

Colorado Snowshoeing

This feature appeared in the November 1998 issue of *Rocky Mountain Sports* and was adapted for the December 1998 issue of *Health & Fitness*.

Editors: For reprint rights (and updates), contact cmwalter@claire-walter.com. Photos available.



SNOWSHOEING SECRETS

By Claire Walter

Everyone's going snowshoeing, from serious runners who use it for winter cross-training to people taking their first tentative steps into the outdoor environment. Snowshoeing is winter's answer to walking and hiking, and it transcends boundaries of age, fitness level, outdoor experience and personal ambition. Snowshoeing is so technically simple. At its most basic, it involves little more than putting one foot in front of the other. "Learning" is as simple as getting used to having gear on your feet that sort of flops up and down while you walk. Fifty paces on the flat, and you're a snowshoer. Fifteen minutes and you've got some experience under your belt. An hour on a few inches of snow and varied terrain, and you might call yourself an expert.

The preparation is equally straightforward. Dress in warm, breathable layers that you can don or shed as body heat and weather dictate. Put on warm socks (wool, silk/wool or fleece), footwear (Sorel-type boots, Gore-Tex hiking boots or a new generation especially designed for snowshoeing) and gaiters if the snow is deep. Remember sunscreen and UV-filtering sunglasses. You can rent snowshoes, usually for around \$10 a day, from outdoor, hiking and ski retail stores, as well as at many cross-country ski centers and Alpine ski areas. Most will apply the rental fee to a purchase if you decide to buy. Putting on snowshoes isn't much more complicated than fastening your car's seatbelt, and someone at the rental shop will even show you how to do it. So snug on a pair of lightweight snowshoes, grab ski poles for stability and a daypack with an extra layer, a snack and a water bottle—and off you go.

You can adapt your dry-land pace to snowshoeing and amble, stride, jog or run. Many snowshoers choose the state's abundant backcountry trails. Especially on crowded trails accessible to Front Range hordes, a little courtesy goes a long way in minimizing conflicts with cross-country skiers. If you are breaking trail on snowshoes, walk or hike along the side of the trail to leave room for skiers. (Savvy skiers should also put their first tracks on the side to leave room for snowshoers.) If you see a set of ski tracks etched in the snow, don't step on them but beside them. The biggest single issue skiers have with snowshoers is trampled ski tracks. Also, if you are snowshoeing in a group, don't spread yourselves across the entire trail, but leave a generous lane for skiers whose downhill runs are often marked more with speed than with control.

Colorado is the snowshoeing capital of the western world. In addition to the accessible backcountry, the state boasts an unsurpassed variety of lift-accessed snowshoe trails at ski areas, guided tours, winter hikes with the Colorado Mountain Club or other organization, serious and fun races and other events. Here are some places to check off on your map and dates to mark on your calendar:

FREE SNOWSHOEING INTROS

In addition to the many outdoor specialty shops' and ski resorts' free demo offers that are sure to pop up on the winter calendar. The first is the Colorado SnowSports Expo, in Denver on November 5-8, which will be indoors but will include snowshoeing information. Some national events provide Coloradans with those opportunities. Tubbs' Snowshoes Outback Tour takes place at Rocky Mountain National Park on December 19, providing new and experienced snowshoers an opportunity to "test drive" snowshoes and join guided hikes, fitness walks, competitive races and run events. If you end up buying a pair of Tubbs snowshoes this winter, you'll get a voucher for a free lift ticket, trail access

pass or even a tour at such resorts as Telluride and Estes Park. For details, call (800) 882-2748.

Ben & Jerry's Snowshoe Romps, an annual fixture since 1991, feature daytime, sunset or full-moon snowshoe hikes followed by ice cream and hot chocolate. Colorado sites will probably include Aspen, Beaver Creek, Breckenridge, Crested Butte, Keystone and/or Vail. The schedule will be available sometime in November from Atlas Snow-Shoe Company, (800) 645-SHOE.

Sunday, February 13, is Winter Trails '99, organized by the American Hiking Society to promote the sport across America's snowbelt. Activities typically include free demos, tours, races and giveaways. Colorado venues are Estes Park and Echo Lake at the foot of Mt. Evans. For details on the Echo Lake site, check with EMS, whose downtown Denver store (303-446-8338) is coordinating the event. The Estes Park Chamber of Commerce (800-44-ESTES or 970-586-4431).

NEW SNOWSHOEING TRAILS AT BRAINARD

The Brainard Lake Recreational Area offers some of the closest winter trails to the northern Front Range—and some of the most popular and therefore also most congested. Nowhere else in the state has the culture clash between ski traditionalists and upstart snowshoers become worse, and nowhere else have such efforts been made to solve them. The U.S. Forest Service and Colorado Mountain Club volunteers cut and flagged two new snowshoe-only trails to diffuse two winter recreational activities and defuse the conflicts between cross-country skiers and snowshoers. In designing them, consideration was given not only to physically separating snowshoers and skiers in this busy and popular area, but separating them visually as well.

