

GAGGA FOR GOOSEBUMPS

& F L U F F Y
L A K E S

Hey snow-haters —
embracing Okanagan
powder has its perks

BY DEBORAH GREAVES



SNOWSHOEING IS JUST A WINTER HIKE WITH WIDEBODY FOOTWEAR. ENJOY YOUR FAVOURITE TRAILS YEAR-ROUND

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rowing up on the Coast leaves Vancouver children out of the classic Canadian winter.

The snowy landscapes of our textbooks were alluring but unreal to kids who usually played in slush. I was one of the children wildly excited when a rare snowfall came in the morning while we were all in class. We were crushed when, by lunchtime, it melted into cold, miserable slop.

It was four decades before I discovered the world of powder snow and when I did it was full immersion. I moved to the Okanagan in 1996 — a winter that broke several snowfall records. It began to accumulate in November and was still coming at the end of February. Heaps of snow were everywhere. It was like nothing I'd ever seen — fluff, not slop. It was like clean, glittering dust. My dog thought she'd died and gone to heaven. Entranced, I thought maybe I had, too. That winter, my life took a distinct turn toward the north.

“The snow crystallized thoughts I hadn't known.”

It all fell into place, one coincidence after another. The snow crystallized thoughts I hadn't known. I looked at the joyful dog and it occurred to me to harness her exuberance by putting her in harness. My youngest daughter's school class bused to Silver Lake Forestry Camp, and I went along. When I put on snowshoes for the first time and walked around the frozen lake, I knew my soul had hungered for this.

The next winter, I saw the Northern Lights in an exquisite, lasting display in the sky right over our hill. I met a woman who let me ride one of her horses and one day we took a long, unforgettable journey through deep snow and beneath laden branches.

WHAT'S A CHIONOPHOBE, AND ARE YOU ONE?

“In North America, the trouble all began when early Europeans began setting up shop here, gearing up for winter as if it was a picnic in the park,” says author, naturalist and snow expert Jamie Bastedo in *Falling for Snow: A Naturalist's Journey into the World of Winter*.

Later, after they picked up “survival tips from aboriginals who were as well adapted to New World winters as the snowshoe hare or the caribou,” the newcomers eventually learned how to dress, move around and build for winter.

It didn't matter if they had to hole up for a week. Wheeled vehicles were left under cover, and people moved freely around using snowshoes, skis and sleighs.

Now, however, city-living humans depend on machines and schedules. Several generations of urban living, says Bastedo, have created a nation filled with chionophobes — creatures that hate snow.

Chionophobes may rejoice: according to the film *An Inconvenient Truth*, the planet is heating up. Snow, apparently, could be on its way out. ■

The Okanagan continued to work magic on me. I snowshoed with friends at night. We were led through the indigo forest on top of a mountain and made to walk for a few minutes alone under the stars. In the middle of the trek, we stopped and sat around a huge fire, removing the snowshoes and sharing melted chocolate.

The spell has yet to be broken. Since that first heavily snowed winter, I wait each year for white



DASHING THROUGH THE SNOW...A SLEIGH RIDE WILL JINGLE YOUR BELLS

to appear on the ridges of the mountains we see from our living room window. I've changed my career path and my habits. I've learned about forest and grassland miracles. I mourn the loss of so much of this region's precious natural heritage just as I've come to partially understand it — its marshes, its special creatures, the native plants and grasses.

On the Coast, I'd spent time admiring the mountains from a distance, but in the Okanagan Valley I've come to experience them.

We all know now about the warming of the planet. It's almost unbearable to imagine our lovely Valley and other parts of this world bereft of the magic, challenge, sustenance and heart-breaking beauty of snow. With active appreciation, I express my reverence for it and encourage you to get out and enjoy the fluffy stuff while it still falls here.

Chionophile fun

While the white stuff's still around, you can savour winter by being a chionophile — a creature that thrives in snow. If you left off somewhere around age five, here are some great ways to start appreciating it again:

Sleigh rides. The private outdoor adventure businesses that offer these classic activities are getting fewer, so grab your cuddly clothes and find out how much fun a sleigh ride is. Try Caravan Farm Theatre in Armstrong, a much-loved combination of theatre and snowy landscape (www.caravanfarmtheatre.com). Big White Resort and Silver Star also offer them.

Tobogganing. It's free, and you can do it almost anywhere there's a slope and no moving vehicles. Crown land offers many pleasures at no cost during winter — you can make a little campfire in the snow and let your kids slide up and down away from urban hazards. If you see a sign indicating a licensed woodlot, it means someone's looking after that land. Try to contact the licensees to let them know you'd like to come around.

Snowshoe treks. This is one of the ultimate traditional Canadian activities. Professional tours include snowshoes,



SLEDDING'S GONE TO THE DOGS. HITCH A RIDE

WITH PROPER HARNESS, A LITTLE STUDY AND LOTS OF PATIENCE, YOUR PAL CAN MORPH INTO A HANDY HELPER-POOCH

chocolate fondue under the stars, animal tracking and great daytime views. Anyone who can walk can adjust to snowshoes. After her first trek, Kelowna downhill skier Jill Watson said simply, "I'm hooked." For a snowshoe adventure without getting lost, there are professional guides. Join a hiking club. Buy a season's pass or pay a drop-in fee at any number of cross country ski clubs in the Valley (www.canadatrails.ca/xc_ski/xcc1bc.html) and enjoy guided ski trips and snowshoe treks with host members. If you have a familiar hiking spot you want to enjoy in winter, just rent a pair of snowshoes, grab a friend and get out there. "It's a double bonus," says seasoned snowshoe trekker Elaine Ophus. "I like to walk for exercise, and snowshoeing lets me expand my opportunities right through the winter."

