


Let's Go Snowshoeing!



Standing at the edge of a snow-filled field, you strap on a pair of snowshoes—the kind once used by American Indians to hunt in deep snow. The shoes have golden wood rims that frame leather laces crisscrossed in a cool pattern.

You shuffle forward, lifting your feet one at a time. As you walk on the fluffy snow, you feel like you are floating on a cloud in a pair of giant slippers.

The shoes help you walk in snowy places. You scurry and sometimes hop like a jackrabbit. The broad surface of the snowshoes keeps you from sinking into the snow. In a clearing you run, kicking up clouds of snow behind you. Poof!

You pause to catch your breath. Your legs feel heavy, but your body is bursting with energy. This is a great way to explore the natural world in winter.

By **MAUREEN M. SMITH**
Illustrations by **RON FINGER**

SOURCE PHOTOGRAPH BY RICHARD HAMILTON SMITH



Snowshoes From Past to Present

When you travel on snowshoes, you travel the way humans have for thousands of years.

Historians believe people developed snowshoes in Asia, perhaps imitating the broad, thickly furred paws of animals such as lynx and snowshoe hares. Early humans brought snowshoes across the Bering Strait when they migrated to North America. They designed different shoes to use on different kinds of terrain. They made frames for the shoes with strong wood. Then they wove a tight web across the frames with tree bark or animal tendons.

Today people use snowshoes mostly for fun and sport.

Over the River

You and your father walk along a frozen river. Birches and pines stand coated with fresh snow. You memorize where you start so that you can retrace your steps.

You wear long Alaskan snowshoes, like those used ages ago by Inuit people to cross miles of open, windswept tundra in the Arctic. The shape makes it easy to cut fresh trail, and you only sink a little

into the powdery snow.

Though it is 10 below zero, you've warmed up from walking. Stopping for a break, you munch granola and sip water to stay warm and hydrated. After resting for a few minutes, you turn around and retrace your tracks to where you began.



Through the Woods

You are snowshoeing with a group led by a state park naturalist.

Just as Ojibwe people did long ago, you go into the woods looking for signs of animals—tracks, broken twigs, nests, or scat.

Tall pines surround you. Fresh snow clings to the evergreen needles. You take care not to step on others' snowshoes, or to let others step on yours.

You approach a river covered with frothy ice and snow. You clomp across a wooden bridge. The naturalist spots deer tracks and scat near some bushes. In a ravine the naturalist finds tracks of a pine marten, a relative of mink and weasels. Up on another slope, your guide points out a rabbit tunnel and a hollow spot where a grouse nestled in the snow for warmth. Though you can't see the animals, your snowshoes have given you a chance to find traces of them in their winter home.

Snowshoe Basics

Snowshoeing is almost as easy as walking across a thick rug. For a short walk on a trail, you don't need special skills.

* **You can rent** snowshoes at many parks and outdoor suppliers. Some stores sponsor outdoor events where you can try their snowshoes for free.

Whether you rent or buy the snowshoes, ask for help in choosing the right size and style. The taller and heavier you are, the bigger the snowshoes you'll need.

For deep, light snow, larger snowshoes work best. On hard-packed snow, smaller ones will do.

* **Make sure your feet** fit firmly in the bindings that attach the snowshoes to your boots. If the snowshoes have buckles, strap them on tight. If they have clips, make sure they are closed. Inside the bindings, your feet will be like steering wheels for the shoes, so you need a secure grip.

* **To walk, step** with your legs spread slightly apart. Lift

your knee and step over the other snowshoe. Practice in a flat, open space. You might try ski poles to help keep you steady and give your arms a workout.

* **Allow more time** to walk on fresh snow without tracks than you would for walking on trails. On older, more densely packed snow, watch out for icy areas: Slow down.

* **On hills or ice**, aluminum snowshoes with metal claws or teeth can keep you from slipping and sliding. When you step forward, the claws near your toes dig into the snow to give you traction.

* **To go up a slope** on wooden snowshoes, walk at an angle. Kick the sides of your shoes into the slope to make a platform for each step. Or hold your toes far apart and heels together to "herringbone" up the hill. When you walk downhill, keep toes pointed up so you don't fall forward.

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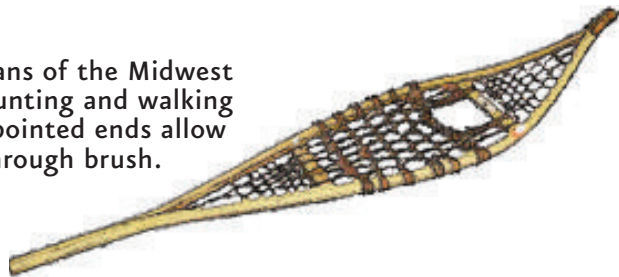
Styles of Snowshoes

Shoes of certain shapes and sizes work best for different activities, such as a leisurely walk, a steep climb, bushwhacking, or racing.

Alaskan or Yukon Developed by native people for crossing windswept plains, this style works well on deep snow. These big snowshoes also work well for big people and people carrying heavy packs.



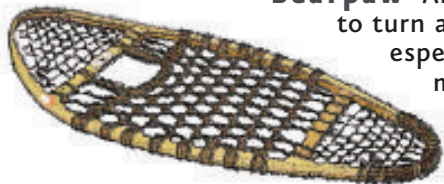
Ojibwe Ojibwe Indians of the Midwest developed them for hunting and walking through forests. The pointed ends allow the user to trample through brush.



Michigan or Maine Natives of the Great Lakes region developed these snowshoes. They work well for hiking and for medium-sized people. They maneuver easily, and the tail helps with balance on deep snow.



Bearpaw American Indians created these shoes to turn and maneuver easily in tight spaces, especially when hunting. The smaller size makes them work best for smaller people and for snow that is not extremely deep.



