

## Snowshoeing: Breaking trail a joy of winter

BY LISA MONFORTON, THE CALGARY HERALD JANUARY 15, 2010

STORY

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Paul Sylvestre, of Nature in Focus, a snowshoe and hiking guide company out of Banff, breaks trail through mounds of snow in area near the Continental Divide

Photograph by: Photo courtesy, Nature in Focus

If you would have told me a decade ago that I'd be standing on a snow-mounded vista in the midst of the Rockies on a bitterly cold day near the Continental Divide sipping a hot mug of chai tea — wearing a big smile on my face — I would have said you must be thinking of the wrong person.

Winter in my previous life in Ontario didn't include embracing the long, cold season, but rather running from it —

from heated house to heated car to heated office and back again.

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But since moving to Alberta, the people I've met — like Paul Sylvestre — have proven to me that winter can be just as much fun as summer, only with more layers.

"There's no such thing as cold weather," says Sylvestre, "only bad clothing."

He's pretty much right about that because I'm actually breaking a sweat as we're breaking trail through knee-high snow with snowshoes strapped to our boots. It's a bright, sunny day, and  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$ . The only thing that's cold is the tip of my nose and a couple of toes. (Note to self: One more layer of socks next time.)

Sylvestre and wife Eva own and operate Nature in Focus, a hiking and snowshoe tour company based in Banff. They invited me out to play in the snow while wearing snowshoes, a winter activity I had yet to try.

Snowshoeing is gaining popularity for a number of reasons: the snowshoes are high-tech, lightweight and pretty much idiot-proof to strap on; it requires little or no skill (if you can walk, you can snowshoe, some say); it's reasonably inexpensive, requiring a one-time investment for the snowshoes. And depending where you decide to go, the terrain is often free.

Add to that the benefits from a heck of a workout with little risk of injury, fresh mountain air and the chance to explore terrain you might not otherwise ever get to set your feet upon during a summer hike.

The best part, adds Paul, who's also a photographer, is that once you park your car, there are no lines to stand in. "You've got the whole place to yourself."

If it's a snow-heavy year, this area can get more than two metres of snow. The beauty of snowshoes is that they prevent you from sinking too deep, allowing you to stay above the snow pack and make tracks at the same time.

On our outing near the Continental Divide, the Sylvestres did the heavy lifting, breaking the trail in the initial stages for the newbie. That's something they do on outings with groups large or small, and who come from as close as Calgary and as far as Great Britain and beyond.

Except for the crunch of snow underfoot, the world has become silent, as we wend our way around snow ghosts, those massive and magical shapes that trees take on after gobs of snow has fallen. As I look up to the tops of those towering firs and pines with their winter-white layer on, set against a brilliant blue sky, I think it's a sight as beautiful as any tropical beach I've visited.

Though we can't hear the wildlife in our midst, we know they've been here or are sleeping or hibernating in the warmth of drooping lower tree branches. We come upon some markings in the snow. A couple of creatures have broken their own trail, the snow-shoe hare and the lynx, which Sylvestre identifies without hesitation. He also tells me the big-footed and white-in-winter rabbit is the meal of choice for the elusive and nocturnal lynx, which has a directly proportional population to the hares for obvious reasons, as we notice the two different prints abruptly meet up and stop at a certain point.

Out here, Sylvestre reminds me, it's all about adaptation. Wildlife don't don layers of microfibre, tuques and mitts to make it through the winter; their bodies acclimate and they go about life, no matter the season.

I, too, have adapted from all those years ago, when I would have dreaded mounds of snow and frigid temperatures. I can't help but agree with Sylvestre when he says: "Every time I come out here, it brings out the child in me."

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## If You Go

\* Nature in Focus offers small and large group snowshoeing outings that go half day (up to four hours, \$70 per person) or full day (more than four hours, \$90).

\* Price includes snacks and tea and top-of -the-line TUBBS snowshoes.

\* Half- and full-day guided hikes are available in summer.

\* Prices do not include transportation, unless requested and for an extra cost.

\* Until Feb. 26, Nature in Focus is offering "flex-price Fridays." You choose the price, they take you snowshoeing, as long as there's a minimum of three people.

\* For details on guided snowshoeing and hiking or to reserve, go to [natureinfocus.ca](http://natureinfocus.ca) or e-mail the

Sylvestres at [info@natureinfocus.ca](mailto:info@natureinfocus.ca). You can also call 403-762-9239.

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