

Central Oregon Offers a Plethora of Snowshoeing Destinations

By Patty Mamula

From ice climbing to ski racing, Central Oregon is packed with winter activities for the “extreme athlete.” But there are plenty of alternatives for fun in the snow that don’t have to break your bones – or the bank!

The motto is . . . if you can walk, you can snowshoe. Plus, it’s a high-energy workout, and fun for the whole family. Snowshoeing is considered America’s fastest-growing winter sport, and it’s definitely one of the most aerobic, burning 40 percent more calories than walking.

ALMOST FREE

The Forest Service offers free guided snowshoe tours, complete with snowshoes, to anyone 10 years or older. The cost? A couple gallons of gas and a willing spirit.



Meet at the snowshoe hut near the ticket office at Mt. Bachelor’s West Village Lodge for a 90-minute tour that goes to an overlook at the edge of Bachelor for views of Broken Top and South Sisters then loops back through a forest of old growth Mountain Hemlock.

Larry Berrin, Director of Conservation Education for the Bend Fort Rock Ranger District, said the trail goes through a restricted area that’s not heavily used. “We watch for wildlife and talk about the three Ps of animal tracking—print, pattern and place. Usually we see tracks of bobcat, black bear, cottontails, coyote, grey fox, the Pine Marten weasel, squirrels and maybe a cougar.” The trail begins at 6,400 feet and gains a couple hundred feet elevation.



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Guides talk about forest ecology, geology and the watershed. They also discuss snow hazards like avalanches, tree wells and snow bombs (heavy piles of melting snow that drop suddenly from trees).

“We talk about the history of snowshoeing,” said Berrin. The first people in North America probably came from Asia across the land bridge on snowshoes.

“We remind people they’re traveling like the first settlers, and in our single file formation we’re mimicking the natural movement of animals.”

Because snowshoeing is so accessible, it opens up the natural experience to all ages and abilities. Guides offer everyone an opportunity to break trail, which can mean wading through chest deep powder.

“Once people put on snowshoes, they think they’re going to float on top of the snow,” said Berrin. “But, they will sink about six inches. They’re not Jesus.”

SEASONAL BARGAIN

With a \$20 sno-park pass, snowshoes and warm clothes you’re ready for a long season of exploration and adventure. If the snow cooperates, you could be on the trails by November 1 and snowshoeing until April 30.

All the sno-parks in the Deschutes, Willamette and Ochoco National Forest have winter trails. Then there’s always the option of breaking your own in fresh powder.

Thanks to a local retired doctor, there are several trails near Bachelor exclusively for snowshoeing. The ones at Edison Butte are also open to dogs. Maybe that’s why they’re the most popular.

About six years ago Jim Davis was out snowshoeing at Virginia Meissner Park. An avid downhill skier and experienced outdoorsman, Davis knew there was an ongoing conflict between snowshoers and cross country skiers sharing the same trail. Snowshoes with their traction claws chew up the grooved track used by cross country skiers.

“Around Bend, every year there are more snowshoers,” said Davis. “It’s a great family sport, even for little kids. In many of the sno-parks there are more snowshoers than cross country skiers.”

Snow shoeing is considered America’s fastest growing winter sport, and it’s definitely the most aerobic, burning 40 percent more calories than walking. So that day at Meissner, Davis used a compass to blaze a new trail. Almost immediately, snowshoers started using it.

That was the first of six snowshoe trails he developed with approval from the Forest Service and support from the Nordic Club to pay for the diamond-shaped trail markers and the required aluminum nails.

The maintenance and upkeep of these trails is a volunteer effort by Davis and friends, but at 83 he’s looking for someone else to take over the job.

The trails are all loops from 3.5 to 5 miles long. The Forest Service, which completes an environmental assessment on all new trails, said that the snowshoe only trails are unique to this area.

Avid adventurers and experienced snowshoers may choose to climb Tumalo Mountain and then ski or snowboard down. But families, especially ones with young children, will enjoy the gentler slopes of the sno-park trails.

AFFORDABLE PRIVATE TOURS

Wanderlust Tours, an award-winning outfitter, offers snowshoe tours led by trained naturalists. Marketing manager Pat Conlon said, “We seek out areas of the Deschutes National Forest with fresh powder, majestic Cascade views and quiet forest sanctuaries. Our guides are the show, out front, breaking trail, sharing their knowledge of the region’s history and geology.”



Conlon said their tours often attract people eager to try it for the first time. All ability levels are welcome, but the minimum age is 8. “Maneuverability is so high with snowshoeing,” Conlon said. “You can go anywhere you like.”

Their season starts when the snow flies, usually around Thanksgiving, and continues through April.

Silver Striders, a guide service geared to baby boomers, offers snowshoe tours in the Deschutes, Willamette and Ochoco National Forests. One of the few guide services owned and operated by a woman, a 60-year-old boomer herself, Pam Kirk promotes preparation, activity and safety.

Her snowshoe 101 training hike, required for all beginners, focuses on basics. People practice putting snowshoes on and off, going up and downhill, walking without stepping on themselves and preparing for weather changes.

Kirk offers four different trips every week, varying in elevation gain and distance with ratings of easy, intermediate and advanced. Participants meet at designated spots and then carpool to the trailhead.

Although she does not provide equipment, she makes strong recommendations about how to select it. She always advises beginners to rent equipment and to insist on smaller snowshoes than are normally recommended.

“Snowshoe sizes are determined by weight. If the clerk says you need a 27, ask for 25. Tell them you are going with a guide and NOT breaking trail. Light is right,” Kirk said.

“Snowshoeing is work. Every mile on a snowshoe can be equal to a mile and a half on dirt. That’s 5,000 steps per mile. I want people to have a good time and come back,” she said.

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