TRADITIONAL SHOES

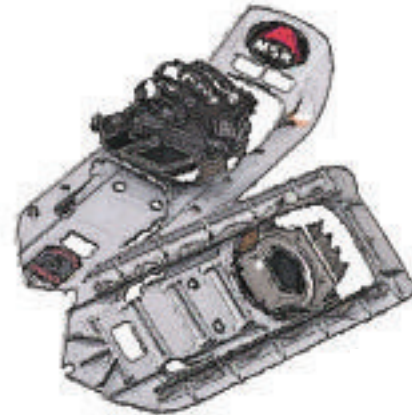
Wooden frames are usually made of ash, which is strong enough to hold a heavy adult, and light enough for a small child to lift. The web lacing is made from rawhide or *neoprene* (a rubberlike material). The snowshoes have space in front for your toe to pivot through the webbing into the snow.

MODERN SHOES

Modern aluminum snowshoes need little or no maintenance, but they cost more than wooden snowshoes. Some modern snowshoes are made of plastic, which is less expensive but not as durable as wood or aluminum.

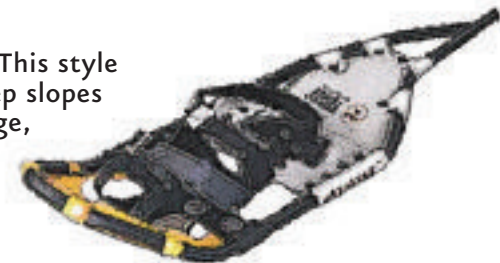


Hiking and walking These range from basic snowshoes for novices on flat land, to all-terrain shoes for backpackers on hills.



Running or racing Small, lightweight shoes are for running without spreading feet apart.

Hills and mountains This style is made for walking on steep slopes or climbing mountains. Large, strong claws attach to bindings for better traction and turning.



BINDINGS

Bindings attach the snowshoe to your boot. The tighter the fit, the more control you have. Here are just a few common types:

A-style Have a built-in toe cup and adjustable heel strap. They are easy to put on, fit snugly, and provide good control.

H-style Have two adjustable straps that buckle or clip onto toe and heel.

Rubber pull-ons Have large cups with holes. They pull easily over your boots, but seldom fit snugly and don't allow much control.

Other types Some modern snowshoes have new kinds of bindings made of plastic casings and metal clasps.

Wear a hat and mittens or gloves.

What to Wear

Dress in layers so you can shed a layer when you feel hot.

Choose warm clothing made of wool or synthetic fibers to stay dry. Do not wear cotton because it stays wet and makes you cold.

Wear warm socks made of wool or synthetic fibers.

Wear waterproof boots.

ATTENTION TEACHERS

To find an online teachers guide for this article, visit www.dnr.state.mn.us/young_naturalists/snowshoeing. To learn more about using *Minnesota Conservation Volunteer* as a teaching tool, contact Meredith McNab, meredith.mcnab@dnr.state.mn.us or 651-215-0615.

Plan to Be Safe

- * Always go with a buddy, preferably an adult who knows the route.
- * Only go off trail if you can still see where you started (your house or other landmark) so you can easily retrace your steps.
- * Plan to go a shorter time and distance than you could go on foot. Snowshoeing takes more energy than walking, especially if you are cutting fresh trails.
- * Take a bottle of water. Drink even if you don't feel thirsty to keep warm and energized. You will sweat when you snowshoe, so you need to replenish your body with liquid.
- * Pack snacks if you'll be out for an hour or more.
- * Pace yourself: Don't go so fast that you wear out. Keep track of time. Return before you feel tired.


Snowshoe Fun at State Parks

Call to make reservations and find out about snowshoe rental and trail passes. Learn more at www.dnr.state.mn.us/state_parks.

SNOWSHOE-MAKING WORKSHOPS

- * **Nov. 6 & 13** Jay Cooke State Park, Carlton, 218-384-4610.
- * **Nov. 13 & 14** Fort Snelling State Park, St. Paul, 612-725-2724.

SNOWSHOE HIKES

- * **Jan. 8, 15, 29** Wild River State Park, Center City, 651-583-2925.
- * **Jan. 13, 27, Feb. 10** Lake Bemidji State Park, Bemidji, 218-755-3843.
- * **Jan. 22** Gooseberry Falls State Park, Two Harbors, 218-834-3855.
- * **Jan. 22, 29, Feb. 5** Sibley State Park, New London, 320-354-2055.
- * **Feb. 5** Mille Lacs Kathio State Park, Onamia, 320-532-3523.
- * **Feb. 11** by candlelight Jay Cooke State Park, Carlton, 218-384-4610.
- * **Feb. 12** with GPS, Lake Bemidji State Park, Bemidji, 218-755-3843.
- * **Feb. 12** Fort Snelling State Park, St. Paul, 612-725-2724.
- * **Feb. 25** by moonlight, Whitewater State Park, Altura, 507-932-3007, ext. 7. 

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Stories in the *Conservation Volunteer* can influence conservation values and choices. When you share this magazine with your children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, and young friends, you're passing along a tradition and sharing a love of the outdoors. Often, you're sparking a lifelong interest, or even a career choice.

Readers say:

"We pass the Volunteer on to our granddaughter, who is striving to become a naturalist. When she was only 4 years old, she came running around the corner of the house clutching a handful of baby garter snakes, telling them, 'Hold still. I just got you untangled!'"

"My children grew up with this magazine. It helped to influence my eldest son in his decision to become a forester."

"I have four boys who love reading the Volunteer whenever they have the chance. They all have a deep love for the outdoors and love doing school projects about it."

"I enjoy sharing the Volunteer with my young daughter, just as my dad shared it with me."

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Thank you.