



Snowshoeing

OUTDOOR PURSUITS SERIES

Sally Edwards
Melissa Mckenzie



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Contents

Chapter 1	1
Going Snowshoeing	
Getting Started on the Right Foot	3
A Type of Snowshoeing for You	4
Chapter 2	11
Snowshoeing Equipment	
What Kind of Snowshoes Do You Need?	12
Anatomy of a Snowshoe	13
Deciding What to Buy	19
Dressing for Success	21
The Well-Equipped Snowshoer	27
Where to Find It All	29
Chapter 3	33
Snowshoeing Correctly	
Stepping Out	35
Stepping Up	39
Getting to Know the Great Outdoors	45
Chapter 4	51
Snowshoeing Fitness and Safety	
How Ready Is Your Body?	54
Improving Your Snowshoeing Fitness	55
Snowshoeing Safely	60
Beating the Elements	61
Staying Found	64

Chapter 5	67
The Best Places to Snowshoe	
Finding the Best Local Trails	68
Snowshoeing Ski Resorts and Golf Courses	70
Trail Etiquette	71
United States Getaways	71
Canadian Trails	81
Snowshoeing in the United Kingdom	85
Western Europe by Snowshoe	88
Scenic Australia and New Zealand	91
Limitless Adventure	94
Chapter 6	95
Pursuing Snowshoeing Further	
Running	96
Racing	99
Camping and Mountaineering	101
Tracking	103
Being a Snowshoer	104
Appendix For More Information	107
Organizations	107
Other Reading	107
Snowshoe Manufacturers	108
Snowshoeing Lingo	111
Index	117
About the Authors	121

1—

Going Snow-Shoeing

When was the last time you did something for the first time? Stop and ask yourself that question. It is imposing. It is challenging. It is one of the reasons we snowshoe. We asked ourselves this question one winter morning in 1991. Once we decided it had been too long since our last "first time," we were off to pursue a mutual first that we had been curious about for some time—snowshoeing. We made halting progress, however, because we didn't know where to go, what to take, what to do, or, for that matter, what wild critters awaited us—basically, we knew nothing about the sport or how to get started.

But somehow we did get started, and our first snowshoeing experience changed our lives. That morning, we packed a lunch and headed to the

Sierra Nevadas. It was a blast. Our dogs couldn't have been happier, and when we stopped for a picnic lunch on the ridge line, we had a panoramic view of the western slopes of the Sierras. That was the defining moment in which we knew we had found a sport that could offer a blend of adventure, solitude, and peacefulness (and almost no learning curve!). We had to tell others about our discovery.



A sport fit for both the two- and four-legged crowd.
© R. Bossi

Since then there has been no looking back. In our snowshoes we have witnessed the winter world opening to us, as it will for you. Ultimately the act of snowshoeing can bring you so much: the thrills of the downhill, the joy of the silence, and the health and spiritual benefits that come from exploring the outdoors.

Getting Started on the Right Foot



Imagine yourself snowshoeing. Draw the mental picture. It looks like you, dressed warmly, wearing lightweight, easy-to-use snowshoes. It looks like you, walking with friends on your favorite summer trails, but this is terrain you can't cover in the summer because it doesn't exist then—this is a landscape that appears only in the winter, with its snow-white drifts and fields, and the only way to explore it is on snowshoes. It looks like you, doing a snowshoe run for fitness. It looks like you, discovering the tracks of a snowshoe hare. It looks like you, climbing up and out of your everyday routine and onto the nearest mountaintop.

Pretty picture, isn't it? Now that you are done imagining it, get out and do it. Grab a friend, a pair of shoes, your gear, and go.

We grabbed quite a few friends one night last winter, when we decided to invite a group to join us on a "winter wandering about" adventure—a full-moon snowshoe walk. We asked several dozen people, assuming only a few would show up. It was a pleasant shock when we arrived at the Nordic resort we were starting from and found a crowd of 65 waiting for us—only 2 of whom had ever shoed before. The ski resort folks had built a bonfire in the middle of a meadow; it would be a relaxed, 45-minute walk to our destination.

