

## History

Snowshoes allow people to walk across the top of deep snow. They distribute weight so that the walker does not sink into soft drifts, and enable people to roam through landscapes that are usually impassible with only ordinary footwear. One of the earliest ways people moved across snow was by using snowshoes. Archaeologists have not been able to determine when the snowshoe was first used, but it has been found that snowshoes were used over 12,000 years ago. It is said that the invention of snowshoes is as important as the invention of the wheel. The first snowshoe was probably made from bent wood and animal skins.

Because the snowshoe is such an old invention, there is not a lot of recorded history to be found. Most of the history of snowshoes, and their use by ancient people, is found in paintings on cave walls.

It has been found that about 6,000 years ago people living in Central Asia used snowshoes to migrate east and west. They moved to Alaska and Canada by crossing over the Bearing Strait and to Greenland and Scandinavia. These snowshoes, or "shoeskis," were made from a solid piece of wood with simple ways to keep them on your feet.

The North American Indians lived in forests filled with soft, fluffy snow. Snowshoes allowed them to move around easier while they hunted buffalo, and also made it easier for them to do their daily winter chores and activities. They found by experimenting with different shapes and sizes of the snowshoe, that they were able to walk across different types of snow. Many of the designs were larger versions of animals' feet, such as a bear paw or a moose hoof. Without snowshoes, Native American Indians would not have been able to survive the harsh winters of North America.

When European settlers came to America, they learned from the Indians how to make snowshoes and the settlers developed their own styles. The settlers would use the snowshoes to explore the unknown wilderness, and also during their normal daily activities during the winter. Snowshoes were an important tool during the French Fur Trade period.

Today, people still use snowshoes, but more for fun instead of needing them to travel. The basic designs of today's snowshoes are still much like the styles of the ancient Native Americans and people who lived in Central Asia. Modern snowshoe frames are now mostly made from light-weight aluminum that replaces the bent wood. Rubber is now used instead of animal skins to keep the person on top of the snow.

## Let's Go Snowshoeing

The good news is that anyone who can walk can go snowshoeing! Age should be no barrier in learning how to snowshoe. It is not necessary to be a muscular athlete. Snowshoeing is a fun and active way to visit the outdoors, it's inexpensive, simple to learn, and an entertaining social activity with friends and family. Snowshoeing is great cardiovascular exercise and is good for your spirit!

### How:

Nearly everyone is a little nervous or intimidated when trying out a new sport. Snowshoeing, however, is a sport that you can enjoy your first time out. Before you go on your first trip take a few minutes to become familiar with your snowshoes. Get acquainted with your new shoes in the warmth of a building and not out in the cold. The most important aspect is to become familiar with the binding. Practice putting the bindings on and taking them off before you head outside.

### Technique:

The most important thing to remember is to keep your stride natural. Don't try to modify or exaggerate your gait. Walking or running should feel natural, and in either instance the terrain will dictate your stride. You will have the easiest time learning on gentle, flat, or rolling terrain, but the steeper and deeper the terrain gets, the more challenging and intense your hike or run will get!

Another point to remember when beginning snowshoeing is that your snowshoes have a larger "footprint" on the snow than you are probably used to. You might feel awkward for a few hundred yards, but soon your slightly wider stance will feel natural. The solution is to simply concentrate on spreading your feet a bit further apart throughout your stride; this helps you avoid knocking your snowshoe frames together and possibly tripping.

The following are some thoughts to keep in mind: remember to lift those knees, think about a wider stance, and avoid dragging or shuffling your feet to prevent your shoes from catching on firm snow.

### Uphill/Downhill/Traversing:

When you maneuver up steep slopes, a good technique involves aggressive use of the front claws, or crampons. Get your knees up and dig the front points of the crampons into the snow. Remember, the fastest way to the top is straight up - but a more practical method is to cross the slope diagonally.

When you are traveling downhill, avoid leaning backwards onto the tails of the snowshoes whenever possible. Try to keep your weight upright and over the center of the snowshoe, and let the front crampons (located under the ball

of your foot) grip the snow to prevent sliding. When you are traversing slopes, stay upright and lean into the hill with each step. Keep your weight forward and your crampons beneath you. Short, even strides, as well as traveling with a set of poles, will help avoid slipping and ensure safety.

### Deep Snow:

Lift your knees and shorten your stride. Your snowshoes are not designed to completely float above the snow, so you will find that you sink a little bit with each step. If you are traveling most often in deep drifts or light, fluffy powder, you may find that getting the next largest size snowshoe will improve your floatation. When in deep snow it is important to tread lightly and pace yourself.

### Intensity:

The intensity level of snowshoeing is infinitely variable. From a slow walk you can increase intensity by going faster, running, using poles, going uphill, and/or by going through deeper and softer snow. The ease with which you can change the intensity level of snowshoeing is one of the keys to its great value in having fun and as a fitness option. At a minimum, snowshoeing will be a bit more intense than walking or running at any given pace or level due to the cold, weight of the snowshoes, resistance of the snow, etc.

### Safety:

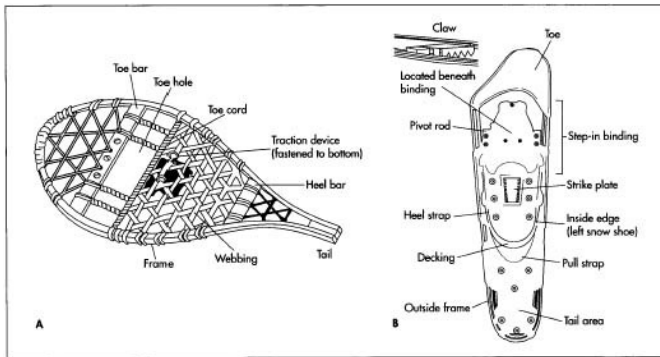
Snowshoeing is an extremely safe sport. It is also one of the only winter-specific sports that do not depend upon sliding or speed. The manageable and maneuverable nature of modern aluminum-framed snowshoes and the soft forgiving nature of snow combine to make the risk of injury while snowshoeing very low. Snowshoeing involves a natural motion similar to walking, to which the body is accustomed, and is very low impact due to the cushioning of snow.

### Where:

There are many great places to try out snowshoeing. City, County, and State parks are a good way to get the hang of it— basically anywhere you have snow! Once you feel comfortable, you might like to try out a new hiking trail. For directions to local county parks, go to [www.jaspercountyconservation.com](http://www.jaspercountyconservation.com).

### When:

Any time you want (if there are at least 4 inches snow on the ground)! Snowshoeing is a great activity by itself or combined with other outdoor pursuits like winter camping, backcountry snowboarding and skiing, sledding, or running. When you have a pair of snowshoes, there are no more excuses for not getting out and enjoying winter.



Above: diagram of the traditional snowshoe (left), and a modern snowshoe (right).

### Fun things to do while snowshoeing:

- Look for wildlife tracks.
- Study different kinds of tree buds.
- Listen and watch for birds.
- Make your own unique tracks and trails and have someone else “track” you!
- Snowshoe by moonlight and look for different constellations in the sky.
- See how many different shapes and sizes of snowflakes you can find.
- Stop for a snowball fight or make a snowman along the trail.
- Go on a winter scavenger hunt. See if you can find icicles, berries, animal tracks, etc. Make a list before you head out on the trail and see how long it takes to find everything.
- Try playing familiar games while on your snowshoes: tag, hide-and-seek, follow-the-leader, or even snowshoe softball!



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# Get Started With Snowshoeing



Jasper County Conservation Board