

# Snowshoeing: A Winter World at Your Feet

Entire families are trying out this popular winter sport.

by Donald Fraser



It's a mild winter day at a local provincial park and Alana Callan, her husband, Kevin, and six-year old daughter, Kyla, are taking a break from snowshoeing. The sun is shining. It's been a lovely morning, made even more so because they've been moving at Kyla's speed, and, as a result, seeing the world through her eyes.

They've followed animal tracks that they would never have had the opportunity to see during the warmer seasons. They've heard the forest talk in the creaks and groans of the winter freeze.

Alana and Kevin have been pulling Kyla in a sled for the trip, but will soon be letting her graduate to snowshoes of her own. "She's almost there," says Alana. "But, even in the sled, she's moving at a speed where the world is slowed down. More observable."

The Callans are no strangers to introducing kids to the great outdoors. Kevin is a world-renowned author on canoeing and camping, while Alana has been part of snowshoeing programs since she was a kid. "It's all about working to the child's speed, the child's ability, and playing off of her cues," she says. "With this in mind, you have the ability to experience the winter landscape in a way you haven't since childhood. It's pretty magical."

While the Callans have explored countless national and provincial parks, they find the bulk of their snowshoe adventures close to home. "We enjoy short trips to the Petroglyphs and Warsaw Caves," says Alana Callan. "There is a lot to explore in Central Ontario."

The Callans are not alone in their passion for snowshoeing. According to local expert, Briar Meade-Semel, snowshoeing is hitting the mainstream in a big way.

"We're selling snowshoes like never before," she reports from her post at Wildrock Outfitters in Peterborough. "More and more people are seeing this as a great way to get outdoors in the winter."

And why wouldn't they? It is an inexpensive sport that doesn't depend on a lot of sophisticated outdoor gear. "Really, you can start by renting shoes

(see sidebar) and hitting any number of free trails," says Meade-Semel.

For those looking for destinations, Central Ontario has no shortage of options. Kristyn Chambers of Durham Tourism points out that there are over 350 km of trails in Durham Region alone. "The new *Durham Region Trails Guide* ([www.durhamtrails.com](http://www.durhamtrails.com)) has a comprehensive list of trails in Durham," she reports. "Most of these trails are suitable for snowshoeing. Just be sure to stay off of cross-country ski tracks, which can be damaged by snowshoes."

Both Durham Forest and Ganaraska Forest are ideal for those living close to Lake Ontario. "While Durham Forest has 15 km of marked maintained trails for cross-country skiing, there are also over 50 km of single track trails that are primarily mountain biking trails in the summer," says Bill Thompson, Conservation Land Planner, Simcoe Conservation Authority. "These trails are used less frequently in the winter and are perfect for snowshoers. They are a great way to explore everything that Durham Forest has to offer." Ganaraska Forest has several loop routes, the longest at 7.2 km, with shorter turn-around points for younger snowshoers.

For those living a bit to the east, Northumberland Forest has roughly 35 km of trails – including the brand new "Purple Trail," that has opened up areas of the forest that were not previously covered in its trail network. A bit further north is the Kawartha Nordic Centre – a cross-country ski centre that has just opened up 10 km of dedicated snowshoe trails.





Photo: Kevin Callan

Snowshoeing never fails to take Meade-Semel back to her childhood. “One of my favourite memories is sitting, parked on a log, enjoying cookies and hot cocoa from a thermos,” she recalls. “My parents were awesome. They opened up a whole new outdoor world for me by taking me snowshoeing.”

Kids can start snowshoeing as soon as they are comfortable walking. Look for toy plastic snowshoes for smaller kids, just to get them used to having something attached to their boots. Incorporate the snowshoeing into playtime at first – just play around on snowshoes in the backyard or in the park in shallow snow. They will probably fall frequently and need help getting back up.

Chris Crooks is a father of three and an outdoor education teacher at Cobourg West Collegiate. He too has a wealth of experience and memories to do with snowshoeing and kids. “It’s a blast,” he says. “I’ve taught all of my children to snowshoe, and they love it.”

Crooks’ snowshoe experiences range from necessity to hilarity. “We have a cabin near Algonquin that we have to snowshoe into,” he says. “So the kids got lessons pretty early. I remember them using old plastic ones in the beginning – just as a means of getting them going. And I remember some very funny moments when the kids would head out to the outhouse, remove their snowshoes, and then try to walk back. It’s not so easy when you all of a sudden sink up to your chest in snow!”

