver Island, traces its roots to Mount Becher and the Forbidden Plateau ski hill, about eight miles to the south. Tourism promoters from the Comox Valley in the mid-1920s, including city engineer Clinton Stuart Wood and newspaper editor Ben Hughes, recognized that a subalpine area on the eastern edge of the Vancouver Island mountain ranges, characterized by stunted trees, rocky outcroppings and small lakes, could be marketed as a summer and winter playground for locals and tourists. To make the area appear more alluring and mysterious, Wood and Hughes re-invented a local First Nation's story of women and children kidnapped on the plateau, and named it the "Forbidden Plateau."

Wood founded the Comox District Mountaineering

Club in 1928 and promoted the area for skiing. On winter weekends, members hiked seven and a half miles up to the club cabin below the summit of Mount Becher (elevation 4,544 feet) just to have two or three runs. After a heavy snowfall, the cabin would disappear entirely; club members learned to hang a shovel high up a tree near the cabin's door so that they would know where to start digging. In the absence of professional instructors, they developed their own ski style, known as the "Becher Crouch." To walk uphill on skis, they attached sealskins to the underside of their skis with wax. In 1933, during the Great Depression, Wood left his city job and with his family built the Forbidden Plateau Lodge at 2,100 feet at the top of a logging road, about five miles below the summit of Mt. Becher.

In the late 1930s, the Forbidden Plateau started to attract attention from skiers off the island. In January 1938, with the help of local guides, well-known British Columbia mountaineers Don and Phyllis Munday travelled via the Forbidden Plateau Lodge and Mount Becher to make the first recorded winter ascent on skis to the summit of Mount Albert Edward (6,870 feet), almost 10 miles west of Mount Becher as the crow flies. In March of that year, Wood organized a skiing competition on Mount Becher that included downhill and slalom racing. Participants came from clubs in Courtenay, Port Alberni, Victoria, and Vancouver. Gertrude Wepsala of Vancouver won the downhill and slalom races for women, and later



THIS PAGE: RUTH MASTERS, "HISTORY OF FORBIDDEN PLATEAU" (ALBUM COMPILED 1982-1986) / COURTENAY AND DISTRICT MUSEUM



Top: Clinton Wood surveys the view from the summit of Mount Becher in an undated photo. Above: In 1933, Wood and his family built the Forbidden Plateau Lodge at the top of a logging road at 2,100 feet elevation. He's shown here with his wife, Mary.



Above: A group of young adventurers on the Forbidden Plateau in 1935; Roger Schjelderup was the lucky kid with skis.

Right: Gertrude Wepsala of Vancouver won the 1938 women's downhill and slalom on Mount Becher.



that year won the women's downhill race at the Pacific Northwest competition at Mt. Baker, Washington.

After World War II, the Comox District Mountaineering Club continued to improve the facilities for downhill skiing. Club member Angus McMonnies helped build the first ski tow on the hill behind the lodge with war surplus material, including a four-cylinder Wisconsin motor. By the early 1950s, members maintained a run from the Mount Becher cabin, through the forest, to the logged-off slope above the Forbidden Plateau Lodge, and built an additional cabin along the way as a stopping point. The club also organized its own annual Kandahar race.

With the increasing popularity of skiing, the City of Courtenay started to offer lessons as part of its recreational activities. In 1947, the Courtenay Recreational Association hired Herb Bradley, a swimmer and lifeguard from Edmonton who had served in the war, as its full-time director, a position he held for 27 years. Bradley taught young skiers every weekend in the winter. This group called themselves the "Fanny Dunkers," for their tendency to land in the snow. They helped pay for their ski-tow tickets by clearing brush from the runs in the fall. Ski tows were made of wire cable, so skiers carried a wooden tow grip with a groove on it to hold on to the tow.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the Forbidden Plateau ski hill, operated by the Mt. Becher Ski Development Society, remained at the forefront of downhill skiing on Vancouver Island. The society built a new day lodge up the hill from the original lodge and added a T-bar. Bradley started to teach individuals with physical and mental disabilities how to ski, a program that continues at Mount Washington today. By 1972, the hill had the first chair lift on Vancouver Island. In the next decades, however, the ski hill suffered from poor snow conditions and lack of revenues. The roof of the day lodge collapsed under heavy snow in 1999, and that year the last of almost 50 Kandahar races took place. Increasing vandalism on the closed hill, including a fire in February 2002 that burned down the lodge, has made re-opening the hill for downhill skiing increasingly difficult.

Some of the same people who learned to ski at Mount Becher and the Forbidden Plateau ski hill have been instrumental in developing Mount Washington (elevation 5,215 feet) as an alpine resort. Alex Linton, a Campbell River businessman who grew up skiing at Mount Becher in the 1930s, was the one who envisioned a new resort at this higher mountain eight miles to the north. In 1975, Linton asked his friend Henry Norrie to fly him in his helicopter up above Mount Washington to gauge its potential as a ski hill. Linton and Norrie then convinced logging company Crown Zellerbach to lease them the land. The current president of the Mount Washington Alpine Resort, Peter Gibson, started skiing as a youth on the Forbidden Plateau in 1960. He recalls that unlike other ski hills in BC at the time, that had evolved based on the activities of clubs, Mount Washington was developed according to a master plan. Lots in the future alpine village went for sale in September 1979, and sold out that same day. That December, the

Mount Washington ski hill opened with two lifts, and added two more lifts by 1984. In the mid-1980s, the resort built its first cross-country lodge.

The resort has continued to expand and diversify its year-round activities. Travel time from Victoria, the capital city of British Columbia, was reduced when the 10-mile road to the resort was paved in 1996, and the Island Highway streamlined in 2001. In 2000, Mount Washington added to its 1,000 acres by purchasing 600 acres from TimberWest logging company. A new nordic center, the 10,000-square-foot post-and-beam Raven Lodge, was opened in December 2001.

In the winter of 2004-2005, the resort opened a chair lift that was unique in Western Canada. Named for its shape, the Boomerang travels up and over the mountain to "The Outback," where advanced skiers and snowboarders can enjoy 400 acres of black diamond and double black diamond runs. When Whistler was chosen for the 2010 Winter Olympics, Mount Washington prepared to host athletes in training since it has similar snow conditions as the nordic venue near Whistler. The resort built a sports center and a biathlon training stadium, upgraded its cross-country trails, and enhanced lighting for evening skiing. More than 400 Olympic athletes, coaches and managers from 16 nations came to Mount Washington to practice for the Games. Having installed four Magic Carpets in its Easy Acres learning area since 2011, Mount Washington has also earned the reputation of offering one of the best beginner areas in Canada. Building on a tradition of skiing that originated on the Forbidden Plateau, Mount Washington continues to find innovative ways to attract skiers and snowboarders of all abilities. ❄️

DETAILS

Mount Washington Alpine Resort

Season: December to April

Location: #1 Strathcona Parkway, about 30-minute drive northwest of Courtenay, Vancouver Island, BC

Vertical Rise: 1,657 feet

Average annual snowfall: 36 feet

Acres of Terrain: 1,700

Lifts: 2 high-speed chairlifts, 2 fixed-grip quads, 1 triple chair, 4 magic carpets

Alpine Trails: 81 runs (14% beginner, 35% intermediate, 51% advanced) **Nordic Trails:** 22

Terrain Parks: 2 terrain parks

Amenities: Restaurants at Alpine Lodge and Raven Lodge (nordic)

Accommodation: The Alpine Village has ski-in, ski-out accommodation for more than 4,000 people

Phone: 1-888-231-1499

Website: <http://www.mountwashington.ca/>



SKI LIFE by Bob Cram

