

STORIES IN THE SNOW

■ Getting around on snowshoes can reveal the mysteries of animal behavior through their tracks in the snow

Tears of joy ran down my cheeks when I tore colorful Christmas wrapping loose from a large cardboard box with an L.L. Bean label embossed on the end flap. Inside nestled a pair of 48-inch long, ash frame snowshoes that appeared to glow in low light. Rawhide laces. Handcrafted in Canada. I'd dreamed of owning a pair of vintage snowshoes since childhood, but held off on purchase when I could well afford it. A frugal upbringing may have entered into the equation.

My prized snowshoes were quickly put to use on wintry treks along ice-glazed creeks and conifer-lined ridges of the Blues. I traversed steep slopes and old growth forest where deep snow rendered a route virtually impassable to outdoor adventurers on foot or cross-country skis. Mysteries of animal behavior were revealed to me via tracks of cougar, elk, ruffed grouse, and snowshoe hare. Marks made by the plunder of great horned owls and the kill of red foxes intrigued. Dragging a newly cut Christmas tree to the truck in waist-high snow drifts no longer challenged.

A whole new world opened up when Nancy and I moved



**THE
NATURAL
WORLD**

DENNIS DAUBLE

to a golf course development outside of town. When snowfall accumulated to reach ankle-deep, I'd strap on my snowshoes and hike through a 40-acre parcel of big sage, rabbitbrush, and sulfur buckwheat to reach a clear day's view of the Yakima River and Rattlesnake Mountain. The trek provided a hinterland experience in an otherwise suburban setting.

At some point in time — I can't say exactly when — the snowshoes began to gather dust on the garage wall. A new housing development blocked my route to the river. Two-hour drives to the mountains on black ice became more of a challenge than an adventure. Looking out the living room window this winter, though, the sight of shaggy snowflakes falling from a muted sky made me want to tip my face back and catch them on my tongue. As new layers of snow gathered, I thought back to when I flopped on my back and shaped an angel in soft surround.

I move swiftly to the



Dennis Dauble/Contributed Photo

Ice-capped boulders decorate a small stream in early January 2021.



Dennis Dauble/Contributed Photo

A pair of vintage wood-frame and modern aluminum frame snowshoes are lined up and ready for a trek in the snow.

cluttered garage, strap on my vintage snowshoes, and reflect on what I have missed. How fresh snow clothes naked branches in vestal white and renders the rough edges of an otherwise stark landscape smooth. Snowfall is

also about stillness. Its presence causes a too-busy world to stop and take a breath. I recall magical moonlight treks over dune-like drifts of powder, peering up at a never-ending night sky, and breathing frosty air that is



Dennis Dauble/Contributed Photo

This distinctive three-toe track of a great blue heron was found on a winter trek alongside an ice-glazed stream.

sharp and clean. The reflective properties of ice and snow never fail to add sparkle to my mood. According to an article in Science magazine, "light reflected off fresh snow can outshine a full moon."

I skirt the edge of the golf course where a tiny vestige of native shrub and bunchgrass vegetation remains. My snowshoes float atop a foot of snow so dry it squeaks. I look for animal tracks and think back to a photo I sent to a friend for verification. Ken, who has a degree in Wildlife Science, wrote back, "Most likely a

squirrel. Rabbit tracks form a distinctive triangular shape."

When I replied I had hoped the tracks were from a cottontail rabbit that used to frequent our yard, he wrote, "I always wonder why people even ask me if they don't want to hear my answer."

No sign of animal activity exists where wandering coyotes and mule deer once strolled, except for the wispy tracks of ground-feeding juncos beside the senescent bloom of gray rabbitbrush.

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Turkey hunters: Don't forget to pick your shot pattern

A lot of turkey hunters think that the whole key in being successful is to learn how to call superbly, so that's all they focus on. In my turkey seminars I teach that calling is about 20% of the puzzle. You have to also learn strategy, camo, decoys and many other details if you want to be successful. Calling is actually only a small part of ensuring that you have a successful turkey hunt. There are many champion callers that can call a whole lot better than me but they aren't good hunters.

So with the above said, let's discuss an often-forgotten piece of the puzzle — patterning your shotgun. On most of your shotgunning you can switch out the choke and use one shotgun for multiple hunts but if at all possible, for turkey hunting it is nice if you can designate one shotgun for turkeys.

Here's why: To shoot out to 40, 50 or even 60 yards, you're going to need a sight or a scope because using the beads on top of the ventilated rib just doesn't work. If you have to mount, unmount a sight or scope every spring



BASE CAMP

TOM CLAYCOMB

on your multipurpose shotgun, it will be a pain.

This year I got a Mossberg 930 and mounted a Vortex SPARC AR Red Dot scope on it. If you can't afford to designate one shotgun for turkeys, don't panic. But for sure use a good turkey choke like a Tru-Lock .650 or .660 choke so that you can get a tight pattern. Even my youngest daughter looked at a target I shot and said, "Daddy, you don't want that many BBs in him do you?" It put 132 BBs on the target.

After you get a good choke, test three or four different loads because they vary in how they perform. Turkeys are tough birds so you want to make sure you use the best shells. The bad deal is, the good turkey loads are expensive. They run from \$1 to \$5 per shell so you don't want to waste too many on the range, but still, if you go to all the time, trouble and expense of going hunting it's a small investment to do



Tom Claycomb/Contributed Photo

As these targets show, the shot pattern can vary substantially with different shells

so. From what I've tested, HEVI-Shot outperforms everyone else.

To make the choice even more complicated, manufacturers offer different sizes of shot and HEVI-Shot even offers a blend of 5, 6 and 7 shot in one load. The theory is, the 5s are heavier and even though lighter, the 7s

provide for a tighter pattern. You'll have to decide what size shot you prefer.

If you test a lot of different manufacturers then you ought to buy a Caldwell Lead Sled. If you don't, after shooting a few of the 3-inch or 3 1/2-inch shells, you'll be flinching. (OK, I hate to be a wimp but the 3 1/2-inch

shells kick big time). Also to reduce flinching, wear double ear protection. I wear foam ear plugs and ear muffs.

To pattern your shotgun, aim 5 to 7 inches below the turkey's head. That way the bulk of the pattern hits from the heart to the head. If you shoot at the head, half of the

BBs whiz harmlessly overhead. I like to use Birchwood Casey Shoot N-C targets.

They make it easy to count how many BBs are in the kill zone. To count how many BBs hit in the kill zone I lay a piece of paper over the target and count holes as I slowly slide it down. Shoot and then count how many BBs hit in the head/neck area. I'm sure there is a socially accepted number you want to obtain but I don't know what that is.

Do you have to buy store-bought targets? If you're a kid on a paper route budget, no! You can get a large piece of cardboard and draw a turkey on it. Color the head red so it's visible at 40 yards. After you've decided which shell to use, shoot at 20, 30, 40 and 50 yards. That way you'll know how effective you'll be at each range. If you have a really tight choke it's easy to miss if one is really close.

Some of the loads will have up to 2 1/4 ounces of shot, so they kick. So it doesn't scare off young hunters and women, have them shoot a 3-inch mag in a 20-gauge. Put a recoil pad on their gun.