



Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald
Twin Mountain seen between the trees near the Anthony Lakes Highway on Sunday, Jan. 23, 2022.

Into the lair of the snowshoe HARE

Winter hike turns up lots of snowshoe hare tracks, and three of the critters



JAYSON JACOBY
ON THE TRAIL

We drove to the mountains on a recent Sunday, seeking sunshine and snow that isn't crusted with ice that clatters underfoot with an unpleasant cacophony.

We found both.

We also found a few things that greatly desired not to be found and that are quite cunning at concealment — snowshoe hares.

Going up the mountains in search of fair weather reverses the normal sequence of things, of course.

Elevated ground is more likely in all seasons to be cloaked in cloud, even when the valleys below bask in the beneficent rays.

But occasionally the atmosphere gets mixed up.

Although in reality it's the lack of mixing that results in what meteorologists call an "inversion" — and for which the rest of us tend to reserve more piquant, and possibly profane, terms.

This temporary confounding of the common weather conditions — that is, the temperature drops the higher you climb — comes about most often during winter, and the explanation lies, in part, with the nature of cold air.

It's heavy — heavier, at any rate, than a parcel of warmer air.

And just as water will inundate low ground, so will chilly air, left to its own devices, pool in a valley (although we tend to think of air as a gas and thus notably different from water, in fact air, in the way it flows and is affected by topography and gravity, behaves much as a liquid does).

This is why it's better — or at least warmer — to pitch your tent on a hummock than in a hollow.

Most of the time the atmosphere is sufficiently roiled that air doesn't have a chance to settle in, like an unwanted houseguest who is blithely unaware of how obnoxious his presence is.

A persistent wind can keep air moving along in most cases.

But even when winds are gentle, air tends to move vertically so long as air near the ground is comparatively warm and thus buoyant.

(This same phenomenon, known generally as "instability," also can fuel thunderstorms. A parcel of air will continue to rise so long it's warmer than the surrounding air, and if it goes high enough it's likely to condense into clouds, since cooler air can hold less moisture in suspension, and potentially congeal into electrically charged thunderheads.)

The initial ingredients for an inversion include clear skies and light winds. In winter, this combination in our region's valleys usually causes temperatures to plunge. Clouds act as a sort of blanket, holding the heat that the ground absorbs from sunlight. When clouds disperse, that heat can more readily rise, leaving a relatively thin layer of chilly air near the ground.

The second key factor is somewhat warmer air moving in higher in the atmosphere. This warmer air acts as a lid, trapping the cold air in the valleys.

And an immensely effective lid it is, one that's essentially leakproof.

The captured cold air has no physical means by which to rise, since it will collide with a layer of air above that's warmer and, more to the point, less dense.

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Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald

Snowshoe hare tracks in the Elkhorn Mountains on Sunday, Jan. 23, 2022.

Getting started with snowshoeing



TOM CLAYCOMB
BASE CAMP

If you've never snowshoed, you ought to try it. In the old days, when I bought my first pair of snowshoes, all they had were the old wood-framed ones which had rawhide webbing. I still think that they're the coolest.

In the old days the trappers and Indians made them out of branches and used rawhide strips to make the webbing. Out on open prairies and grasslands they used longer, narrower shoes. In brush and mountains everyone uses wider, shorter ones nicknamed bear claws.

But let's back up to the beginning. Why would someone use snowshoes? Because in deep snow you'll sink up to your waist and get buried. It is impossible to walk. And even in shallower snow it is a major pain if it is just slightly crusted over. You take a step and right when you're put-



Tom Claycomb/Contributed Photo

A pair of ski poles are also nice to have when snowshoeing.

ting weight on that foot your break through the crust and slam down into the snow a foot or more. Snowshoes are the only way to go in snow other than if you're a cross country skier.

The bindings on snowshoes are different than used on downhill skiing. When downhill skiing, your foot is tied in firm to the ski. When snowshoeing, your toe is in constant contact with the shoe but with every step

your heel rises up. The bindings resemble a thick piece of rubber that your toe slips into. Of course, there are varying types of bindings but the original ones 40 years ago were all like this.

A few years ago ... I don't remember, maybe 20 or 30 years ago, you started seeing aluminum-framed snowshoes hit the market. They're lightweight and relatively cheap. I still like the old wood/rawhide snowshoes the

best but mine finally rotted out. It was cheaper to buy a pair of aluminum ones than to repair my old ones. So that's what Katy and I use now.

Where should you go?

You don't want to just randomly pick a mountain to hike up. You'll want to pick a trail or old logging road to hike on. Think back to where you elk hunted last fall. Where were some good logging roads for hiking? Or you can hike across a meadow. Or maybe even use them if you're going ice fishing and the snow is deep on the ice.

I've seen a couple of backcountry yurts advertised as fun to hike to and spend the night in. I've never done that. When Katy and I go snowshoeing we just go up in the mountains and hit a trail. It's a fun excuse to get up in the mountains and get a little exercise. We don't have a big agenda. We're just going hiking.

To have a carrot at the end of the hike I like to throw a coffee pot in my backpack. After a couple of hours of hiking we'll build a fire and heat up a pot of

hot water to make hot chocolate. You'll want to throw a jug of water in your pack. Sure, you can melt snow but remember, 10 inches of snow melts down to 1 inch of water. By the time it heats and sizzles you don't have much water left so you'll use a lot of snow. But yes, I use snow. I'll put water in the pot and supplement it with snow so I don't have to pack as much water.

So, with the above said, heat up a pot of water and pour everyone a cup of hot water. Pull out the packets of hot chocolate and everyone is ready for a treat. It's a big treat for everyone to warm up around the fire with a cup of hot chocolate.

A lot of the newer shoes are not quite wide enough so with some of them you'll sink down in the snow if it is too powdery, soft and deep. I haven't researched all of the makers so I can't recommend which is the best shoes to buy.

So in closing, don't set around the house and get fat and lazy. Grab a pair of snowshoes and hit the trails.