



at Family Skiing Highlands Nordic

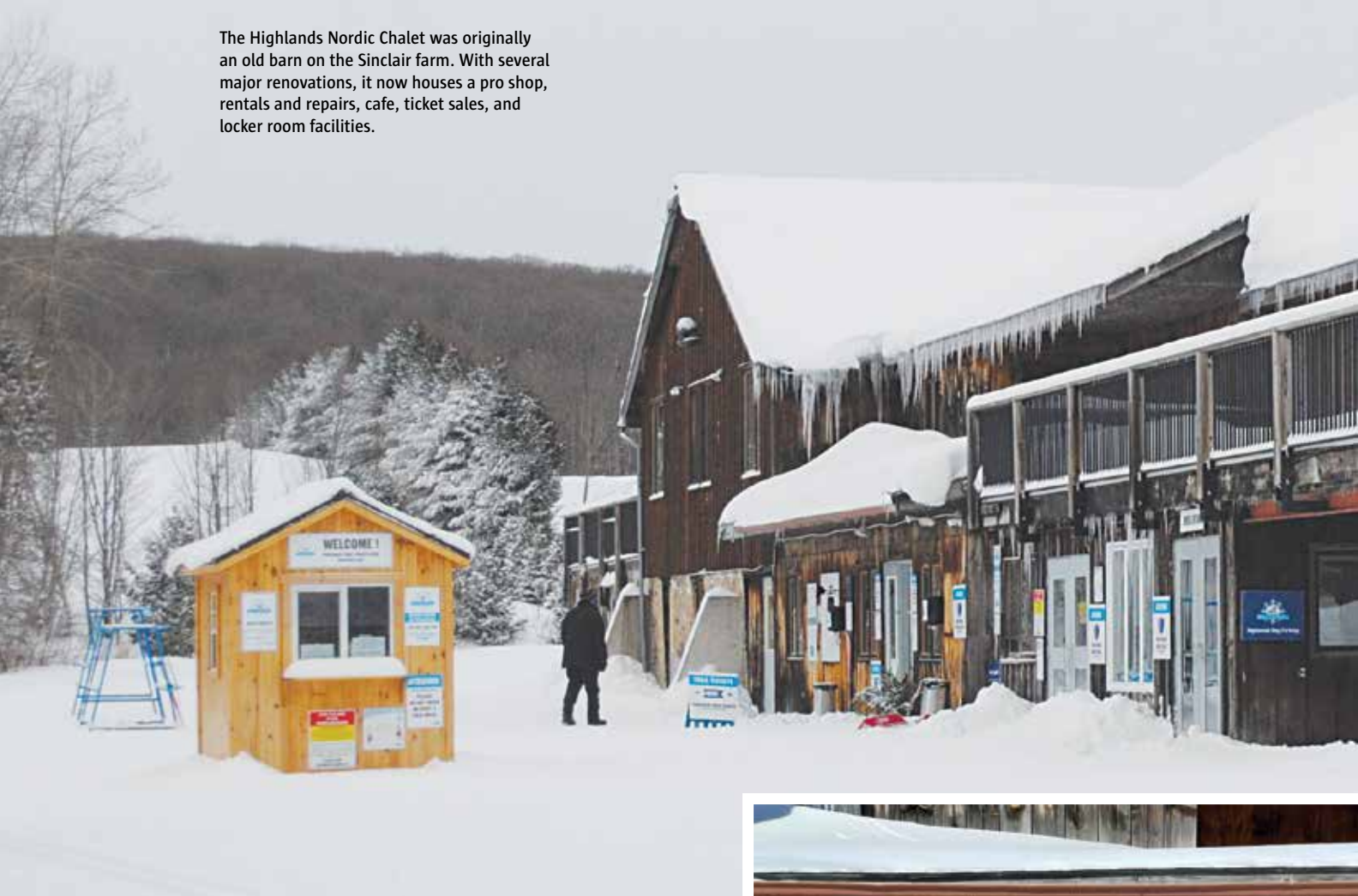
WRITTEN & PHOTOGRAPHED BY SANDRA J. HOWE

Highlands Nordic is perched on the Niagara Escarpment 15 km south of Collingwood. On a clear day, Nottawasaga Bay and the rich farmlands toward Stayner are visible to the east. To the west and north, the Escarpment rises in steps to a summit called Larry's Glacier. There is, of course, no glacier but imagination is part of the fun. In business since 1989, Highlands Nordic has had fun as an important part of the building process all along. The Sinclair family started a cross country ski centre out of the Duntroon Highlands golf clubhouse because of their love of skiing. In 1993, they purchased the adjacent property, and renovated an old barn for a lodge. Thirty years, three generations, several renovations, and Highlands Nordic is going strong.



