

### *Snowshoeing – General*

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The writer snowshoeing in Rocky Mountain National Park.

### There's No Shoe Like a Snowshoe

By Claire Walter

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Snowshoeing is so hot that it's cool. Even though I'm a longtime skier, snowshoeing has become a tranquil counterweight to high-energy downhill sports. I love strapping big feet

onto my smaller ones and setting off with just a companion or two on what is always a voyage of discovery. Over the last decade, I've come to treasure the rare beauty of the sun filtering through snow-laden trees the morning after a snowstorm, the fulsome splendor of a big, blue-domed sky blazing with sunshine and the dark canopy of night brightened by a full moon and an infinity of stars. I've snowshoed past grazing elk, browsing bison and even a moose standing up to its haunches in an unfrozen mountain stream. I've padded around ghost towns, mine sites and abandoned ranches. I've breathed hard on uphill pulls and cruised back down, and I've struggled against a stiff winter wind and picnicked in a sunny backcountry clearing. And I've done it all with a smile on my face.

While marked snowshoeing routes are generally uncrowded, I am hardly alone in my passion for this burgeoning activity. According to SnowSports Industries America [stet – no 'of'], roughly one million Americans call themselves snowshoers and nearly five million more may do it occasionally. When cross-country skiing was ascendant in the early '70s, promoters tried the sell line, "If you can walk, you can ski." Trouble was, it simply wasn't true. Cross-country skis are narrow (some would say, flimsy) and newly minted Nordic skiers are often uncomfortable sliding on snow. By contrast, snowshoeing truly is within the reach of nearly everyone. The learning curve is minimal, the rewards come practically with the first step, and the risk of injury is low. Just strap on snowshoes and start walking. Snowshoers joke that getting started is a 12-step program. "Take 12 steps and you're a snowshoer," they quip.

Snowshoes have changed radically in the last 15 years. You're more like to find classic bentwood-frame models laced with rawhide used as a decorative object over a fireplace than on anyone's feet. Most of today's snowshoes are made of lightweight aluminum with a tough synthetic decking to provide flotation on the snow. Nylon rather than leather straps or ratchet-closure bindings affix the snowshoes to the boots. Small snowshoes are designed for walking on packed trails or for running, medium-size ones for day hiking under variable conditions, and beefy models are designed for a large man carrying a heavy pack in deep snow. Bindings are adjustable to many sizes, and claws or crampons on the bottom of the snowshoes permit hill climbing without backsliding. The whole set-up costs less than \$200 and will last for years.

Easy to learn and easy on the budget, snowshoeing is winter's answer to walking and hiking, America's most popular outdoor activities. It crosses boundaries of age, fitness, outdoor experience, and personal ambition. Health benefits are a bonus. When Bruce Carey, a 40-year-old Vail, Colorado, attorney who thought of himself as reasonably trim, went for a medical check-up back in 1997, he got a wakeup call. "My internist said, 'Exercise or insulin,'" he recalls. "I took up snowshoeing. I lost three inches from my middle – and I didn't need insulin." Carey became a snowshoe racer and took a part-time job leading snowshoe tours at the Beaver Creek Cross-Country & Snowshoe Center. He is messianic about the health benefits of year-round outdoor exercise.

Americans' scary trend to excess weight, even obesity, is now, on the national radar screen. We know that kids, teens, and adults are all getting fatter, and that the chances of contracting diabetes, cancer, heart disease, and cardiovascular disease are reduced when weight is reduced. It's also common knowledge that exercise is a key component in weight control. It's easy to get some winter exercise on snowshoes. These

stable platforms are ideal for people who are overweight, out of shape, or simply uncoordinated. In fact, snowshoeing is a Special Olympics sport for people with serious developmental or mobility issues.

