

Snowshoes come of age with sleek, new styling

By Marie Chestney
staff writer

For non-skiers, there's still a way to enjoy the serenity of snow-shrouded woods without sinking into three feet of snow — snowshoes.

Snowshoes? Those webbed, wide, ancient pieces of wood that make you walk like a duck?

With a reputation like that, it's no wonder that snowshoes have long stayed hidden in the shadows of their glazier and faster cousins, skis.

But no more. Two trends have merged to bring snowshoes out of the shadows. One is the quest for year-round physical fitness. The second is a spiffy new 20th century look to an old technology.

An Upper Michigan snowshoe maker three years ago sold 2,000 pairs of snowshoes. He has since topped sales to 12,000 pairs a year.

"I took a gamble when I bought this company three years ago," said Bob Hulse, owner of Iverson Snowshoe Co. in Singleton, the only snowshoe maker in Michigan. "But I thought their popularity would increase."

"And we got a big break when we became the distributor for L.L. Bean (a Maine outdoor mail order company). That accounts for one-half of our sales."

Ten thousand years ago, native Americans strung moose or caribou thongs onto a piece of lightweight wood and took off across the glacial terrain.

FOR THE last 200 years, folks living in America's northern regions

have used this practically unchanged and very practical piece of equipment for a strictly utilitarian reason — to get through the woods when the snow got too deep.

Woodsmen, outdoorsmen, trappers and foresters have long used snowshoes. Even snowmobilers and skiers carry along a pair for emergencies.

But snowshoes today have captured new fans.

Physical fitness buffs find inexpensive ways to keep active in the spring, summer and fall. But, for non-skiers, options dwindle when sidewalks get icy.

Snowshoeing is a good way to keep physically fit because breaking a trail through snow is exhausting work, especially in light, powdery snow, where snowshoes sink deeper.

That brings us to the second reason for the new interest in snowshoes — modern technology.

With the new, narrower snowshoes, the old duck walk is gone. Today's snowshoes are lighter and shorter than their ancient counterparts.

THE IVERSON company still sticks to old-fashioned wood frames. But many companies today have switched to maintenance-free, nearly indestructible tube aluminum.

Rawhide bindings and harnesses have given way to synthetic materials such as neoprene or urethane. Unlike rawhide, these bindings don't fuzz up with frequent use.

"Twenty percent of those we sell are rawhide, and that's mostly to traditionalists who hang them over the fireplace," Hulse said. "The big



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Kathy Thomas, an assistant naturalist at Independence Oaks County Park, opted for snowshoes during a recent trek through the woods.

switch has been to neoprene."

In the Upper Peninsula, families still buy snowshoes as a practical tool to get through their snowbound winter.

In Lower Michigan, families now buy snowshoes to enjoy winter.

Today, the distinctive track of the webbed snowshoe is a common sight on state forest and recreation lands.

Snowshoe wearers have three advantages over skiers.

First, snowshoeing can be quickly mastered. It takes just five minutes to learn the basic technique of walking (keep the tips up and let the tail drag).

And it takes maybe an hour to master the secrets of climbing up short, steep hills (kick tips straight into slope).

SECOND, snowshoers have an easier time getting up steep hills than cross country skiers, and they have an easier time getting downhill where there are no ski run-outs.

And third, folks on snowshoes can go where other folks, including skiers, can't go. They walk where the only tracks in the snow are the tracks made by animals. In the silence of winter, they can plough through thickly wooded backcountry,

unfazed by fallen logs, heavy underbrush or marshland.

Snowshoeing is not yet as big as skiing or snowmobiling, Hulse admits.

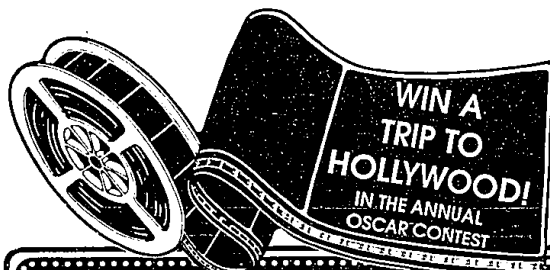
Back East and out West, snowshoeing is bigger. In fact, Hulse's biggest market is New England, where folks buy his mountain-climbing snowshoes.

Snowshoes are designed for specific uses. Some give good traction in

open areas. Some give backpackers or foresters extra support. Still others are best for long walks through drifted snow.

The Benchmark, 32715 Grand River, Farmington, has some Iverson models in stock, as well as some aluminum models.

And persons with questions about what model to buy can call Hulse at 936-452-6370.



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