We sensed in our companions a nervous excitement blending with their hunger for adventure. Bringing up the rear and pulling a sled loaded with marshmallows, graham crackers, and chocolate bars, we joined our friends at the bonfire and started to listen and talk. All present were asked to introduce and say one positive thing about themselves. We heard some say they were not sure why they had wanted to come, but they knew why now.

We returned to our homes close to midnight. Most of us had to be at work the next morning, but no one seemed tired. We shared a feeling of up-liftedness, much like a runner's high. Over the next several weeks, we received letters and phone calls from the moonlight snowshoers saying how much they had appreciated our invitation. Their comments ranged from "I really needed the hike—it helped me find something inside myself" to "Why didn't anyone ever tell me that winter could be so much fun?" For us, we had simply wanted to share with others the joy of winter wandering about. We didn't know the impact it would have. But now we do.

The snowshoeing experience can be simple, with minimal preparation and training, as you've seen from our moonlight walk, but somehow its rewards far outweigh the investment. Read on. Then you too can join us floating on the snow.

SNOWSHOEING THROUGH TIME

Snowshoes arrived in North America from Central Asia some 6,000 years ago, at a time when the Bering Strait was passable by foot. The indigenous people of North America were the first great snowshoe designers. Starting with a basic bearpaw shape, they developed hundreds of frame patterns suited to all possible snow and terrain conditions.

When the first Europeans arrived in North America, they adopted the snowshoe. During the European expansion snowshoes were very helpful to trappers, hunters, explorers, and surveyors, particularly in Canada.

In the mid-1800s, snowshoe clubs began organizing the first snowshoe races, with distances ranging from 100 yards (91 m) to 6 miles (9.7 km). These clubs also organized snowshoe "tramps," or training workouts. Other early snowshoe events grew in popularity as well; Canadian winter carnivals and New England community snowshoe hikes thrived through the late 1930s.

It wasn't until 1862 in Maine that the first commercial, large-scale production of snowshoes began. Other manufacturers joined in, and after only a few decades the majority of snowshoes were factory built. Still, it wasn't until the 1950s and the development of Western snowshoes (as sport snowshoes were originally known) that the modern era in snowshoeing began.

A Type of Snowshoeing for You



The basic snowshoe concept—staying aloft by increasing the surface area of your feet, thereby reducing how much you sink in the snow—is pretty unsophisticated. Snowshoes are basically foot extenders. But the development of snowshoes as a means of travel ranks up there with the invention of the wheel—and snowshoes can take you where wheels cannot.

Yet, when people think of snowshoeing they typically visualize someone trudging along with rough-hewn tennis rackets strapped to her feet. Quaint, but most fitness and recreational athletes would find such a workout unappealing. Fortunately, any notions of snowshoeing as laborious and primitive no longer have basis in fact. Thanks to ever-improving technology and design, today's sport snowshoes are light, stylish, and fun. They have turned the drudgery of the past into the revolutionary new pastime of today.



Snowshoeing no longer means trudging through the snow with
unnis rackets strapped to your feet.
© F-Stock/David Stoecklein

Today's snowshoers take advantage of the new lighter and slimmer sport snowshoes to race, hike, and explore areas previously off limits to all but the most intrepid or unwary. Whether it's a long stretch of wilderness or your own backyard, modern sport snowshoes allow you to go where you want to go, in style and comfort.

Still not sure that snowshoeing is for you? Well, there happen to be snowshoeing options to suit almost all tastes and abilities. The three basic types of sport snowshoeing activities are walking and recreation, training and racing, and back-country mountaineering and winter camping. This book prepares you thoroughly for the first type and adequately for the second. If you get hooked on snowshoeing and want to do some camping or mountaineering, we recommend you pick up a couple of other books that go into greater detail about these more advanced activities. The appendix lists some good ones.

Remember that you don't need to be athletic or outdoorsy to have fun in the snow. In fact, if you are one of the millions of people who helped make exercise walking the hugely popular participation sport it is, then snowshoeing may well be for you. Snowshoeing is the wintertime version of exercise walking. If you live outside the Sunbelt, you know that winter walking in your tennis shoes just won't do.