Most of us are neither Special Olympians nor backcountry addicts nor serious runners, and snowshoeing suits that large lump on the bell curve that represents most people's interests and abilities. Its low-key nature that provides an easy way to experience the ethereal beauty of winter, to bond with nature, and get some exercise. This low-impact activity is, of course, ideal for much-written-about ageing baby boomers. Snowshoeing fits anywhere on the walking-to-running continuum, and anything that you do on bare ground in summer, from a quiet stress-busting winter walk to an adrenaline-filled run, translates to snowshoeing. If you are a casual walker who likes an occasional leg-stretch in the fresh air, strap on snowshoes and amble across a snow-covered meadow in a city park, up an unplowed country lane, or on an urban recreation trail. If you like to hike, strap your boots into a pair of snowshoes, and hit your favorite trail, perhaps with family or a group of friends, or as part of a guided naturalist tour to learn about the winter world. And again, whatever your starting point, whether couch potato or endurance athlete, plugging snowshoeing into your winter life will make your fitter, healthier, stronger, and fleeter.

If you are an ardent backpacker, outfit yourself with sub-zero gear and try winter camping, the epitome of backcountry self-sufficiency and solitude. If you are a runner, stay in shape through the winter by running on snowshoes, and if you like to compete, think about entering a snowshoe race. The snowbelt is filled with events ranging from casual one-milers for families to I've seen special-needs youngsters navigate on the stable platforms that snowshoes provide and gonzo endurance events of 10 or 20 miles, sometimes at 10,000 feet above sea level. The United States Snowshoe Association ([www.snowshoeingracing.com](http://www.snowshoeingracing.com)) maintains a race calendar, and snowshoe racing might well be added to the Winter Olympics roster.

The initial advice for acquiring most skills is to "start off on the right foot," but with its inherent simplicity and user-friendliness, there is no "wrong foot" to snowshoeing. Lessons, as understood in most sports, do not exist. When a one-day extravaganza called Winter Trails Day debuted with little fanfare in 1997, it attracted more than 2,000 people nationwide to community parks, nature centers, and public lands whose trails are used for snowshoeing. Now, Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado, alone welcomes that many snowshoeing debutants. Ten locations host full-blown Winter Trails Day events, often accompanied by a festive winter-carnival-type atmosphere. Newcomers can try out snowshoes gratis, get snowshoeing tips, and join short interpretive snowshoe walks. Additionally, dozens of Nordic centers across the North Country offer free use of snowshoes, suspend trail fees, conduct guided snowshoe walks, or provide some combination. Winter Trails Day at most sites is Saturday, January 8, with Colorado hosting an extra one at Estes Park and Rocky Mountain National Park on Saturday, February 19.

If your first snowshoe outing is a group hike, whether or not as part of Winter Trails Day, you'll tap into snowshoeing's sociable side. Local recreation centers and health clubs; adult education programs; singles', seniors', and new parents' clubs; sporting-goods stores, and nature and environmental organizations are among the home-town venues in snow country that organize group excursions on nearby trails. Even local

chapters of such esteemed regional backcountry, mountaineering, and conservation organizations as the Appalachian Mountain Club, the Colorado Mountain Club, and the Sierra Club organize snowshoe outings, and snowshoe clubs are springing up across the country, many with appeal mainly to racers. Wildlife sanctuaries may slot interpretive tours into their winter programs, some geared for families; the National Audubon Society's website ([www.audubon.org](http://www.audubon.org)) lists them. America's galaxy of splendid national parks, as well as some state parks, schedule snowshoe schedule ranger- or naturalist-led hikes throughout the winter.

Snowshoeing guides based at ski resorts also lead excursions on quiet trails within the confines of the lift-served some ski areas and nearby that cater to resort guests. It's a fabulous was to learn about winter ecology and animal tracks identification – and perhaps even spot some wildlife. Especially in the West, hiking and climbing guides can customize snowshoe tours for any level of fitness or experience, from timid novices to veterans who want to learn about winter camping and mountaineering. Some offer avalanche safety courses for snowshoers with backcountry ambitions. You can find these guides are either through visitor centers or chambers of commerce, or through outdoor-gear stores.