A lone skier double-poles along a gentle slope at Highlands Nordic. The Niagara Escarpment rises in steps behind him.

The Highlands Nordic Chalet was originally an old barn on the Sinclair farm. With several major renovations, it now houses a pro shop, rentals and repairs, cafe, ticket sales, and locker room facilities.



The fragrance of fresh-baked banana bread wafts through the Highlands Nordic chalet. The staff are friendly and welcoming. Lockers painted with winter-wonderland scenes line the walls of the dressing room. The pro shop is stocked with all the outdoor clothing, gear, and waxes needed. Large trail maps and helpful signage provide orientation to the etiquette and possibilities of this beautiful property. The snow is groomed to perfection. We are all set for an amazing day of Nordic classic or skate skiing, or a snowshoe stroll through wintry woods.

Kelly Sinclair, general manager, greets us with a warm smile. She introduces her husband, Chanse Dionne, outdoor operations manager. We joke about the next generation's

► Chanse Dionne, Kelly Sinclair, and their mascot dog, Teal, pose in front of the chalet and trail map. Teal and Kelly often get out for a ski on Teal's Tango, a dog-friendly trail in the lower meadow.





◀ Skiing on the beautifully-lit night ski trails. About five km of trails are lit by low-voltage LEDs powered by solar panels.

arrival but she explains, “Teal, our dog, is it so far! He does love to go out skiing though, and we are developing a meadow called Teal’s Tango with dog-friendly trails.”

Kelly talks about growing up at Highlands Nordic, skiing, racing, working, and stepping into greater responsibilities. Chanse came to work as a co-op student for Kelly’s father.

“The boss’s daughter asked me to marry her so I stayed,” laughs Chanse. Kelly’s mom does the book work. Kelly’s grandma still helps with the cleaning sometimes. It really is a family effort!

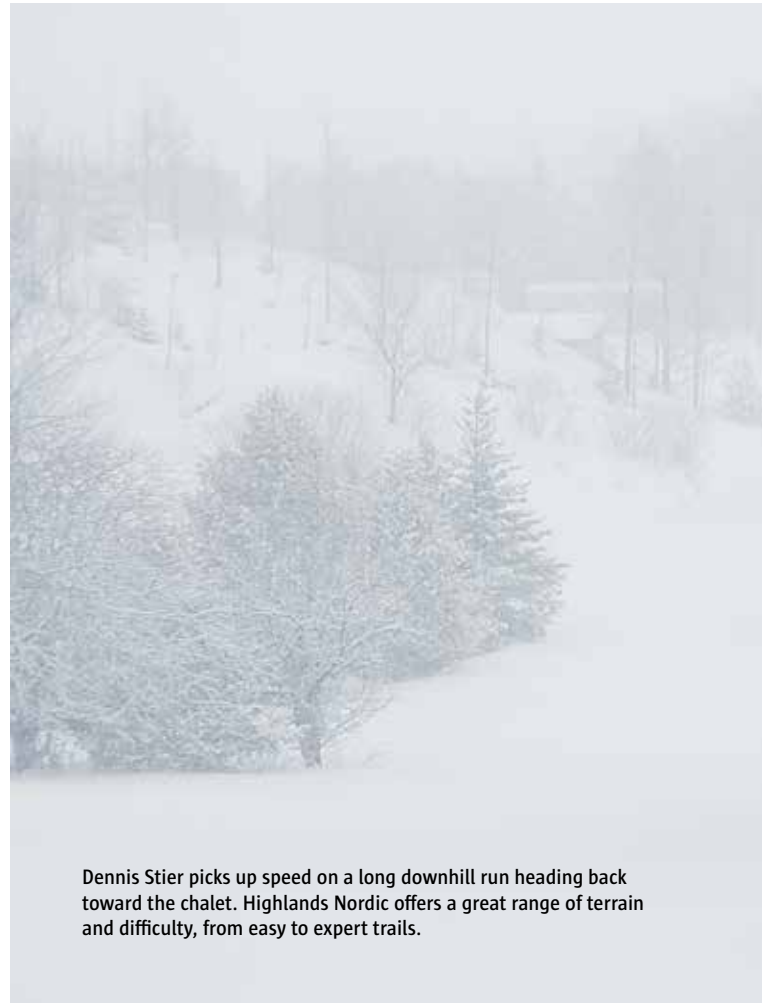
On a blustery Wednesday, my husband Dennis Stier and I arrive at Highlands Nordic.

