



# Ontario Eco-Adventure Celebrates Winter

by Debbie McKeown

*"Snowshoeing reigns supreme. It is the true, natural revel of robust 'Canucks' who love the snow, however deep, and the storm, however stiff."*

George Beers

As my laboured breathing slowly returns to normal, I take in the natural splendour surrounding me. Snow falls steadily, cooling my overheated face while I scan the slopes below for wildlife that made the tracks we saw while snowshoeing to our rocky perch atop Moose Mountain. The hill opposite us is covered with the mixed forest typical to this area. I find this silent snowy moment to be a fitting finale to our long weekend Eco Adventure on the edge of Ontario's Algonquin Provincial Park.

Three days earlier, my husband Jack and I arrived at Voyageur Quest's Algonquin Cottage Outpost after a four-hour drive that quickly rendered Toronto's urban sprawl a distant memory. The road to the cottages is snow-covered and sparsely populated, with glimpses of frozen marshes and the rocky outcrops of the Canadian Shield, the oldest rock formation in Canada.



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We are greeted by Mark Goldsworthy, one of Voyageur Quest's winter guides. Mark will be with us for much of our time here, not only accompanying us on snowshoe excursions, but also sharing stories and information about the area and preparing meals to die for. We start with a lunch of squash soup, warm-

from-the-oven beer bread, and a mixed green salad with homemade dressing. Guests can opt to self-cater and explore on their own, but we are thrilled to leave the entire weekend in Mark's capable hands.

With full stomachs, our next priority is to get outdoors for some snowshoeing. The area, near the small town of South River, is laced with trails, making the possibilities almost endless. We choose the Tower Trail which is part of the extensive Forgotten Trails network. We soon realize another thing that is forgotten ... our rusty cross-country skiing skills, as we ski the snow-covered logging road leading to our trailhead. With snowshoes dangling from our packs, we set out. It's fun to reconnect with cross-country skiing, but even better to finally strap on our snowshoes and start our ascent to the site of an old fire tower lookout.

As we climb through the forest, Mark points out different trees that constitute the mixed forests in this area. Predominant is the tall, straight white pine, traditionally logged for ship masts and beams. Deciduous trees, which create a blaze of colour in the fall, are ghostly sculptures this time of year. American beech is a deciduous tree that keeps its brown leaves in winter, providing a last-resort meal for deer in especially harsh years.

We check for tracks as we make our way upwards, and are rewarded with sightings of deer and moose tracks, along with the tracks of several smaller mammals and birds. Moose are the giant mammals of the forest and spotting one is rare and special, particularly in winter. We notice one set of tracks that indicate a moose mother and calf had been on the trail recently.

Today is misty and warm, unusual for this time of year. As we climb, we laugh that Mark is perhaps conspiring to prove early on to us British Columbia mountain fanatics that Ontario indeed has some hills too. We ascend into a low cloud which obscures our view



when we finally reach the fire lookout, but it feels mysterious and quiet. Nature never disappoints, regardless of the weather.

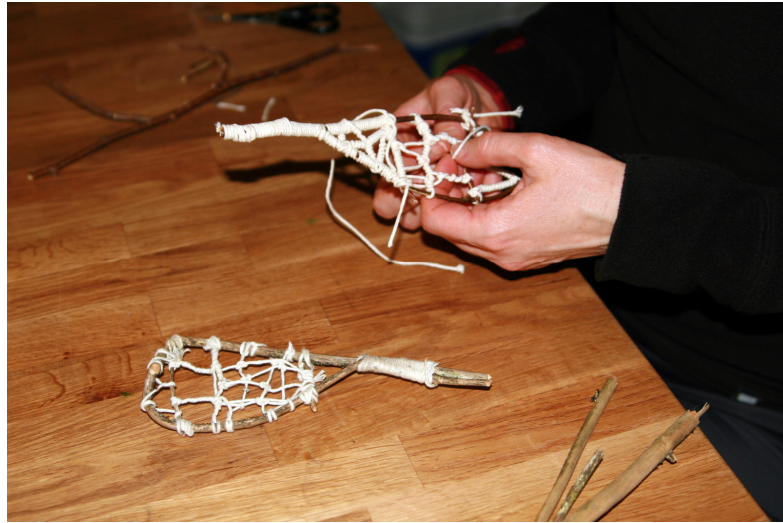
Back at our cottage we settle in for the evening. Even though the Voyageur Quest cottages are off the grid, they are warm and comfortable. Our wooden cottage, called Nipissing, is powered by solar and heated by wood and propane stoves. It faces eastward to Kawawaymog Lake, allowing us to catch at least one spectacular sunrise during our stay.



Tonight is New Year's Eve which calls for more excellent food. It's a good thing we're keeping active or we wouldn't fit into our clothes by the end of the weekend. Baked brie with chutney on crackers and roasted chestnuts precede an equally tasty dinner.

We head outside for an evening bonfire, enjoying the mild weather. Skating on the lake was on the agenda, but called off due to warm temperatures. Maybe next time. As I sit beside the fire, I think about Canada's iconic northern landscape painter Tom Thomson who, according to local legend, would doodle on pieces of birch bark and then set them beside the campfire. This area was one of his favourite haunts. I wonder if any of those birch bark sketches survived.

