

Homage – snowshoes
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Snowshoes fueled many a boyhood nightmare for this Manitoba Cub Scout a long, long time ago.

Planning our annual showshoeing outing, our intrepid Akela always chose winter's most wretched day, with biting north wind and numbing temperature. Our snowshoes were large and awkward, the bindings made of wicking material that always got wet and froze, then became loose and needed to be retied. Fingers turned into icicles. Tears flowed.

Slippery-soled lace-up moccasins were the footwear of necessity. Blue jeans became soaked and froze solid from countless falls. When we finally reached the campfire, hotdogs and steaming cocoa, I was a frozen mass of blubbering frustration.

Ah, snowshoes. Love 'em or hate 'em, or perhaps a little of both.

From their noble beginnings in central Asia maybe 6,000 years ago, they've evolved from the tool of trappers and hunters to a fun way for urbanites to get out and enjoy winter.

Traditional frames of white ash and decking of rawhide latticework webbing are still used, but modern models are made of aluminum or stainless steel tubing, with neoprene, nylon or polypropylene decking. Some even come with anti-slippage cleats or crampons underneath step-in bindings that actually lock into place.

Along the way, my relationship with this boyhood nemesis has turned around. I've since used them on a northern Manitoba trapline, and to tromp around the mountains of southwestern Alberta just for the heck of it. I've snowshoed into ice-fishing destinations, and I've worn them to hunt deer and, yes, snowshoe hares. I relish the feeling of gliding over snow and savour the padded silence of a winter forest.

I once saw a marketing line that likened snowshoeing to *Like Dancing on Snow!*

That doesn't quite describe my own technique. I still fall down more than I should, but at least the nightmares have stopped.