The snowshoeing trails both begin at the CMC South ski trailhead, but quickly veer off toward Red Rock Lake. The shorter one is a loop of about 1.5 miles, and the longer is roughly four miles, one way. With the creation of these trails, Little Raven becomes ski-only and skis are recommended on CMC South. Winter use of all the Brainard trails remains free. For information, call the USFS Ranger District office at (303) 440-6600.

SNOWSHOEING HIDEAWAY

If Brainard still feels just too crowded, or if you long for a nearby escape, cross Peak to Peak Highway to Gold Lake Mountain Resort, a truly tranquil getaway just 40 minutes from Boulder and little farther from Denver. Miles of never-crowded winter trails thread through the resort's own 500 acres and adjoin public routes as well. The \$37.50 day-use fee includes trail access, equipment, a delicious lunch at Alice's Restaurant and, perhaps best of all, use of four fabulous lakeside hot tubs with views that won't quit. Spa packages are also available. If you're interested in a romantic snowshoeing retreat, book into a charming cabin at low-season rates (starting at \$140 nightly per couple on weekends, with a 20 to 30 percent midweek reduction). For details and reservations, call (800) 450-3544 or (303) 459-3544.

DISCOVERIES WITH DAVE

Niederlander Dave Felkley is a snowshoeing enthusiast and passionate lover of the winter trails around his adopted hometown. Through Bigfoot Snowshoe Tours, he conducts day

and moonlight excursions on private land, places that you simply aren't permitted to access on your own. Given the weekend crowds at some of the more popular Front Range routes, this is a real benefit for groups and individuals. Specialty programs including nature tours, photography tours, wine-and-cheese tours and picnic tours cost \$25-\$35 per person. Call (303) 258-3157.

[

ACCESSING ELDORA

Eldora Mountain Resort's two designated snowshoeing trails are accessible for a fee that was unannounced at this writing. One trail skirts the perimeter of the Alpine ski area and climbs 1,400 vertical feet in two miles to Corona Lookout, the ski area's highest point. The second, gentler route gains about 800 feet in three miles to the Tennessee Mountain Cabin, a hut that can be rented through the ski area for overnights. Eldora prohibits permit snowshoeing on cross-country ski trails, but the Jenny Lake Trail, accessible to both snowshoers and skiers, is free and is reached by ascending up the side of Eldora's Ho-Hum beginner slope. For information on the trails, rates or events, call (303) 440-8700, Ext. 212.

SNOWSHOE WITH A PARK RANGER

Rocky Mountain National Park rangers lead guided interpretive tours that are ideal for new snowshoers, families and perhaps visitors who are not accustomed to being active at altitude. The tours are free, but the park is a fee area (\$10 per carload). On the east side of the park, the anticipated schedule is for two-hour novice walks beginning at 12:30 p.m. with some basic snowshoeing tips and four-hour intermediate-level hikes beginning at 10:30 a.m.. Tours fill up quickly, and reservations are required but are only taken a week in advance. Call (970) 586-1223. On the west side, easy snowshoe tours last winter were given on alternate Saturdays at 1:30 p.m. with cross-country ski tours. Reservations were requested, but they may be required this year. Call (970) 627-3471. Snowshoe rentals are available at sporting goods stores in Estes Park and Grand Lake, but not in the park.

DOING DEVIL'S THUMB

Devil's Thumb Ranch Resort near Winter Park permits snowshoers on more than 100 kilometers of cross-country ski trails, as long as they stay off the set tracks. But the best part are the wonderful snowshoeing trails that wind through the forest and traverse meadows, among the trees and enjoying the unsurpassed tranquillity. Last year, there were three trails ranging from flat and easy to a three- and five-milers with steady climbs, welcome descents, sinewy sections snaking through a beautiful ponderosa pine forest, straight-aways across open meadows and those wonderful views for which Devil's Thumb is known. Devil's Thumb may flag additional trails this year. The trail fee is \$12, and Redfeather or Atlas snowshoe rentals are \$10. Devil's Thumb also hosts snowshoe races and special events, which had not been firmed up at this writing. For dates and details, call (970) 726-8231.

FRISCO FROLIC

The Frisco Nordic Center (970-453-6855) has over 20 kilometers of dedicated snowshoeing trails. Trail fee and rentals are \$12 each. The center also puts on some major snowshoeing events, including a Susan G. Komen Foundation fundraiser for the

battle against breast cancer on Saturday; January 23; the prestigious Governor's Cup on Sunday, January 31; the Gold Rush on Sunday, February 14.

SNOWSHOE WITH THE MASTER

Two-day snowshoeing clinics with Tom Sobal, the Michael Jordan of snowshoe racing, cover gear, technique, route selection, problem avoidance and all sorts of other refinements. The package includes two nights at the Mt. Elbert Lodge in Twin Lakes, five meals (night-of-arrival dinner through last-day lunch), instruction and coaching, equipment. Clinics are slated for the weekends of November 21-22, December 9-10 and January 16-17 (plan on arriving Friday evening). They will be for all ability levels, but if the interest and demand warrant, the January session may focus on intermediate and advanced skills. Rates are \$220-\$260 for two people sharing a room (\$79 for each additional person) or \$155-\$195 single occupancy. Call (800) 381-4433.

