

Happy Trampers

Snowshoeing 101: Tips for a fun winter escape

Story & photos by Tracy Beard

Discover winter wonderlands in the Pacific Northwest. Outdoor recreation in Oregon and Washington changes with each season. In spring, meadows bloom in every shade of pink, red, yellow and purple. In the summer, forests burst in every shade of green you can imagine, and in the autumn, reds, golds and oranges decorate every horizon. But in winter, fields and forests come alive in new ways. Tree limbs hang low with ice and snow, open areas are decorated with scampering animal tracks, and the forest's silence is nearly deafening. If you are new to winter sports, don your waterproof hiking boots, rent or borrow a pair of snowshoes and join me for some incredible outdoor adventure.

#1 Select the Perfect Destination

Private ski areas, forest trails and sno-parks can be great places to snowshoe. Several ski resorts in Washington and Oregon offer trails specifically designed and groomed for snowshoers and cross-country skiers. Many are maintained several times a week, making it easier to trek through the powdery snow. Check with local ski resorts to find out about their rules and get a map of their trails.

Some of your favorite hiking trails may make for a terrific snowshoeing outing, but others may not. Certain places are prone to avalanches and are not well maintained. It is essential to contact the nearest ranger station and ask about winter risks.

Designated sno-parks are a sure bet for a great time out. Many parks are groomed and maintained, but that does not eliminate all potential dangers. Tree wells are holes that develop at the base of a tree. It is easy to slide into one accidentally, and it can be challenging to escape. Snow cornices are collections of snow that hang over a ridge or the crest of a mountain and also gather on the sides of gullies.



When visiting sno-parks in Washington or Oregon, you must purchase and place a sno-park permit in your windshield, enabling you to park your vehicle at plowed lots with access to groomed and backcountry trails. There are several websites available online where you can download maps for local sno-parks.

#2 Consider What Gear You Need

Snowshoeing requires a little more gear than hiking. Aside from the actual snowshoes and possibly snowshoeing poles, you must consider what to wear. Warm clothing like ski pants, long underwear, fleece and maybe rain gear are great options. It gets cold and wet in the Pacific Northwest, so be prepared. Layer your upper body with quick-dry pieces, as most people work up a sweat trekking through the snow, especially if you are traversing up and down hills.



Waterproof boots are essential. Hiking boots work great when made with Gore-tex, and snow boots or rubber boots are a terrific option. Poles come in handy if you are new, unsteady or plan to explore more extreme terrain.

Snowshoes can be purchased, rented or borrowed. Today most snowshoes are made with aluminum frames and various materials weaved back and forth across the shoe to keep you on the snow's surface. Teeth on the bottom prevent you from sliding on the ice and give you better traction to go up and down hills. There are usually a few straps to keep your boots snugly fitted into the shoes.

#3 Be Prepared

Like hiking, you will want to bring the Ten Essentials plus maybe a few extra items, and always check the weather forecast before heading out.

- Navigation equipment: map, compass, GPS
- Extra water
- Extra food
- Extra clothes
- Matches, lighter, firestarter
- First-aid kit
- Knife
- Flashlight or headlamp with batteries
- Sun protection
- Emergency shelter or silver blanket
- Small shovel and an avalanche beacon

#4 How to Snowshoe

The technique for snowshoeing is quite simple. It is just like regular walking, but you must widen your steps to accommodate the snowshoes' extra width. It may be a little awkward at first, but most people, including children, get the hang of it quickly. If you happen to step on your shoes and fall, which I have done, the snow is generally forgiving. I enjoy hiking with snowshoeing poles as they help me set a pace and assist with my balance in deep snow. Like hiking, it



is imperative to pay attention to where you are and where you have been. It is easier to get lost when everything is glistening white.

Like most sports, there is some etiquette involved when others are around. Snowshoeing is permitted on cross-country ski trails, and you should not walk on the tracks but rather stay to one side or the other, leaving the tracks for skiers. On steep grades, skiers have the right of way, so be courteous.

#5 My Favorite Places to Snowshoe

Trillium Lake, just south of Mount Hood, is one of my favorites. My family and friends try to go at least once each season. The 4.5-mile-walk around the lake is stunning, with private cabins peppering the woods, spectacular views of Mount Hood and shimmering ice covering parts of the lake. It is a popular place for snowshoers, families sledding and playing in the snow, and cross-country skiers. We usually bring a packed lunch or, at a minimum, some of my famous hot chocolate (*see facing page*) to drink halfway through.

Packwood Ski Resort has a vast sno-park for cross-country skiing and snowshoeing located across the road from the downhill ski resort. You can rent gear onsite. Meadowood Ski Resort has a similar setup near the downhill resort.

There are numerous sno-parks on the eastern side of Mount Hood and plenty of great snowy trails out near Cougar, Washington.

It is always good to bring something hot to drink or eat when planning a day out in the snow.



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