



January 13, 2011

Eye on the Environment

Snowshoeing is fun, healthy and EASY

By Diann Ericson, Swan Ecosystem Center

Regardless of your age, size, gender or income, the literature I have read says there is reason for almost everyone to appreciate and enjoy snowshoeing. You do not have to take my word for it, but you might find it difficult to deny these widely touted facts: Of all the “pros” for taking up snowshoeing, the one that catches my attention is—it is easy!

According to a Snowshoe Magazine article found on the Internet, “First-Timer’s Guide,” snowshoeing is easy to learn. This has been our experience putting snowshoes on youth and adult novices, as we have at Swan Ecosystem Center for the last eight years. One can get up and go as soon as the snowshoes are fastened on.

The article continues listing other factors in the plus column—it is relatively inexpensive, safe and it is great way to burn calories. Not that any of us are thinking of that this time of year.

So, who originated this mode of travel, currently a successful winter recreation component to a healthier America?

It is thought that snowshoes originated many thousands of years ago and facilitated inhabitants of the northern climate of Central Asia in their migration east to the Bering land bridge into North America, and west to the Scandinavian countries. There are a number of theories as to why the early extension of the human foot, at times called “shoeskis” became *skis* in western Europe and *snowshoes* in Alaska and points east to the Atlantic.

In another article provided on the Internet by Due North Marketing, Athapascan Indians of America and Canada were credited as “great innovators in snowshoe design.”

Snowshoe Magazine states that snowshoeing is the fastest growing winter sport in the world, even faster than snowboarding. Speaking as a baby boomer, that makes perfect sense. The point is that its popularity is an indication that it is worth a try.

Then there is the caloric factor: calories burned while snowshoeing. According to Fitness magazine a 150 lb person will burn 551 calories an hour. The amount of calories burned is in proportion to your weight (and, I’m sure, terrain and snow conditions.) On average a 125 lb person would burn 459 calories per hour and a 175 lb person would burn 643.

Moving from the introduction to history and motivation, we arrive at the “Ok, I have decided to give it a try. What should I do next?”

First step, find snowshoes. Rent them from a sporting goods store for about \$8 a day. Buy them at an after Christmas sale. Borrow them from friends, family or neighbors. I suspect there are many pairs of snowshoes in basements and garages all over Seeley-Swan-Ovando country. But be warned newer models are lighter and easier to strap on.

The main point to remember is to buy the shoe right for your size (height, weight, shoe size). Ask the store salesperson about the advantages and disadvantages of the different bindings and harnesses available.

Here are a few vocabulary words to shop with: *Frame*—made of metal or wood, it is the outside skeletal shape of the snowshoe. *Decking*—it can be solid or webbed; it is the part of the shoe that keeps you above the snow. *Cleat*—this metal piece is found under the snowshoe and provides traction, much as an athletic shoe cleat does. *Harness and bindings* are usually made of synthetic materials today, such as plastic and nylon, and secure the boot to the snowshoe.

The most difficult aspect of beginning snowshoeing is probably strapping on the snowshoe and keeping it on. One factor that can make this easier is to wear a solid-body winter boot. The stiffer the sole, within a reasonable comfort range, the better secured your bindings will be and the more likely the snowshoe will stay secured to your foot.

Another tip is to practice attaching the snowshoes in the warm comfort of your home. Warning! No hiking until you are outside; you might scratch the floor or snag the carpet. And for those of us who no longer bend like pretzels, here is another point: Again practicing in comfort, kneel down on one knee, with the other knee up, but do not sit back on the back boot, then “shoe” the front boot. Switch knees and repeat.

Once you can secure the shoes indoors, take them off, go outside and give it a try. You will want to try a few short walks down the driveway or around a park before heading for the backcountry.

To me the reason to have snowshoes is to tour the forest. But that is just me. If you find snowshoeing boring, my guess is you are not using them in the correct landscape for your interest or expectations. So give them a fair chance.

With snowshoes you can continue that healthy walking regimen you started on dry ground last summer. Some would even say that walking in the forest in the winter on settled snow is easier than summer foot travel over the forest debris. Of course, snowshoes are perfect for wintry trails, gated roads on public land, off trail—anywhere your skill level on skis does not match the landscape.

Evidence of an increased popularity of snowshoeing is the number of events and activities in our own neck of the woods. In mid-December the Blackfoot Challenge hosted a tracks-n-trails morning with Bob Sheppard, an area trapper and trapper education instructor. The Flathead National Forest has 30 pairs of snowshoes for educational groups to borrow in

the Kalispell area. Montana Discovery Foundation has an SUV full of snowshoes used at various schools in the Helena area and beyond, including the Seeley Swan area. Winter Trails Day snowshoeing activities will be offered in the Flathead National Forests and Glacier National Park.

Two years ago with funding from Recreational Equipment Incorporated (REI) and reduced pricing from the nonprofit Western Wildlands Alliance, Swan Ecosystem Center purchased a dozen pairs of Atlas brand youth snowshoes. They are “on the snow” in local schools and at After School Club as long as there is snow on the ground. By the way, snowshoeing is an excellent winter unit for physical education classes of all ages.

Three programs on Swan Ecosystem Center’s winter schedule relate to snowshoeing. On **January 8**, in observance of Winter Trails Day, there will be a Ladies’ Day snowshoeing walk from 10:00-12:30 on the interpretive trails at the Center. The morning will include snowshoeing basics such as attaching and reattaching snowshoes (if the most difficult component of snowshoeing is getting the snowshoe on, keeping snowshoes on is a close second). There will be a choice of trails to travel.

On **January 20**, David Cronenwett, a winter survival skills expert, will give an evening presentation at Swan Ecosystem Center including demonstrations of traditional and current survival knowledge and skills. The time will be 7:00 to 8:30 p.m.

On **March 1** Samsara Chapman of the Montana Discovery Foundation, will conduct an afternoon hike in the Swan Valley, location and time to be announced. Sam’s hike includes observations of native vegetation and ecology.

The Montana Discovery Foundation was established in 1999 to assist the Helena National Forest in the preservation of the historical, cultural and aesthetic integrity of the Forest. These activities “include a variety of educational programs that increase the knowledge and awareness for improving wildlife habitat,

watershed health, responsible recreation ethics and other subjects related to outdoor interest. We run programs to get kids of all ages out into the woods to have fun and learn about nature and natural resources.”

One final word of advice is that comparing snowshoeing and cross country skiing is valuable only if you factor in your proficiency in each activity and the landscape you wish to travel. And remember if you are physically able to walk, there is no legitimate excuse not to try snowshoes. For more information call us at Swan Ecosystem Center, 754-3137.

Visit these websites to learn more about purchasing snowshoes, snowshoeing tips, the Montana Discovery Foundation and Swan Ecosystem Center. Happy wintering!:
www.beginnersguide.com,
www.flatheadcore.org, www.livestrong.com,
www.montanadiscoveryfoundation.org,
www.snowshoemag.com,
www.swanecosystemcenter.org