

Thursday Tour, 18th February 2010

By Derek Wills

Rendezvous: 10:15 a.m. at Parking Lot "Chateau Bleu", Ste-Agathe des Monts

Trails skied: La Catherine & La Gillespie

Round trip skied ~ 9 km On-trail duration ~ 4 hours

Conditions: -3°C, sun-c loud mix, pre-skied backwoods trails

Ref: Info/map from Club de Plein Air de Ste-Agathe-des-Monts
www.clubpleinairsainteagathe.com

Here we are almost midway through the 2010 winter games and in current Olympic spirit we struck double gold in terms of snow conditions and trail network novelty. Yes, novelty inasmuch that this remote x-c neck of the woods was a "first time explore" for all participants...which were: Gordon Cohen, Celia Lang, Howard Bussey, Sheila Mason, Judy Rogers, Murray Moss, Judy Lazarus, Tim Baker, Derek Wills, Chris Lyle, and Valdurn guest Peter Doob.

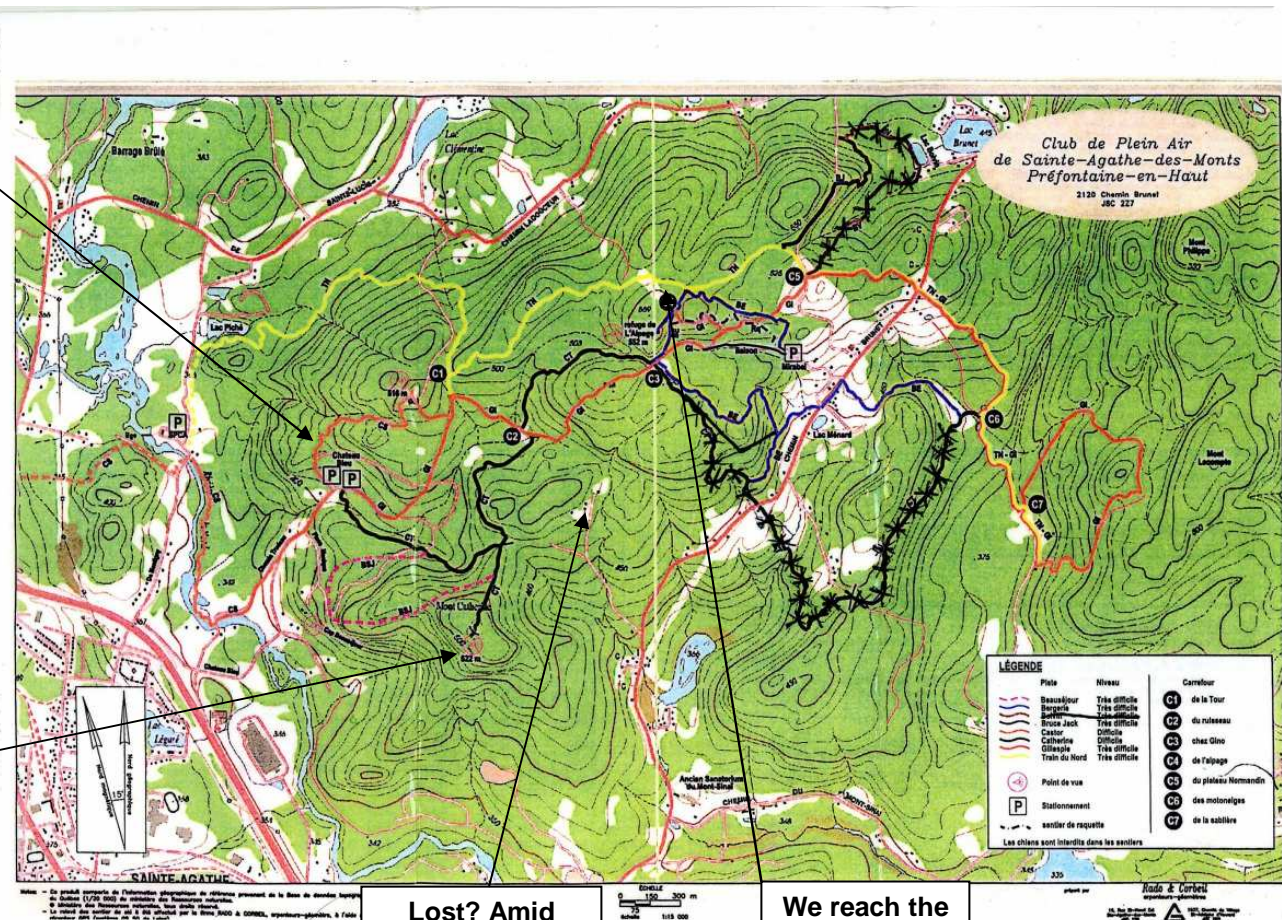
We must thank Gordon who took the initiative here and joined this non-profit citizens club so that we could obtain a sacred trail map (not publicly available) and permit us to be his invited "tour guests"! This club, with the rather lengthy name of Club de Plein Air de Ste-Agathe-des-Monts, was founded some 17 years ago by a group of local residents with the aim of preserving, marking and maintaining a set of ski, snowshoe and hiking trails. There are some 43 km of x-c trails, non-machine grooming being in keeping with the club's environmental policy. Much like Viking, these trails are all thanks to the:

....."grâce à la collaboration des propriétaires terriens"

However, also like Viking, they are confronted with road and residential development...as we were to discover first hand....nibbling away at the network!