SNOWSHOEING VAIL AND BEAVER CREEK

Snowshoers have gained a firm toehold on the slopes of Vail and Beaver Creek. Lessons, rentals and backcountry tours depart from Golden Peak and from the Nordic Centers at the Vail Golf Course and at Beaver Creek's Nordic center at the base of the Strawberry Park Express chair. Tours, with or without instruction, are \$64-\$66 for a full day; gourmet lunch tours are \$77-\$88. Call (970) 845-5313. The Vail Valley also hosts the Snowshoe shuffle, a fundraiser that is also North America's largest snowshoe race. The 5- and 10K race takes place on Saturday, April 3. Contact the Vail Valley Medical Center at (970) 845-9086 during business hours for details.

ASCENDING IN ASPEN

Sun Dog Adventures organizes snowshoeing activities of all sorts. Snowshoe racer and guide Erik Skarvan has developed a unique snowshoe training program for serious uphill racers, runners who want to transpose their summer sport to snow or anyone serious about using snowshoeing for a fitness regimen. He starts with a consultation and evaluation and continues with a customized program for \$70 per hour. Sun Dog Adventures also offers guided snowshoe tours, gourmet and otherwise, of Richmond Ridge, Hunter Creek, Maroon Creek and other Aspen area venues, starting at \$40 per person. For the less than hardcore, and the less than deep-pocketed, Skarvan created Snowshoe Striders, whose free weekly outings give beginning and intermediate snowshoers a chance to join a group for informal snowshoeing tours—and some technique tips too.

Skarvan's pet project, literally and figuratively, is the K9 Uphill, an annual race up 2,030-vertical-foot Buttermilk Mountain. The start time for teams of snowshoers and their dogs is 10:00 a.m. on Saturday, April 10. The \$30 entry fee includes a chance at \$10,000 worth of human and canine prizes in Erik's Epic Raffle. For information on any of these programs, call (970) 925-1069.

EARN YOUR EATS

You have to work for your dinner at the Tennessee Pass Cookhouse, a mile and nearly 400 vertical feet above the Piney Creek Nordic Center at the base of Ski Cooper. Snowshoeing through the forest, with moonbeams brightening the trail or snowflakes

swirling around you, is a wonderful prelude. Enter through the swinging doors into the soft glow of candles set atop wooden tables whose rich patina attests to many fine meals and good times. Warmth from a wood stove, melodic music and a decent wine and microbrew selection enhance the atmosphere. The *prix fixe* dinner features an elegant appetizer platter, soup or salad, a choice of entrees (elk tenderloin, rack of lamb, trout, chicken or a vegetarian selection) and dessert. A dinner like this is all the more impressive at 10,800 feet. For reservations, which are required, call (719) 486-8114 or (719) 486-1750.

SPECIALTY TOURS IN SALIDA

Guide Terry DuBeau has special expertise organizing snowshoeing tours with small children, seniors, women-only groups and people with developmental or physical disabilities. She includes equipment (snowshoes, poles and footwear) and refreshments (a snack on a half-day tour and also lunch on a full-day program). Half-day rates are \$30-\$40 per person, depending on the group size. Figure on \$50 per person for a full-day. She is a Forest Service licensed guide who tailors itineraries for various levels and interests: beginners or families with small children, people wanting a naturalist orientation or experienced hikers looking for the day's best trail conditions. Contact Mountain Spirit Adventures at (719) 530-0914.

CRESTED BUTTE CRUISE

The Alpineer [stet], an outdoor and mountaineering retail shop in Crested Butte, has been organizing free, twice-weekly group snowshoe outings for all ability levels since 1995. They also offer free use of demo snowshoes to participants. Reservations are recommended. The schedule will probably stay the same as it was last winter, namely Sundays at 10:00 a.m. and Wednesdays at 1:00 p.m., but call (800) 223-4655 or (970) 349-5210 to confirm the schedule and reserve a slot.

PIONEERING POWDERHORN

As Colorado ski resorts go, Powderhorn, located on the western wall of the Grand Mesa, is a minor-league player. As far as snowshoeing is concerned, Powderhorn is a pioneer. While others have appended snowshoeing to other snow-sports offerings, Powderhorn has given it first-rate status. It is not a cross-country venue that also offers snowshoeing, but a facility developed for and dedicated to snowshoeing. This is first in the state.

The Crescent Moon Snowshoe Center occupies a prime parcel, directly at the ski area's base and offers easy access to an ambitious network of snowshoeing trails. There are two trail systems, three concentric loop trails totally nearly five miles at the base of the ski area and a 3.1-mile trail along the Grand Mesa's West Bench connects the upper terminals of the two main chairlifts. Trail access is free. Snowshoe rentals are \$5 or \$8 including a single-ride lift ticket for those who want to snowshoe the West Bench trail but aren't interested in climbing 1,650 vertical feet. The resort's Snowshoe Series of clinics and races are scheduled on four Sundays, December 10, January 24, February 21 and March 21. Call (970) 268-5700.

-end-