

Snowshoes

by Joseph Robertia Peninsula Clarion, Carl Heilman, University of Alaska



Traditional snowshoes are the snowshoes that have been used by the Natives of Alaska for hundreds of years. They are often made of willow or other wood; with a decking of moose sinew or thin strips of hide. In modern times, traditional shoes continue to have frames made of wood with a decking material of rawhide or synthetic webbing such as a neoprene coated nylon. Wooden shoes are classics still favored by many old-timers and veteran snow-shoers. Traditional shoes are often considered more simple in design and more elegant in appearance.

Modern snowshoes, sometimes called technical shoes, usually have aluminum frames with solid synthetic decks, rather than lacing, which increase flotation. Plastic molded frames also exist, but are not as common.

The aluminum alloy is much lighter. You lose about a pound per pair compared to other materials; and every pound off your feet is equivalent to 6 on your back. Modern shoes tend to be much more durable and resistant to abrasion as well.

Flotation

Flotation is what your weight will be on top of the snow. Denser snow often allows for a smaller shoe.

Weight also must be considered in selecting the right size shoe. Many snowshoes have a tag or label identifying the weight range the model shoe is designed to support. Weight includes not just body weight, but gear weight, a child in a backpack, whatever.

Articulation and Comfort

Articulation refers to how the foot moves in the snowshoe. You want a natural stance and stride on the snow. Articulation can relate directly to bindings, and these are one of the most important features on a snowshoe.

Bindings are generally either fixed (holding the foot in place) or allow for rotation. Snow shoes with limited-rotation bindings lift completely off the ground with every step. The tail does not drag as it does with a free-rotation system. This can reduce energy exerted and increase efficiency on flat or gently rolling hills and packed trails.

Free-rotating bindings are intended for the steep terrain and hill climbing a hiker would encounter in back country backpacking and mountaineering; with free rotation, the tail falls and drags, but this allows the user to really dig into a slope with his or her toes.



“Walking in the snow on snowshoes is one of the most enjoyable and relaxing things I've done. It's hard to explain to someone how something so simple can be so rewarding until they've tried snowshoeing themselves. Each time I put on my snowshoes and walk in an enchanted woods that's draped with a fresh mantle of snow, I still feel the same magic I felt the first time I put on a pair of snowshoes and headed off across the snow.”

Carl Heilman II

Learn how to make the traditional snowshoe:

www.birchbarkcanoe.net/books.htm

Lesson Outline for Cultural Understanding:

www.ankn.uaf.edu/Curriculum/units/snowshoe.html

Recommended Website: www.carlheilman.com/snowshoe.html

Books:

1. The Snowshoe Experience: A Beginners Guide by Claire Walter
2. Snowshoeing by Steven A. Griffin

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