Rendezvous
Parking area
at
Chateau
Bleu

We ski to the
top of
Mt. Catherine



Lost? Amid
new road
development
here!

We reach the
Refuge
De L'Alpage

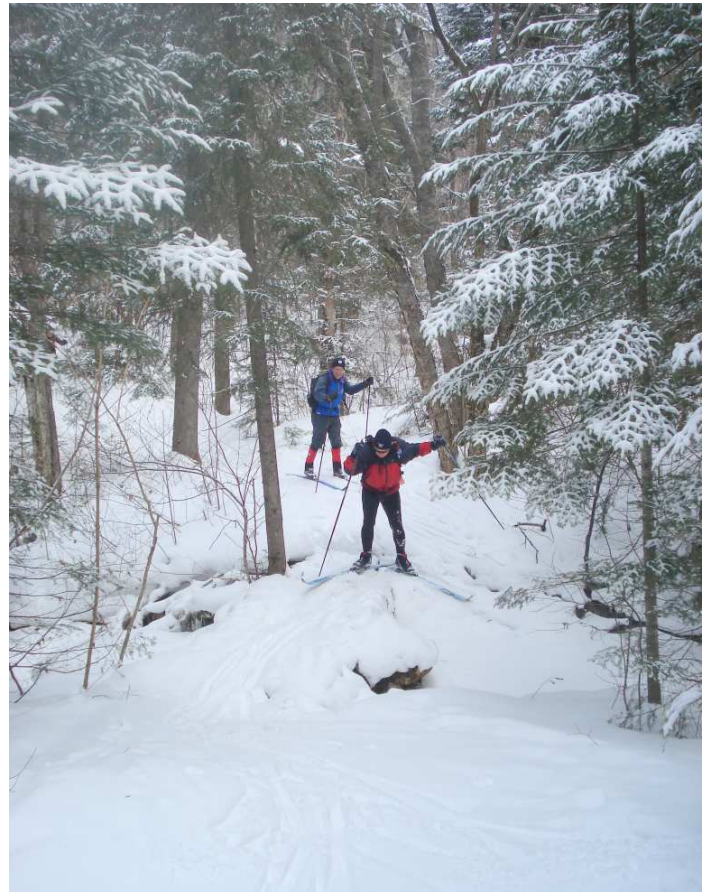


So this is the so-called Chateau Bleu parking rendezvous, but no sign of any Blue Castles?

First off, we decide to tackle Mt. Catherine (522 m high) and find nearby a barely legible sign indicating the start of the Catherine trail but with a better quality sign warding off those pesky snow-shoers!



Our Catherine trail is characterized by these elegant swan-like trail markers.



Being on unfamiliar trails, caution must always be exercised....especially at makeshift bridges!



And so after a long climb, we reach the summit of Mt. Catherine (522 m) where saplings are determined to obscure an otherwise panoramic view of Ste-Agathe!



Somewhere in there are skiers, making an “interesting” descent down from the top of Mt. Catherine.



Here’s Judy the down-hiller, enjoying the final downhill to re-join the main Catherine trail.



Personal life insurance policies may not cover this particular hazard that back country skiers expose themselves to on remote terrain!



We follow a vaguely marked spur trail off the Catherine trail....which eventually leads us headlong into a vast new road construction complex and potential residential development....end of trail????

A developer's sign kindly advises us where to get further details, but probably not about where the trail goes!

Navigationally confused by map, compass and GPS, we decide to console ourselves by having lunch!

Lost souls no more as the Catherine trail brings us to a major intersection with the historic Gillespie trail, where signage abounds!



The signage here makes its clear just who ... is to go where!



Our curiosity is stirred by mention of a Refuge de L'Alpage which we finally reach via the Catherine trail...and a very steep ascent.



The on site plaque gives thanks to the benefactor of this fairytale log refuge equipped for backwoods sleepovers at elevation 559 m



**Judy and Celia make themselves at home!!
Sleeping quarters are aloft, via a staircase.**



The roughly southerly view from the Refuge de L'Alpage elevation 559 m



This poses the question as to who has the greater budget for signage, the snow-shoers, or the Nordic skiers?



Ah, wait, what's this more modern signage?



It seems despite the claim to Swedish neutrality, the Gillespie trail signs are still subject to “takeover” by solid and persistent adversaries!



Our return down from the Refuge summit, via the Gillespie trail, took us on a steep and tree confined section where even Olympians would have run into trouble! However, this was followed by a relaxing long run back to our vehicles at the Chateau Bleu parking area.

All concluded with Peter and Chris leading us off to Ste-Agathe, behind the huge METRO store? But there tucked away was a gem of a place called Couleur Café where in a most decorative coffee bean atmosphere we partook post tour refreshments and sweet treats.

It had been a great tour where seemingly we had the scenic terrain all to ourselves having not run into any other backwoods folks, either on skis or snow shoes...quite a discovery...thanks Gordon... and your Club de Plein Air de Ste-Agathe-des-Monts