

# Snowshoeing 101

What makes snowshoeing so appealing is that there are no special skill sets or expensive lessons involved. If you can walk on land, you can hike on snowshoes. If you can run, then you can certainly run on snowshoes. Just be aware you will expend considerably more energy (and calories!) than you would on dry land, and that would be in proportion to how deep the snow happens to be.

Getting down to the basics:

## **What to Wear on Your Body:**

If you are active outdoors in the winter you already have most of your gear. Even if it is not snowing, you're going to fall down and get wet. This means really good wicking stuff. And wear less of it. After that first plunge into the woods, which I liken to jumping into Jones Beach waves in early June, you will get really hot really fast and it is no fun getting overheated. On the coldest sub-zero days I will wear a tight-fitting race tee, a thick polar tech long-sleeved shirt from Target, a windbreaker, lined tights, a neck gaiters and a beanie. Arm warmers are handy as they can be pulled down for ventilation and leg warmers will provide extra protection when your tights get wet. Some folks will wear a pair of tights under waterproof pants but personally I feel like the proverbial roly-poly kid in a snowsuit when I dress like that. My hands are treated to hand warmers, gloves and a lightweight mitten shell, but that's just me as I have poor circulation. But even if you don't, hand warmers provide a nice glowy feeling while hanging around at the start line giving you the confidence to dress lightly.

## **What to Wear on Your Feet:**

As far as footwear goes, boots are OK for hikers but awkward for runners. "Ye Good Olde Days" were truly laughable, as we experimented with plastic bag booties over sneakers and argued over which store produced a more durable product. Tinkering led to the sleeker duct tape approach which is still in use today. Finally, figuring we could always learn something new, we took a hint from mountain biker Maureen Roberts and bought bike booties to fit over our sneakers, establishing a new gold standard for toasty piggies. Now, of course, shoe companies have all manner of winterized models complete with gaiters. If your feet are always cold, the first line of defense is the Toe Warmer, followed by thick smart wools and neoprene socks. In a light bulb moment, I finally realized that a larger winter-dedicated sneaker size would be appropriate. On the cheap, you can re-purpose a sneaker with worn-down tread as your snowshoes will be providing the traction.

## **What to Wear on Your Sneakers:**

If you intend to race, according to United States Snowshoe guidelines, snowshoes must display a minimum of 120 square inches of functional surface area. Whatever that means. Before you unearth your slide rule, know that all snowshoes meet that requirement. The main purpose is to prevent folks from insisting that yaktrax are really snowshoes in disguise. Starting out, you need one versatile model, so I suggest a pair of Dion racers, even if you do not intend to race.

([www.dionsnowshoes.com](http://www.dionsnowshoes.com)) They are nimble, lightweight and come with interchangeable small and large cleats for a variety of conditions. Designed by the "Father of New England Trail Running," they are made for athletes by a seasoned athlete. Back to "Ye Good Olde Days," before Bob came

along we wrapped our shins with surgical tape hoping to offset the banging from poorly secured, overly wide offerings. Even if you have no desire to run, I would suggest visiting [www.runwmac.com](http://www.runwmac.com) for a listing of local races supported by Dion. Hikers are welcome and most longer races have shorter options to accommodate beginners. Sign yourself up for a pair of \$5 rentals and in the bargain you will get expert advice. Also, plan on arriving early to check out what folks are wearing.

### **What to Take:**

Bring a complete set of dry clothes and change immediately after you finish. By the time you find your car and get your snowshoes off you will be chilled. Most likely, you will be changing in your car whether you are at a race or hiking at a trailhead. Water is problematic since it ends up getting frozen. To supplement occasional sno-cone snatches, snowshoer and hiker Jen Ferriss suggests eschewing water and using an electrolyte mix to lower freezing temperature. Secure your bottle underneath your clothes and turn it upside down so that the bottom, which now has the spout, will freeze last and sip often to keep up the flow. Similarly, if I am racing and know I will need a lift halfway through, I hide a few shot blocks in my gloves. No need to stop and fumble with clothes and they are already warm enough to chew without breaking a tooth.

### **What to Do:**

Relax and have fun! If you are racing, toss any miles/minute preconceptions. Do not feel embarrassed to walk. Unlike road races, snowshoe events have a way of evening out the odds. Only the winners run the whole thing; most conserve energy by hiking the hills. If you opt to go with the first pack, you will often find yourself struggling along in train formation, helping to break trail. Many middle-of-the-packers actually end up doing their race at a seemingly faster pace than the leaders struggling through snow drifts. Even if you do not care about your place, don't assume that since you are new you should start at the very back. Passing on a narrow trail involves plowing into sometimes knee-deep snow and overtaking the person ahead who is on an easier path. I've discovered that passing on a downhill stretch where the curve follows the direction of the trail is the easiest route. But think carefully about energy expenditure. If you are patient, the pack will loosen and then folks will readily move aside for you.

### **To Trail or Not to Trail:**

Snowshoeing also offers an unparalleled opportunity to step off the beaten trail and explore the woods. Landscape that would be difficult to negotiate in the fall is now smoothed out and frozen. You will be surprised at many hidden places, formerly accessible only to animals, are waiting for you. And best of all, you can explore without fear of getting lost as all you have to do is trace your snowprints back.

Most of all, you will discover a sport where everyone from National Class racer to mid-packer to hiker is encouraging and friendly, just happy to be outdoors enjoying a Winter Wonderland.

*By laura clark*