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*Pc: John Thain, Visit Cook County*

### **Ski North Ultra - one month out update!**

The Ski North Ultra is less than one month from its second annual event in Cook County, Minnesota. The classic-technique cross-country ski race on March 7, 2026 features a 100km distance, unique to the region, and a 38km option. Starting and finishing at Cascade River State Park, the race utilizes the State Park, Norpine and Bally Creek trail systems. The course features long climbs up and descents down the terrain along Lake Superior. Skiers cross the bridge at Cascade River featuring the famous waterfall, and experience a day in the northwoods, skiing some of the best trails around. Being a full-day event as well as traversing narrow, intimate trails creates more of an ultra-running event feel: friendly, collaborative, pushing boundaries. Bumpy single-track trails, crossing roads on foot, lack of cell coverage, the occasional beaver crossing, a creek and river crossing, two-way narrow trails, this race is a true Northwoods adventure.

The 2025 inaugural event was a wild one, with low snow prompting organizers and volunteers to shovel for days leading up to the event. 125 skiers from around the region and country came up to see this new thing for themselves. The race began under thin conditions but soon thereafter received an unexpected and charmingly welcome 1inch of snow that changed conditions dramatically. Skiers wove through the single-track trails of Bally Creek under fat, falling flakes, descending down the long trail back to Cascade River State Park. As the day went on, the sun came out, and all of the fresh snow glommed onto the bottoms of skis with such affection that skiers were walking down the trail for miles, or stopping every few minutes to scrape off the

bottoms of their skis in hopes of gliding again. Fortunately, the clouds came back and the snow became more agreeable by the time the last big climbs came into play. The snow up on top of the hill was much deeper than snow by the lake (the micro-climate along Lake Superior is a whole fascinating sub-topic), and skiers were able to finish the course in great conditions prior to finishing on a narrow rolling trail back into the park. Skiers were welcomed back with homemade medals and warm food in the State Park building. Other notable challenges included a couple of confusing intersections, in which some skiers ended up skiing ever FARTHER than 100km. Organizers have noted this for 2026! Overall, it was a heroic journey for all involved, and despite some particularly challenging conditions, the resilience and joy of a good day's outdoor adventure shone through.

Why would anyone want to ski 100K? The biggest ski race in North America lives next door in Wisconsin, the American Birkebeiner hosts thousands of skiers for a challenging course at 50km with an elevation gain of roughly 4600 feet. In comparison, the Ski North Ultra features 5700 feet of elevation gain, over 100km. The idea sparked from other endurance sports that encourage a long day, allowing some people to race, others to try to complete it. Look at trail running, mountain biking, gravel riding. It seems the better question is why doesn't cross country skiing have a longer option?

There is a 12 hour cut-off time (7am - 7pm) that is fairly challenging, keeping skiers at under 7:12 minutes per kilometer (keep in mind this includes stops to eat, wax, rest, etc). Last year 72 skiers started the race; 52 completed it. We'll see how things shake out this year!

From the skiers themselves, those who made it through this goose-chase, described the event as "gnarly and different", "so inclusive, so welcoming, so encouraging", "I can't believe how beautiful the trails were up at Deer Yard and Bally Creek", "a truly wonderful event". I might be biased, but I think what we have started here is pretty unique and pretty special.

This year, the race will have a new start/finish area and new order to the course. Thanks to Visit Cook County, skiers can enjoy a post-race meal at Cascade Restaurant, awards from local artists, and a Norpine Trail membership. The race is eager to embed itself into the community, and looks forward to bib pick-up at Lutsen Winery and a post-race celebration at Up Yonder.

The event has a 150 participant cap - there are still spaces left, but register soon at [skinorthultra.com](http://skinorthultra.com). Conditions are currently looking good for a full course. Volunteers are important and helpful: please consider a role at [Grasshopper](#).

Big thank you to Visit Cook County, the Norpine Trail Association, MN DNR, USFS and Finn Sisu for supporting this event.

See you up north!

- Ski North Ultra



