Start Snowshoeing!

By Dan Burnett, Penitentiary Glen Nature Center Manager

Snowshoeing really gets my blood moving. As an outdoor enthusiast, I anticipate the days of early winter and the chance to strap snowshoes to my boots and conquer a fresh blanket of snow on the frozen landscape like a new world explorer or even Bigfoot. My favorite trek is across an untouched snow covered field; any of the fields at the park will do. Surrounded by the haunting silent sound of winter, interrupted only by the calls of chickadees and crows, even breath seems to freeze. My mind pulls me across the barren landscape in search of a frosty adventure. So many stories in the snow; fresh fox tracks, an abandoned goldfinch nest and the silhouettes of the distant tree line blurred by falling snow. All these curiosities make me feel alive against the stark and moody grey skies of winter. The thought of snowshoeing around the frozen outdoors may seem crazy to many, but I would bet that if those naysayers tried it, many would find it an exhilarating experience! Snowshoeing can be a blast – a break from cabin fever and the winter doldrums. Fun for the entire family, with a friend or even in solitude, snowshoeing can be easily mastered in just a few basic steps. And there is also an added BONUS… snowshoeing can burn 800 calories per hour!

People have been using snowshoes as a means of travel for more than 2,000 years. Native Americans of the northern forests handcrafted their snowshoes. For them it was much more than a pleasant pastime; it was an important part of their seasonally changing world. Snowshoes were their transportation for winter survival. From the North American fur trade market to the Alaskan gold rush, snowshoes helped shape our frontier.

Native Americans developed two basic snowshoe designs: a long, narrow "teardrop" shape used for trekking over open terrain, and a short, wide "bear paw" design for moving through dense underbrush and forests. All snowshoes made today are variations of these two designs.

The frame of a snowshoe must be strong, yet lightweight. Snowshoes were originally made from wood, mainly white ash, although birch, hickory, oak and cedar were also used. Rawhide was the material of choice to weave the webbing. Today, sturdy aluminum and plastic are used to manufacture snowshoe frames, while Neoprene, plastic and resin-coated cable replace the traditional rawhide webbing. Snowshoeing in modern times has been gaining popularity as a sport and leisure activity with many health benefits.

How do snowshoes enable us to move more easily in deep snow? They increase the surface area of your foot, which distributes your weight over a larger area, preventing you from sinking too deeply into the snow. In this way, snowshoes are much like the webbed, furry feet of the Snowshoe Hare.

Why not Try Snowshoeing Today?

Lake Metroparks offers snowshoeing opportunities for the entire family. Penitentiary Glen Reservation and Chapin Forest Pine Lodge offer miles of trails that await your discovery. Staff is available to show you the basics so you can get started on the right foot.

For snowshoeing opportunities, call Penitentiary Glen Nature Center at (440) 256-1404 or Chapin Forest Pine Lodge at (440) 256-3810 or visit lakemetroparks.com.

Look on pages 7 and 17 for snowshoe programs.

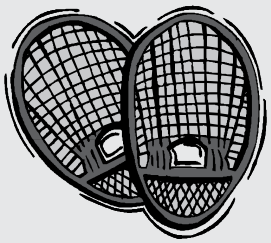
Snowshoeing Tips:

- Snowshoe with a partner
- Dress warmly and in layers
- Take your sunglasses and a trail map
- Start slowly, pace yourself and rest often as needed
- Use a normal walking gait

What to Wear

Be sure to protect yourself against the elements. By wearing the following protective items, you'll remember your snowshoeing adventure for the fun, not the cold.

- Hat
- Sunglasses
- Scarf
- Gloves/mittens
- Insulation layers
- Wind-resistant layers
- Long underwear
- Gaiters (boot & lower leg coverings)
- Wool socks
- Waterproof hiking/snow boots
- Sunblock



Snowshoes can be rented for the entire family at Penitentiary Glen Nature Center.

Snowshoe Hare mount on exhibit at Penitentiary Glen Nature Center.

Snowshoe Hares are named for their large, furry feet, which have special webbing between the toes. This adaptation allows them to run quickly across the snow, the same way that snowshoes help people walk on snow. Other adaptations for this winter survivor are color changes in fur from summer brown to winter white as well as large ears to listen for predators. Unlike our common cottontail rabbits, which live in open fields and lawns, snowshoe hares live in places where there are large tracts of dense forests and swampy woodlands. Snowshoe hares were once abundant throughout Ohio, but were extirpated by loss of habitat in the early 1900s. These elusive, nocturnal creatures have recently been reintroduced into portions of Ashtabula and Geauga counties. Although still uncommon, you may be fortunate enough to see one in the wild. You can also see a live snowshoe hare in an outdoor enclosure at The Cleveland Museum of Natural History.