



Snowshoes: An Arctic Traveler's Best Friend

By Joe Henderson

Every once in a while I see dramatic photos of the Brooks Range Mountains layered with a plush carpet of snow in a magazine or book. Heck, even some of my own photos resemble a dog musher's paradise. Just by looking at the photos, one might get the impression that a dog team could cruise effortlessly down the wide valleys and rolling hills. But I know from firsthand experience that those romanticized images were taken in the springtime, probably in March and April when the sun and wind had worked the snow smooth and hard. During the *real* winter (November through February) the snow conditions in the Brooks Range are incredibly variable. It's not uncommon for the snow to be waist deep in one valley and ankle high in another.

While I'm on an expedition, experiencing the variability in conditions on a daily basis, I'm constantly reminded of something my old Alaskan gold miner friend once said to me after he

caught a glimpse of my worn, wooden snowshoes leaning against my dog sled outside his cabin window: “You’re only as good as your tools,” Charley proclaimed. Charley’s sharp eye had noticed a fist-sized piece of rawhide webbing missing from the toe where my Malamute pup had chewed it clear through. Those words spoken so long ago echo in my mind, even still, as I put on my snowshoes.



Charley was absolutely right. Snowshoes are a valuable tool for a dog musher and are an essential component of travel upon which the success of a dog sledding expedition or a winter weekend camping trip in the mountains hinges.

Snowshoes have been around for thousands of years. Their design evolved to suit many different kinds of snow conditions, resulting in the styles we have available today: bearpaw (curved heel), teardrop (have a tail), and hybrids. Modern snowshoes are constructed with a variety of materials and selecting the right pair can be confusing. I mean, where do you start? Do you purchase snowshoes made with aluminum or wooden frames? Rawhide or neoprene webbing? Is the traditional long shoe better than the shorter ones? The list of possibilities goes on and on.

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If you are not careful and buy a pair that doesn't cut it for what you need, you may find yourself flinging cuss words at your newly purchased snowshoes while lying face down in the snow. Needless to say, the snowshoes one selects should be appropriate for the snow conditions.

People often ask me why I don't use skis. Well, I do sometimes, but I prefer snowshoes and have grown comfortable with them. Without a doubt, skiing is an easy and effortless way to get around, even in really deep snow. However, working with dogs and dealing with brush is difficult while wearing skis. Another downfall of using skis is that they require the use of poles, which is a real pain considering I need to keep my hands free to handle the team. Nonetheless, I always have a pair of skis on the sled that I use for scouting around and hunting.



I like to have a versatile pair of snowshoes that will serve me well regardless of snow depth. I prefer to invest in snowshoes that I can use in the arctic, either on crusty windblown, waist-deep snow in the Brooks Range, and even the deep snow in interior Alaska.

If you've ever tried it, you know how difficult snowshoeing can be. I have found the most



challenging snowshoeing conditions are in the mountains, especially if you are breaking trail in thigh-deep powder, trekking up and over steep mountain passes. Or, blazing trail through parka-shredding brush with an amped up dog team on your heels. Even with a decent pair of snowshoes, mountain travel can wear a person thin, literally. Somehow,

when I travel on the arctic coast I successfully maintain my weight, but when traveling in the mountains... holy smokes, I become skinny as a rail. It doesn't matter how many calories I consume. I just burn it right off. When I snowshoe all winter in the mountains, the constant cardiovascular exertion drops my resting heart rate down to about 50 beats per minute. It's during those times I'm fit as a fiddle.



Snowshoeing in extreme conditions requires a lightweight yet durable snowshoe that can withstand a good beating. I prefer Iverson Snowshoes (www.iversons-snowshoes.com); their old Alaskan Trail style, to be specific, with rawhide webbing and a long tail. They are light, durable, and maneuverable. The long tails on the shoes are important since they allow the snowshoes to track straight forward. For deep snow, I prefer the longest snowshoes I can get my mitts on. I have great success with the 12x60-inch shoe for the deeper, sugary snow that lies in the mountain valleys.