Do you think snowshoeing sounds too casual or sedate? If so, think again. At the 1993 Mt. Hood Snowshoe Race, runner Herb Lindsey, who once held the United States record in the 10,000 meters, overcame other competitive snowshoers to win the overall men's racing division. Four-time Olympic biathlete Lyle Nelson won the snowshoe/cross-country ski biathlon. Sport



Snowshoeing is fun for the young and the young at heart.
© Carl Heilman II

snowshoeing attracts athletes from other sports not only because it is simple to start right in but also because the physical effort one expends can be adjusted to suit the fitness needs of everyone, from novice to pro.

Maybe you're not interested in exercise for its own sake. Well, if you love the great outdoors, snowshoeing is the best way to experience all its winter glory. Hikers, trackers, campers, and mountaineers can all pick up and put on a pair of snowshoes at minimal expense and with little, if any, learning curve.

And how does snowshoeing stack up against skiing? When people ask us to compare snowshoeing with skiing, we say, "no contest." Here's why:

- *Snowshoeing is easy to learn.* You don't need lessons, because if you can walk, you can snowshoe. Age, sex, size, conditioning, and coordination are not factors.
- *Snowshoeing is inexpensive.* Once you have purchased the snowshoes, there are no other necessary expenses except transportation to and from the trailhead.
- *Snowshoeing is low- to no-maintenance.* With modern snowshoes, there's no waxing to worry about, and there is very little chance of equipment breakage.
- *Snowshoeing is convenient.* You don't need a packed trail to snowshoe. Snowshoes are also easier to carry in the field than skis are, in addition to being a breeze to transport to and from your destination.
- *Snowshoeing is safe.* The possibility of being injured while wearing snowshoes is slight, and the chances of falling on snowshoes are far less than on skis.
- *Snowshoeing is fast.* When you've got a direct destination, you can almost always go right to it; there are few long detours to get past the kind of obstructions that skis can't handle.
- *Snowshoeing is slow . . . when you want it to be.* Snowshoes allow you to take the time to explore your winter surroundings, to go off trail and spend half an hour tracking a fox if you want.
- *Snowshoeing goes with camping.* You can't beat snowshoes for winter backpacking (not to mention the fact that snowshoes are very efficient for stamping out a campsite).
- *Snowshoeing is good exercise.* Well, skiing is too, so let's just call it a draw on this one!
- *Snowshoeing is for anyone.* Wanderer, walker, cross-trainer, runner, racer, tracker, camper, climber, explorer—all of you, you'll love it.

So, are you a walker, hiker, racer, parent with active kids, outdoorsperson, or cross-trainer? Are you trying to get (or remain) fit, or do you simply enjoy being outdoors? If so, snowshoeing is for you. Read on and we'll show you how to get where you want to go and have a great time getting there.

In the following chapters you'll find a comprehensive guide to getting on the right snowy path and staying there. If you're looking for thorough instruction on snowshoeing, read the chapters in order. If you already have the basics down, use this book as a reference and consult the chapters, appendix, and index as needed. Of course, we think all readers can gain something from sharing our snowshoeing experiences. We hope doing so inspires you all to go out and have some snowshoeing experiences of your own!

MOONS AND MOTHERS

I have always loved the outdoors. Although I don't consider myself an athlete, I do like to keep fit. In summer I swim, hike, and climb mountains. In winter I cross-country ski. I had heard about snowshoeing and what a great way it is to experience the wilderness. Ten years ago, I rented a pair of the old-style heavy wooden frames laced with animal hides. Although the snow was beautiful and the day sparkling clear, the clumsy snowshoes destroyed what could have been a special experience. Not only did they feel as if they were falling off, they did fall off, repeatedly, until I simply gave up.

By the time I met Sally and Melissa, I was convinced that snowshoeing was not for me. However, when they invited me on a full-moon snowshoe hike, I decided to give the newer, high-tech snowshoes a try. The night in the California Sierras was beautiful. Between clouds the moon created magic on the snow, and I felt truly part of nature. After a 2-mile (3.2-km) walk, we clustered around a campfire and shared stories. To enhance the mood, I read some quotations and poems.

Encouraged by our magic moonlight evening, and at Sally's suggestion, I decided to invite my mother for a daytime snowshoe walk.

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Mother has always been adventurous. In her youth she was an avid hiker, climber, and swimmer. But at age 81, she has had to slow down. Although she was initially reluctant to try snowshoeing, I convinced her when I asked, "How many new things do you get to try at this point in your life?"