It is the amazement of walking on top of the snow that hooks the kids, says Crooks. “You won’t believe the fascination they’ll have with being able to float above deep snow – they have this, ‘I can’t believe this works,’ look on their faces when they first try.” Crooks likens the experience to walking on water: “If you are in snow that is more than three feet deep, it is a truly unique experience that will absolutely thrill your kids.”

While his kids – Nathaniel, Zachary and Danica – are all in their teens and beyond the learning

## How to Snowshoe

Here’s the thing: if you can walk, you can snowshoe.

The secret is, don’t try to overcomplicate things. You are going to find your stride naturally. You’ll need to have your legs a bit further apart than usual, and you may find it a bit easier to ever-so-slightly point your toes outward, but otherwise, it is the same heel-to-toe motion that you use in your normal gait.

One thing that you may have to get used to is keeping your feet flat. You don’t want to have your weight tipping the snowshoe to the side. You should be able to master this quickly.

The most important thing to consider is taking it easy at first. Parents, you may want to stretch before and after – as you would for any type of new exercise. And it’s never a bad idea to teach your kids to stretch before and after taking part in sports or exercise.

Finally, be careful out there. Make sure lakes and rivers are fully frozen, and be sure to let people know where you are going and when you are coming back.

And that’s pretty much all you need to know. Strap on those shoes and have yourself a blast!

phase, Crooks still has the opportunity to teach others. His high school classes, for instance. “It doesn’t matter how old a kid is,” he says. “The first time is always a memorable experience.”

All three experts have some good advice to offer parents who are taking their children snowshoeing for the first time.

To experience the world like a child, says Alana Callan, you have to think like one. And you have to bring yourself to their level. “Start out slowly,” she advises. “Go on short jaunts. This is true for the sled and for the first number of times on snowshoes. And even when your child is on shoes of her own, be sure to bring the toboggan. It can be a tiring experience. Exhilarating, but exhausting if you try to do too much.”

“When it comes to snowshoes, you have to remember that there is more than one way of looking at size,” advises Meade-Semel. “You need to remember that, although the snowshoe has to fit the child, there is also a matter of body weight, amount and type of snow, and floatation ability.”

Meade-Semel recommends talking to an expert

## Rent or Buy?

It only makes sense to try out snowshoeing before you buy. You can rent snowshoes at outfitters, ski centres, and ski resorts. And it doesn’t cost much. At Wildrock Outfitters in Peterborough, for instance, it costs \$15/pair for the first day and \$10 for subsequent days, according to Wildrock’s Briar Meade-Semel.

To purchase entry level skis for adults, the cost is about \$139/pair. Skis for kids are based on weight, with the price for “minis” (30-80 pounds) around \$70/pair, and youth (90 -120 lbs) \$90/pair. The good news for parents is that kids’ snowshoes do not have to be replaced every year. Kids can wear their minis for three to five years, says Meade-Semel, and youth shoes can last even longer.

Second-hand snowshoes are also available from outfitters, and on places like craigslist or kijiji. Meade-Semel advises families to check out the condition of the snowshoes before they purchase from these sites, however, because the suspension on shoes can wear out. She suggests running a photo of the snowshoes by someone knowledgeable.



in order to choose the right snowshoes for you and your child. “I mean, I started out on old wood and catgut shoes,” she says with a smile. “And I loved them. But there are plenty of options out there – from traditional to high-tech.”

And do yourself a favour, says Meade-Semel – “Don’t start out on the coldest day of the year. You’ll turn your kids off snowshoeing before they even begin. Choose a warm day and just go for short trips. Let them enjoy the experience without it being too much work.” And don’t forget to layer clothing. “Be sure to be able to add or remove some layers for when they start to warm up and sweat. You don’t want your child to catch a chill by building up sweat and then getting cold again.”

Meade-Semel’s final tip: “Bring some hot chocolate, and some really fun treats. There is nothing, and I mean nothing, like a hot chocolate with mom and dad on a fun snowshoe trip.”

As an experienced teacher, Crooks also recommends going slow but for another reason. “You are going to be using muscles that you don’t usually use – like your hip flexors – particularly if you are in deep snow and have to lift your knees high. “You’ll get the hang of it soon enough. And you’ll adjust to wearing snowshoes. But, like any other sport, it’s always wise to ease into it.”

The most important bit of advice offered came from all three experts. And that was to have fun. “You are going to be building some wonderful memories,” says Alana Callan. “And you are going to reenact them every time you go out. You are going to experience an outdoor world unlike the one you are used to seeing. And you are going to be creating the opportunity for a lifetime of winter adventures for your child.”

All of this by strapping some paddles to your feet. Makes you wonder why you haven’t tried it already.

*Donald Fraser is a freelance writer and consultant with a love of the outdoors and a good sense of adventure.*