Horseback riding. Horses are slowed but not daunted by deep snow, and a ride through the forest with friends can be deeply satisfying. If you get a chance to go with a well-schooled horse, don't miss it. Stables such as Mandy and Me (www.mandyandme.com) on Kelowna's Westside offer rides in the right conditions.

Dogsled rides. "It was fantastic," say those who've done it, "more work than I'd thought, but a great trip." Competitive musher Mimi Kurz of Princeton says she has a roster of friends waiting for the chance each season, but she isn't always sure she will find the right trail with the right amount of snow. You can take a commercial dogsled ride at Big White, where there's still plenty.

MUSHERS DON'T YELL MUSH

They're called dog mushers, but the real go-command to the dogs is "Hike!"

The popular sport of dogsledding isn't changing as much as the dogs themselves. Many sled dogs are now blends of husky with pointer or even greyhound. True northern dogs are slower and get too hot if they leave the far north. ■



GET YOUR DOG IN HARNESS

It's easier than you might think if your dog likes snow and wants to please. It takes just minutes to get Rover used to the harness — and a bit longer to get the dog organized to pull in a straight line. A proper harness is important so the dog takes weight across its chest and not its neck. Dogs need patience from you. Start out with a sled that doesn't bounce around and bump or scare your pooch. Very gradually increase the loads — even if it's just snow — and give plenty of praise. Keep a separate leash on. Attach a line between the harness and sled. Call "hike!" Lead the dog along if it needs encouragement, or let it pull ahead of you towards someone the dog likes. When you, the dog and the cargo have arrived at point B, celebrate a job well done. After a few sessions, the dog will be proud and happy to work.

A harnessed dog with a line attached can come in very handy. Over a few winters, one Westbank dog pulled firewood into the forest for a winter campfire, provided rides for small children, helped her human up more than a few hills and got groceries on a sled up the driveway when the car couldn't make it. Googling "how to teach your dog to pull a sled" will yield more great advice.

For an authentic sled dog harness that will fit your pooch, call Dale Senkiw in Kelowna at 765.0721. ■

SMALL PHOTO BY ALICE HARGREAVES

TWO-LEGGED MEMBERS ARE THE MINORITY IN CLUB CHIONOPHILE

According to Okanagan wildlife biologists, you'll have plenty of company in the chionophile club — even when you can't see it. No matter how peaceful and quiet the meadows and forests may seem, life in the snow is busy.

"That's what I like about snowshoeing," says Denis Davis, chair of the Regional District of the Central Okanagan's environmental advisory commission. "It's good exercise and I enjoy seeing the animal tracks in winter to see what wildlife is around."

Under and on the Okanagan winter snow, voles, mice, weasels, minks, badgers, lynx, coyotes, cougars, deer and moose make a living as you stamp around overhead or close by. Above, among other birds, are great grey and great horned owls. Along almost every trail, you'll find tail, paw, hoof and wing prints etched into the snow. Not only do many creatures stay awake in or under the snow all winter long, but many of them can't survive without it. The Valley's snow, often like diamond dust, is as precious as life.

Westside biologist Les Gyug says as snow levels rise and fall, animals are drawn closer or have to search harder for twigs, mosses or grass beneath or above the snow. Those beneath are sheltered from the cold as well as the eyes, teeth and claws of their enemies. It's almost like a vertical white tide — or a snowy cupboard door. Or a fickle, weather-operated elevator. What kind of scramble will it be if the snow fails to materialize in the future? ■



CHIONOPHILE CRITTERS LOVE THE WHITE STUFF, ADAPT TO IT, EVEN DEPEND ON IT

Skijoring. Like dogsled racing, it's also an enjoyable spectator sport. If you have just one sturdy, enthusiastic dog and lots of patience, there's plenty your own pet can do in harness. Skijoring began long ago with harnessing up the family workhorse and zooming along behind her on cross-country skis. Then, skijoring nuts conscripted pairs or trios of dogs. People have skijored with pairs of German shepherds, border collies and mutts as well as huskies. They're still at it because it's ridiculously fun. When the snow runs out they use carts. Google it — you'll be amazed.

With altitude comes the blue

It's amazing how few people, racing around the Valley on dark or overcast days, don't drive up the hillsides into the sparkling white world on the high rim of the Okanagan. "One of the other reasons I enjoy snowshoeing," Kelowna's Denis Davis says, "is that it often gets you up high enough to be out from under the cloud cover where you can see blue sky." Snowlines are changing, and the weather warms every year. The snow is often up there, though, on the dullest lower valley days — last year into April. Get to know how lovely it is on Okanagan mountains while the snow is there. It's waiting, but it may not wait forever. **OL**

THE WARM FUZZIES

If you've forgotten what to wear in the snow, just remember to mimic the animals with either wool (no cotton) or synthetics: a soft underlayer, a fuzzy medium layer such as fleece, and a wind and snow-resistant outer shell. Outdoor stores will advise you. Layers come on and off as you heat up or chill down. Hats, gloves and comfortable footwear are vital. Take a pack to carry whatever you're not wearing, a bit of duct tape and a pocket-size first aid kit, as well as water and a snack or two. ■