Temperatures are hovering near zero, and the snow is heavy. Chanse kindly adds a layer of glide wax to our ski bases to reduce snow stick. There are no long views to be seen today but we catch

glimpses of the Escarpment rising in the distance. Heading out on the easy loop, we climb gradually through beautiful maple forest past a small sugar shack. It is so quiet and peaceful on the trails. A few other skiers skate or glide by. Staff tell us that it will be busier when after-school programs, and night skiing start. On Wednesdays and Fridays solar-powered lights come on at dusk to light up five km of night skiing trails.

Sustainability

The solar-powered lighting is only one example of Highland Nordic’s deep commitment to ecological sustainability both on and off their property. They do not provide printed trail maps but rather post permanent signage at each trail junction, thus reducing paper consumption and waste. They have grown and planted more than 400 evergreen trees



Dennis Stier picks up speed on a long downhill run heading back toward the chalet. Highlands Nordic offers a great range of terrain and difficulty, from easy to expert trails.



▲ Chanse Dionne, outdoor operations manager, with the new Husky Groomer. Chanse starts work at 4am and finishes at 5 or 6pm during the ski season. He discovered “a passion for grooming” and loves to “lay perfect corduroy and track”. His only opportunity for skiing is night skiing.





▲ Young Trailblazers in bright blue jackets line up at the starting gate for a chance to pre-ski their race route at Sawmill Nordic Centre in Hepworth. Trailblazers, the not-for-profit ski club from Highlands Nordic, includes a few hundred members, ages four to 80.



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into a retired field area. This is Teal's Tango, a beginner and dog-friendly loop trail, which is becoming very popular as more skiers want to bring their furry friends skiing.

Guests can also sponsor a tree to help reforest this area, reducing winds and maintaining snow cover for a longer ski season. Chansé says his goal is to plant up to 200 more trees per year on the property. Posters in the chalet encourage skiers to connect with Collingwood's Climate Action Team and the local chapter of Protect Our Winters, a group advocating for policy solutions to climate change.

Sure enough, as dusk approaches many young skiers appear on the trails. The masters, age 18-plus, race past us, skating strongly. Gord Salt, who has coached skiing for more than 50 years, explains that the Highlands Trailblazers Ski Club has several hundred members, and on weekends has more than 100 children, ages four and up, participating in their programs.

Gord says, "I love the sport! The elegance of classic skiing. The toughness of racing. There is so much to learn. It is just a beautiful sport, and Highlands Nordic is a great place to ski!" Several Olympic-level athletes came up through the Trailblazers Program.

Athletes in other sports also practise skills and races at Highlands Nordic. Over the years, Highlands has hosted mountain and fat biking events, snowshoeing, disc golf, obstacle courses, a wide range of skiing competitions, Mud Hero, and 5 Peaks Adventures. The Bruce Trail crosses the top of the property.

Chansé proudly shows us the biathlon ranges



▲ Kathy Pedersen in red, and Fred Tustin in blue, head out from the chalet for some track skiing after completing their work shifts. Kathy, "one of Kelly's Highlands chicks," is in her second year as shop assistant. Fred is the program manager. Both are avid skiers.



▲ A young racer powers to the finish line at Sawmill Nordic Centre, Hepworth, on the Suntrail Special Cross-Country Ski Race. Each competitor is timed over the route and scored accordingly.

which were built in 2020 for skate skiing and shooting challenges. He talks about Highlands outdoor education programs which offer experiential learning linked to the Ontario curriculum for all ages. The property includes hardwood, mixed, and cedar forests, clear-running streams, open meadows, and Escarpment topography. There

is plenty for everyone to learn in this beautiful landscape!

Variety of Trails

Highlands Nordic trails wind and loop, offering varying length and skill levels. Trails are named and colour-coded to help with navigation. The trail grooming is meticulous for both skate and set track. The snowshoe trails and

Bruce Trail criss-cross our path. We head back to the lodge through snow-laden trees lit by solar-powered lights. The forest is truly beautiful at night! One turn, the Hairpin, gives me trouble on our route down the Escarpment, and I land spread-eagled and laughing in the soft snow.

Arriving back at the





Dennis Stier heads up the Niagara Escarpment on colour-coded trails on a snowy day.

chalet, we meet Fred Tustin, program manager, and Kathy Pedersen, pro shop assistant, just heading out for a night ski after work. Asked about her work, Kathy says, "We are all passionate about skiing and kind to each other. Our kids were Trailblazers and staff here too. Highlands is our second home and family!" They ski off happily together.

We head into the lodge for a snack. Warm banana bread from the cafe oven is a welcome treat. Highlands Nordic really does feel like family skiing! **NEV**

Sandra J. Howe's last feature for Niagara Escarpment Views was "Giving Thanks for Barrow Bay Cliffs Nature Reserve," Autumn 2022.



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