I remember complaining to a friend long ago, an old-timer, about the deep powdery snow that hungrily swallows snowshoes at every step. “Just tie a cord to each snowshoe toe and pull on

them while you walk.” He grumbled as if I should’ve already had known this old trick. Basically, he recommended “puppeteering” the tips of the snowshoes to train your body to become familiar with the motion of snowshoeing. As you step forward, say with your left foot, you also lift the cord on the left snowshoe. It trains you to pick up your feet and lift those toes. After a while you’ll find this movement natural, and bucking that deep snow becomes nearly effortless (“effortless” being a relative term).

No matter what type of snowshoe I put on my mukluks or how hard I train, it’s never *really* easy. Before an expedition, I try to accumulate quite a few miles of running up hills and through snow without snowshoes on. This kind of training helps get my legs warmed up for the season, but after about the first month of snowshoeing in front of the team six to eight hours a day, my legs have pretty much adjusted to the brutal physical demands. After three or four months of busting



through deep mountain snow, I can actually say snowshoeing becomes as close to effortless as it will ever get.

When I am testing a new snowshoe I like to see the tail of the snowshoe drag over the snow at all times. So when I look behind me on my trail there should be narrow drag marks similar to ski tracks where the tails had dragged and

never left the snow surface. That way, your toe is always pointed forward and enables you to cruise ahead at a trot or a fast walk without worrying about the snowshoe turning on you and planting you in a snow angel position.

As I mentioned before, there are a lot of different styles of snowshoes out there and the type you select should depend on the type of conditions you’re planning to walk in. I see quite a few bearpaw-style snowshoes around and they do have a purpose in deep, heavy snow like you find



in the forests of Michigan. But for Alaska's dry snow they sink awfully deep. The aluminum bearpaw-style shoes have their place in recreational snowshoeing and mountaineering, but probably not in a scenario where you're breaking trail with a dog team over long distances. I doubt that they are superior to a pair of traditional wooden snowshoes in regards to floatation, user-friendliness, and weight. And believe me, weight does matter, especially if you're snowshoeing in front of your team all day.

It seems like there's a world of emphasis put on snowshoe bindings these days. Again there's a pile of them out there on the market. I think a simple binding is the way to go. What works best for me is the leather "H-style" binding. It's simple and serves the purpose well. Once they're adjusted to my mukluk they stay on all day and if I need them off, I simply pull the strap down off my heel and kick my foot forward and there it goes. The H-style binding is relatively inexpensive. Iverson Snowshoe Co. designs and sells a great line of bindings as well.

I have tried just about every snowshoe design and I always gravitate back to the original Alaskan Trail style. They are tough, light and easily repairable. Besides I have found they work similar

to skis going down hills. The trick here is to sit down on the snowshoe tails then lean back and enjoy the quick ride down the mountain. I like to wear the Objawa-style shoes when maneuvering in thick brush in the boreal forests. The toe, which comes to a point like an arrow head, pierces through the brush and makes snowshoeing easier. For wide open cruising on soft snow they seem unbalanced on the toe.

Happy snowshoeing!

Additional Information:



This year, my team of Malamutes and I will set out on a three-and-a-half-month, unassisted (no resupplies), solo dog sledding expedition. The expedition is a tribute to Alaska's new official state dog, the Alaskan Malamute. It may sound strange that an animal – which originated in the arctic thousands of years ago and is one of the world's most ancient domesticated breeds – would be up against individuals challenging the idea. It was quite a fight.

School kids from Polaris K-12 in Anchorage proposed House Bill 14, which would designate the Malamute as our state dog. After three years of hard work and in depth research to help them make their case in front of the legislature, the kids and their teachers met with success and Governor Sean Parnell signed the bill into law.

The 2011 Arctic Expedition is dedicated to all the kids who worked on that project. Some kids worked on it for three years. One girl was quoted in the Anchorage paper as saying that she had worked on this project for a quarter of her life. It's the best way we know how to show our appreciation to these individuals for their hard work in making it possible and also to show them that the Alaskan Malamute continues to thrive in the arctic in modern times.

Bio

Joe Henderson has been traveling on snowshoes in the arctic with his team of Malamutes for about 30 years. He's probably a better runner on a pair of Alaskan Trail style snowshoes than he is in Nikes. For more information, visit www.alaskanarcticexpeditions.com.

Article photography by Angus Mill: <http://arctic-stories.com>





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