Snowshoes are now readily available for rent or sale at sporting-goods stores, ski shops, and Alpine and Nordic ski centers. Most models consist of a lightweight metal frame, a platform of Hypalon or other strong synthetic to provide flotation on the snow, and an adjustable binding to affix your footwear to the snowshoe. These big feet attach to your own smaller ones for hassle-free access to the white world. The only limitations are those you put on yourself – how fit you are, your comfort level in the outdoors, and your feelings about guided touring versus the quiet companionship of just a good friend or two. While snowshoe hiking is a tranquil, almost contemplative activity, it is also a great family adventure that parents can do with their children—and adults can do with their own parents. Backcountry snowshoeing with a group of amiable companions is not just a winter pleasure, but a safety measure as well, and snowshoeing with a hardy canine companion is fantastic.

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#### Ten Top Snowshoeing Sites

The combination of reliable snow, a variety or well-marked trails, and accessibility to a major metropolitan area or important resort region puts these on the list of leading snowshoeing venues.

- Anchorage, AK; 907-276-4118, [www.anchorage.net](http://www.anchorage.net).
- Aspen, CO; 970-925-1220, [www.aspensnowmass.com](http://www.aspensnowmass.com). Also, Aspen Center for Environmental Studies, 970-925-7345, [www.aspennature.org](http://www.aspennature.org).
- The Balsams Wilderness, Dixville Notch, NH; 603-255-0600, [www.thebalsams.com](http://www.thebalsams.com).
- Beaver Creek, CO; 970-845-5313, [www.beavercreek.com](http://www.beavercreek.com).
- Galena Lodge/North Valley Trails, Hailey, ID. 208-788-2117 or 208-726-4010, [www.svxc.co](http://www.svxc.co)

- Jackson Ski Touring Foundation, Jackson, NH; 603-383-9355, [www.jacksonxc.org](http://www.jacksonxc.org).
- Montecito-Sequoia Winter Sports Resort, Los Altos, CA; 559-565-3388, [www.mslodge.com](http://www.mslodge.com).
- Methow Valley, Winthrop, WA. 509-996-3287, [www.mvsta.com](http://www.mvsta.com)
- Minocqua Winter Park, Minocqua, WI; 715-356-3309, [www.skimwp.org](http://www.skimwp.org).
- Stowe, VT; 800-GO-STOWE, [www.gostowe.com](http://www.gostowe.com).

#### Top Ten Snowshoer-Friendly National Parks

Again, reliable snow conditions, fabulous scenery, suitable trails and ranger-led snowshoe hikes make these parks snowshoeing meccas.

- Crater Lake National Park, OR; 208-527-3257, [www.nps.gov/crla/](http://www.nps.gov/crla/).
- Craters of the Moon National Monument and Preserve, ID; 208-527-3257, [www.nps.gov/crmo/](http://www.nps.gov/crmo/).
- Glacier National Park, MT; 406-888-7800, [www.nps.gov/glac/](http://www.nps.gov/glac/).
- Lassen Volcanic National Park, CA; 530-595-4444, [www.nps.gov/lavo/](http://www.nps.gov/lavo/)
- Mt. Rainier National Park; 360-569-2411 (weekends) and 360-569-2271 (midweek), [www.nps.gov/mora](http://www.nps.gov/mora).
- Olympic National Park, WA; (360) 565-3130, [www.nps.gov/olym/](http://www.nps.gov/olym/).
- Rocky Mountain National Park, CO; 970-586-1223 (east side), 970-627-3471 (west side), [www.nps.gov/romo/](http://www.nps.gov/romo/).
- Sequoia National Park, CA; 559-565-3341, [www.nps.gov/seki](http://www.nps.gov/seki).
- Yellowstone National Park, WY/MT; 307-344-7311, [www.nps.gov/yell/](http://www.nps.gov/yell/).
- Yosemite National Park, CA; 209-372-0200, [www.nps.gov/yose/](http://www.nps.gov/yose/).

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