

Showshoe explosion

• An estimated 1.5 million people will take up the silent sport this winter

By MIKE TERRELL

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Nothing is as quiet as a winter forest, when shrouds of snow softly cover the sleeping woodland.

The beauty and hush of winter has been drawing an increasing number of enthusiasts to the silent sport of snowshoeing, according to the National Sporting Goods Association. An estimated 1.5 million people will take up the sport this winter, which is three times the number who participated just six years ago.

What's causing such an explosion is this century's old sport?

"It's the easiest and least expensive way to get out and enjoy winter," said Chad Kahler, who has taught an eight-week class in snowshoeing at Northwestern Michigan College the last few years.

"You can get a decent pair of snowshoes for around \$100, and that's really all you need to get started. Living in northern Michigan, you should already have all the clothing you need," he laughed.

Forget the outdated image of snowshoeing, which was a stoic Jack London-type figures slogging through a frozen tundra. Today, it's become a mainstream winter sport.

"Snowshoeing is a great family sport because it's so easy to learn," Kahler explained stressing how easy the sport was. "All you need is 15 minutes and a few inches of snow to get started.

"The only rule you need to learn, once you have the snowshoes strapped to your feet, is not to step on the other shoe once you start walking. It's a little wider step than normal, but that's about as advanced as it gets."

Not only is it the easiest form of winter recreation to learn; people of all ages and levels of physical activity can enjoy snowshoeing. You can walk, hike, or even run over the snow if you want to get really aerobic. It's considered a low-impact sport with no undue stress on muscles, bones, and ligaments.

Snowshoes have been around since

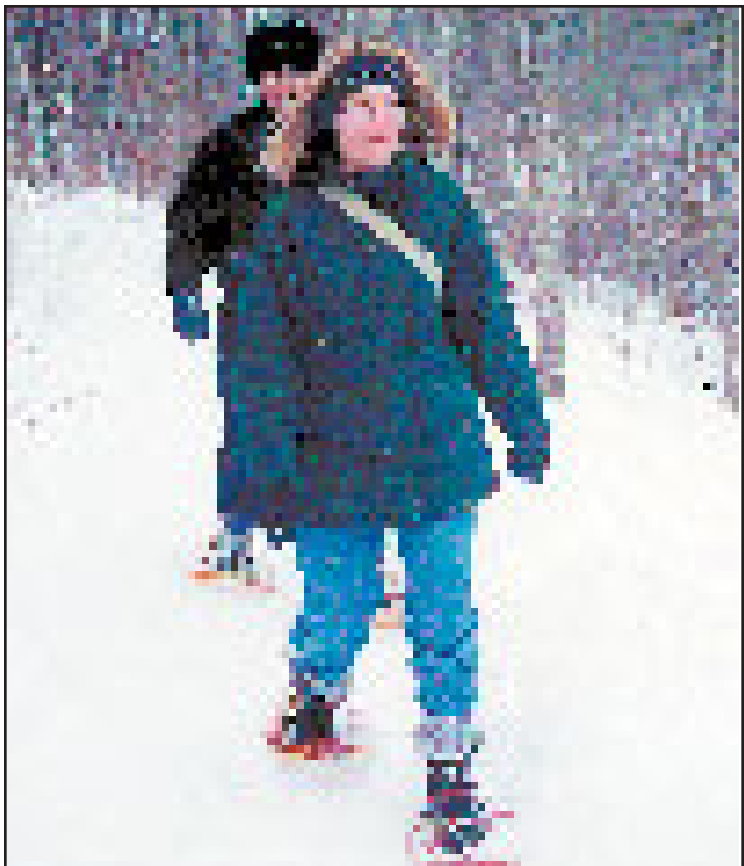


Photo by Mike Terrell

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the first Asians trekked across the Bering Strait land bridge to North America. During the 1980s snowshoe companies started bringing out aluminum models, which were lighter and much easier to maneuver and control than are their ash-wood predecessors.

At the college they have both types of snowshoes available, the student doesn't need a pair to take the class, Kahler had pointed out when we discussed the class winter before last.

"That's a part of what we study during the course, the different types of snowshoes," the outdoorsman had said. "We talk about the various styles, shapes and bindings available today.

"One thing I advise students is not to buy traditional snowshoes by mail order. You need to look at the grain and make sure that it's tight and straight. Otherwise, it's prone to breaking easily"

For those who would like to go one step further and build their own tradi-

tional snowshoes, a couple of classes are being offered at the Forest Visitor Center in Hartwick Pines State Park near Grayling, according to Rob Burg, DNR park historian. The popular classes fill quickly each year. For more information on time and date, or to put your name on the list, call 989-348-2537.

In the past they have worked with the Iverson Snowshoe Company from the U.P. They supply the wooden frame and webbing and bindings, and you learn to weave the webbing on the frame. The cost has been around \$140 to \$150 in past years, which covered all materials and the class registration fee.

Once you start it doesn't take long to get hooked on the sport, according to Kahler.

"It's an easy activity to keep up. Once you get going I would anticipate that you'll keep snowshoeing for a lifetime."