So we went back to the Sierras, and I fitted her with snowshoes and ski poles for stability. The day was just perfect, and the trail we chose was uncrowded. I would have been afraid to take Mother cross-country skiing because there is so much more to learn and the danger of falling is greater. But on snowshoes she felt perfectly stable, and we could adjust to her pace. When I asked her later what she liked about the day, she said, "I was thrilled to be able to walk on the snow without falling through. I was exhilarated with my new adventure. I loved the silence and the beauty of winter, and it was so nice to experience it without feeling crowded."

It was a special experience for us both. She is already asking me when we are going again. Thanks to the new generation of snowshoes, a snowy walk in the woods is a treat I can enjoy with friends of all ages.

—Marty Maskall

2— Snowshoeing Equipment

You're right to think the first things you need to snowshoe are the shoes! But before you run out and pluck a pair off the shelf, we recommend that you learn a little bit about them. Once you've got the basics down—snowshoe components, different models, and so on—you'll be in a much better position to choose the right pair for you. After that, you can start thinking about the gear, clothing, and accessories that will complete your snowshoeing picture.

What Kind of Snowshoes Do You Need?



Thanks to ever-improving technology and the recent progression of snowshoes from back-country tool to sporting toy, there are now enough types of snowshoes available to suit anyone's tastes and needs. The various snowshoes you'll find on the market fall into two general categories: traditional snowshoes and sport snowshoes. Which kind is best for you depends on your intentions and habits.

The primary rule in determining the best snowshoe for you is to select the smallest and lightest weight snowshoe that provides the necessary flotation. The other thing to keep in mind is that in varying snow conditions, different



Traditional snowshoes are beautifully crafted.
© Carl Heilman II

shoes work best for different uses. This could lead the high-intensity shoer to make multiple purchases.

Traditional snowshoes have wooden frames and are beautiful pieces of craftsmanship. Their natural materials have the color, the history, and the warm, human touch that sport snowshoes sacrifice for their lightweight, high-technology components. But before you can put away a pair of traditional snowshoes at the end of winter, you'll need to waterproof the webbing and the bindings, a process that requires removing the harness and applying a resin-based spar varnish. Each year the bindings also need to be treated with a coat of high-quality wax. Only then may you store the shoes in a place that is dry, cool, and mouse free.

The advantages of sport snowshoes, made from aluminum, rubber, and other "high-tech" materials, are durability, ease of use, and low upkeep. Sport snowshoes require no maintenance and are rugged enough that many companies provide lifetime warranties. At the end of a season, you can pitch your sport snowshoes anywhere, and they'll be ready to go for the next season with no loss in their life span.

Anatomy of a Snowshoe

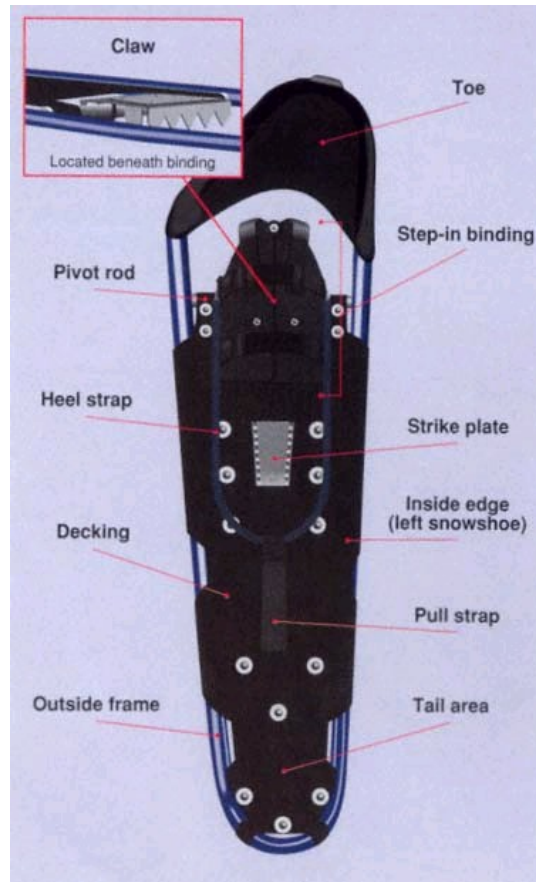


There are five parts to most snowshoes: the frame, binding system, pivot system, crampons or claws, and decking. When it is time for testing, rental, or purchase, put on each pair of snowshoes and compare these parts to decide which pair best suits you.

