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**Snowshoe Travel**

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Basic snowshoe technique on flat terrain is not much more difficult than walking, once you get used to having feet that are 8 inches wide and 24 inches long. On steeper terrain, there are a few techniques that you should practice to travel successfully.

The first step is getting them on. Some snowshoes have no left or right shoe, but many do. Step into the snowshoe and align the ball of your foot with the axle of the traction device. Follow the manufacturer’s instructions for putting on your snowshoes. Be sure to get the excess strapping out of your way so you won’t trip on it. Now you’re ready to venture forth. You’ll find that a rolling gait with the tips of the shoes lifted slightly upward with each step is the easiest way to walk. You may need a slightly wider stance to walk without stepping on the other snowshoe, but you’ll probably find this comes without much effort.

Since Northwest snow conditions vary widely - sometimes from step to step, the snowshoer must work to maintain good balance with the weight centered over each foot. A sliding stride sometimes helps, but try to keep your weight centered. On hard or icy surfaces, you’ll have to plant each foot firmly to help set the traction device of the snowshoe. A step with good traction involves a deliberate, firm step and waiting a second or two for the snow to grip the crampons under the snowshoes before taking the next step.

**Falling (Correctly**) - Practicing in so snow on the flat is an easy way to banish the fear of falling. This will benefit confidence in handling hills. Falling can happen quite often in snowshoeing depending on terrain and conditions. If you don’t get comfortable falling, your confidence will suffer in steeper terrain.

To fall to the front, bend at the waist and knees while crossing arms in front to cushion the fall. The forearms are used in the fall to push the snow out away from you. This eases the fall and catches weight gradually.

To fall to the rear, ball up into a crouch so that you will roll as you contact the snow. To practice this, crouch down with hands near the knees and roll backwards.

Getting up is easier with poles. The first task is to roll over on your front if you are not already in that position. Place the poles crosswise on the snow and use them to raise the upper body. From that position, place one pole and then the other, basket down, to support standing up.

**Turning** - Changing directions on the switchbacks requires a turning technique. Swing your downhill foot perpendicular and ahead of your uphill foot. Pivot your body weight onto your front foot and bring your other foot around. You are now ready to begin going the other way! If the terrain allows, the turn can be wider (with more steps involved) or tighter (by doing a 180-degree kick step turn).

**Uphill Travel** - On gentle uphill slopes, you can climb straight uphill. Stay an adequate distance from the person in front of you to keep from getting a face full of snow or a facial restructuring from the snowshoe above. As the hill gets steeper, other techniques need to be used.

**Step Kicking** - Steeper snow calls for step-kicking if the snow is deep enough. Kick steps by pointing your uphill toe down and in firmly, then flattening your foot to compact the snow under the foot. The next foot repeats the process, creating a set of steps that the next person follows, deepening and improving the step.

**Traversing** - Another technique for traveling uphill is to traverse the slope. The leader makes switchbacks across the slope by firmly placing the uphill snowshoe while pushing the uphill edge into the slope and keeping the platform as flat as possible. Keeping centered on the snowshoes and staying in balance, followers improve the steps of the leader with a similar technique.

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**Rest Step** - The rest step is an essential uphill technique for delaying the onset of fatigue on long strenuous trips. Stamp the forward foot into the snow, straighten the rear leg, lock the knee, pause, breathe deeply, relax the thigh, and then repeat with the other leg.

**Breaking Trail** - The first person in the party has the task of finding the route and setting steps in the snow, often a tiring activity if the snow is heavy or deep. Each person in the party should take a turn as leader for a set amount of time or number of steps; he/she then steps to the side, lets the party pass, and takes up position at the end of the line. This conserves the strength of the party and allows everyone the fun of route finding.

In deep snow, with a large party, sharing the leadership can make the difference between getting to your goal and having to turn back early, before it gets dark. The second person in line always should improve the leader’s steps; and each other party member should do the same in turn. If you should break out a step, trail etiquette calls for you to kick a new step for the people following you.

**Downhill Travel** - Going downhill is more difficult than one might suppose, especially with snowshoes without aggressive and multi-directional crampons. The best rule of thumb is to take small enough steps to keep your weight centered on the snowshoes. Do not lean backward, as that actually will tend to push your feet out from under you. A quick shuffling step will keep your weight centered and will decrease the chance of slipping. Fresh snow often is easier to descend than using someone else’s footsteps, as it provides more traction.

Traversing down the slope can be a good choice as slopes get steeper. Another option is plunge stepping (see below). Downhill technique in snowshoes often provides a new set of challenges on a trip. As with other winter travel, be aware of what is above you and what the run out is like, adapting the technique to fit your ability and the terrain.

**Plunge Stepping** - Plunge stepping is one technique to use in downhill travel when the snow is relatively soft. Take long steps with the knee initially stiff, heel down; then, as the heel strikes, relax the knee, keeping the toe turned up. A bouncing or slightly jumping step can help.