Back indoors, Mark has several models of traditional snowshoes on hand for us to see, including one special pair of beavertail snowshoes that was owned by his grandfather. He challenges us to make a miniature snowshoe from sticks we've picked up on the trail and twine. Our creative (and competitive!) tendencies kick in and by the end of the evening, Jack and I have each produced a lopsided but passable snowshoe.



We could sleep forever in the quiet comfort of our cottage, but have an early start the next morning at Chocpaw Expeditions to try our hands at dog sledding. Our Eco Adventure includes a sampling of several winter sports with an emphasis on snowshoeing. When dog sledding was suggested, my adventure-loving adrenaline kicked in and I couldn't resist. So why, after the hour-long briefing, am I completely terrified?! Likely because there is so much to remember. Will I get my gees and haws (rights and lefts) mixed up? Will I ever sort out the maze of lines and harnesses? And worst of all, will I inadvertently do something that could harm one of the dogs we are responsible for?

I needn't have worried. We are given lots of support by Chocpaw's guides. Chocpaw has over 400 dogs that are raised for racing and recreational sledding. The guides and the dogs are experts at getting beginners set up for a day of dog sledding. I felt like our six-dog team instinctively interpreted our garbled commands and gave 100 percent to create an incredible experience for us.



It seems chaotic when the dogs are being harnessed. They love to run and are eager to get started. Their barking ramps up the excitement even more. Finally we're off, tearing up the forest trails at speeds that seem impossibly fast. Jack and I are working with a dog team led by Domino and Raven who are old pros.



We quickly discover that sitting back and relaxing is not an option. We take turns in the driver and passenger positions. The driver stands on the back of the sled braking and steering as necessary, while the passenger sits in the sled with the gear. When going uphill, both jump off and run to reduce the load on the dogs, the driver always keeping at least one hand on the sled. With the continuation of our January thaw, the trails are slushy, making tough going for both dogs and humans. I fall in the sloppy snow several times as I never master the technique of getting on and off a moving dogsled. By the end of the day, I am soaked, exhausted, smell like a wet dog and have had the time of my life.



That evening, we decide our achy muscles could benefit from a little heat therapy. So, we took advantage of the opportunity to enjoy the “floating sauna”, which is a short dash from our cottage. It actually does float in Kawawaymog Lake in summer, although frozen in the ice in winter. We are excited that the outdoor temperature is dropping and snow drifts down as we step outside the sauna to take a break from the heat.

Our final day includes a long and wonderful sampling of area snowshoe trails. All are well-marked and easy to follow but natural, not manicured. It feels traditional, evoking thoughts of earlier times when snowshoes were used by native people for trapping and winter transportation. We see no-one else all day ... our own private wilderness.

As the snow falls harder, we start the day with a long loop around a beaver pond where we see evidence of Canada’s favourite rodent ... a snow-covered beaver lodge and slender trees chewed almost to the breaking point. Fresh deer and hare tracks make us wonder if we are being watched, while a woodpecker entertains us by flitting from tree to tree. We stop to identify some larger tracks, now almost obscured by the new snow. Maybe a black bear that, during the recent thaw, awakened briefly from its winter slumber? There are stories in the snow and mysteries to be deciphered all around us, and



Mark helps us to interpret them. I feel my own powers of observation and deduction sharpening as a result.

As we finally descend Moose Mountain and prepare for our departure, I think about how this weekend has incorporated many of the best aspects of the long Canadian winter. With stunning natural beauty and endless opportunities to snowshoe, dogsled, cross-country ski, and skate, I'm happy for winter to hang on as long as it likes.

#### Practical Information:

Our trip was organized by Voyageur Quest ([www.voyageurquest.com](http://www.voyageurquest.com)). We stayed at their Algonquin Cottage Outpost on the shores of Kawawaymog Lake (also called Round Lake) near South River, Ontario which is a 4 hour drive from Toronto and five hours from Ottawa.

The cottage we stayed in sleeps four to six people. A second cottage has an upstairs and a downstairs unit, both of which also sleep four to six. Cottages are fully equipped for cooking. Any one, or all, of these cottages would be excellent for family groups. Electricity for lights is provided by solar power, but do not expect to plug in hair dryers, shavers or other appliances. There is no cell phone or internet access.

Voyageur Quest also offers the Algonquin Log Cabin which is located 10 km away on Surprise Lake. Another nice option for large groups of family or friends, it sleeps 12 to



14 people and has a wonderful central stone fireplace. When we stopped by, a giant Christmas tree still graced the living room.

Our Algonquin Winter Eco Adventure was fully catered with delicious meals and snacks ... more food than we could possibly eat. My vegetarian requirements were easily accommodated. You can also opt to self-cater.

We joined Chocpaw Expeditions ([www.chocpaw.com](http://www.chocpaw.com)) for our day of dog sledding.

There are numerous opportunities to snowshoe in the vicinity of the Algonquin Cottage Outpost and the Algonquin Log Cabin. Outings can be organized with a Voyageur Quest guide or you can go on your own. Programs can be customized to a variety of abilities and rental snowshoes are available, including ones sized for children.

Algonquin Provincial Park ([www.algonquinpark.on.ca](http://www.algonquinpark.on.ca)) is Ontario's oldest and one of its largest provincial parks. It lies immediately east of where we were based, providing even more opportunities for snowshoeing and other winter adventures.





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