Frames

In general, there are three different sizes of snowshoe frames: short-oval, medium-wide, and long-narrow. Because of the continuous decking material in sport snowshoes, smaller shoes get more flotation than their earlier, longer counterparts. For example, a 10-inch by 36-inch (25-cm by 91-cm) traditional webbed shoe may have a 200-pound (91-kg) carrying weight rating. Easily, an 8-inch by 24-inch (20-cm by 61-cm) sport snowshoe will provide equal if not better flotation in the same snow conditions, and at half the shoe weight.

There are only two fundamental sport snowshoe frame shapes: asymmetrical and symmetrical. The symmetrical shoe design centers the foot in the middle of the shoe. The asymmetrical design is shaped in a curve similar to that of the human foot, which allows the binding to be set to the inside and the feet to be brought closer together. This design helps eliminate the characteristic "snowshoe waddle."



Parts of a Snowshoe

All sport snowshoes have turned-up toes in front, as this prevents snow from collapsing on the shoe and makes it easier to move forward. For the same reasons, most modern snowshoes are weighted such that the tail is heavier than the toe, which keeps the tail down during movement.

Traditional snowshoes come in two basic shapes: elongated teardrop or oval. The teardrop shoes tend to be of two types: the long, narrow (10-inch by 56-inch, or 25-cm by 142-cm) shoes with 5- to 6-inch (13-cm to 15-cm) upturned toes, called the Alaskan or Yukon; or the shorter Maine and Michigan shoes (about 12 inches by 48 inches, or 30 cm by 122 cm). Both models are good for travel in wide open spaces and deep snow. The Ojibwa is similar to the Alaskan but is made from two pieces of wood, resulting in a pointed toe that cuts through deep snow and is less likely to load up; this makes for a much faster shoe.

Oval shoes are called "bearpaws" and are wider and shorter than the teardrop styles. Standard bearpaws range from 12 inches by 24 inches (30 cm by 61 cm) to 15 inches by 33 inches (38 cm by 84 cm) and have a 1- to 2-inch (2.5-cm to 5-cm) upturned toe. More popular for recreational users are the modified bearpaw shoes called "Green Mountain bearpaws," which are 10 inches by 36 inches (25 cm by 91 cm) and have about a 4-inch (10-cm) upturn to the toe. Green Mountain bearpaw snowshoes maneuver well in thick brush and densely forested areas and are great for use around camp.

Binding Systems

Traditional snowshoes are held on your foot by rawhide harnesses called either "A" or "H" bindings, depending on their shape. Sport snowshoes have replaced the rawhide harness with bindings adapted from those used in cycling or skiing. The most advanced sport bindings work in coordination with the pivot system. Whether you are buying traditional or sport snowshoes, look for bindings that provide a solid landing platform and a secure connection between you (your shoe) and the snowshoe.

Our criteria for bindings are ease of use, little lateral or fore/aft motion, no pressure across the foot, universal fit (one size fits all), use of buckles or quick release systems (no lacing), and proper heel positioning (no contact with the frame). If you look for these qualities, you won't go wrong.

Pivot Systems

The pivot system is a high-stress point in a snowshoe and needs to withstand considerable weight and rotational forces simultaneously. Pivot systems using thick rubber straps allow for limited rotation as the foot flexes.

Sport Snowshoe Models



Back-Country Models

These one-size-fits-all models are the real workhorses of snowshoes. They'll get you through deep snow, but not very quickly. All are at least 8 inches wide by 30 inches long (20 cm by 76 cm), and may weigh 2 to 3 pounds (1–1.4 kg) per shoe. You can usually find a pair for about \$200 to \$250.*

Walking and Recreational Models

These all-purpose snowshoes combine good flotation with lighter weight and better maneuverability. Widths are generally no more than 10 inches (25 cm) and lengths should be under 32 inches (81 cm). Walking models weigh less, too—around 2 pounds (1 kg) each. The cost is also a little less—around \$160 to \$200 per pair.

