

A Really Big Shoe

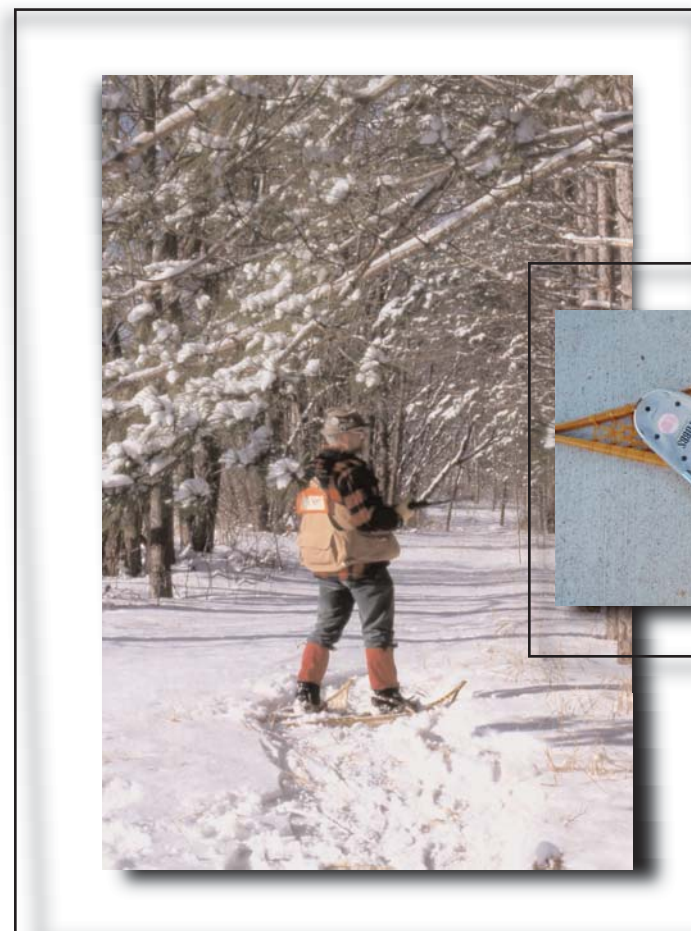
Snowshoes help hunters' performance

By Dick Ellis

The snowshoes had been left back in the bed of the parked truck along with the scattergun Friday afternoon as two hunters and three Labradors pushed the sloping grassland of Rock County for wild pheasant. Not knowing what snow conditions we would find in south-central Wisconsin, I had taken the shoes but discarded the thought when just four or five inches of white welcomed us. I followed the initial push of the day armed only with Rocky Boot-clad feet, a camera and the hope that explosions of white would soon announce the escape of roosters ahead of a good lab.

Gunner though, Bob Johnson's beautiful "yellow" and most valuable player in any pheasant field, could have used some help in the snow. Gunner is 100 pounds of pure enthusiasm and field savvy, but at 12 years of age, that's a heavy load to carry when conditions aren't right. What was good for man Friday was not good for dog. Gunner struggled on, his will to hunt holding on against the crusty layer of ice that continuously broke under his weight, and too quickly stole his endurance.

Unlike our canine partners, man is more fortunate when it comes to playing to certain win-



Depending on snow conditions, a hunter can make life much easier by getting to hard to reach places on the right pair of snowshoes. (Jerry Kiesow)

ter conditions. I had just gained a lesson the week before in snowshoe hunting from fellow Wisconsin outdoor writer Jerry Kiesow. What he knows can help

you now, even if you end up going back to the store for a late Christmas present for someone in the family who hunts with you, or almost as good...for yourself.

According to Jerry Kiesow of Grafton, although thought of as "bulky things", a lot of work and difficult to use, snowshoes can actually save a day of hunt-

Different makes of snowshoes including ash with rawhide, aluminum with hypalon or Nyltex decking, and polyethylene plastic can be chosen with the help of sales people to fit the right budget and conditions. (Jerry Kiesow)

ing or hiking, because they make life easier...not harder.

Kiesow tells one story of pheasant hunters, he included that used snowshoes to navigate the deep white stuff and put a limit of roosters in the bag because of it. He also tells the story of the planned deer hunt to a far-back swamp that comes apart largely



12-year old Gunner had trouble with snow Friday, breaking through hard crust to deeper, softer snow. The non-stop strain ended Gunner's Rock County hunt early. (Dick Ellis)

due to an all-night snow. The hunter follows through with the plan, but arrives on-stand sweating and stinking. When he does drop the buck, the one mile pull out is undertaken by the lone hunter, with snow to the knees.

“(That deer hunt) would have been an easier and safer day if you’d have had a pair of snowshoes,” Kiesow said. adding that his own bird hunt would never have transpired without the shoes. “Without them we wouldn’t even have been hunting. Our day was spent skimming along on top of old snow covered by a new dusting. The dogs meanwhile, were struggling.”

“Several hours later we returned to the truck with three happy, albeit, dog-tired Golden Retrievers and six birds. Without those webs we wouldn’t have gotten 100 yards from the truck.”

Kiesow offered some expert advice on snowshoe selection. Because outdoor activities are “pursued” and not played, he refers to snowshoes and many similar pieces of outdoor equipment or accessories as tools, and not toys.

Snowshoes come in a variety of shapes, sizes and materials, Kiesow said, from traditional ash and rawhide, to aluminum with Hypalon or Nytex decking, to Polyethylene plastic. Choosing the best doesn’t have one simple answer, like almost any tool.

“I have three pairs of webs,” he said. My Alaskans and Ojibwas are wood framed, and I also have one pair of aluminum frames. I did not buy them all at the same time. Actually, I made the Ojibs, which are my favorites.”

If you buy wood frames, Kiesow said, know that there will be times of the year when the snow has enough crust to support your weight on shoes but when that type can be dangerous.

Wood bases can slip precari-

ously on hard snow. Crusted snow needs aluminum decked webs with crampons. Crampons are serrated pieces of metal below the balls of your feet that grip into the crust when you walk. The wood frame, he said, is best when the snow is soft and deep.

According to Kiesow, expect to pay between

\$80.00 and \$200.00. “Any good dealer can fit your needs and pocketbook,” he said. “Remember, any kind of outing when the snow is over your boot tops, be it hunting or just going for a hike in the woods, it’s easier and safer on snowshoes. If you haven’t added snowshoes to your tool chest, give it some serious consideration. If you do, then you too can get out and walk on water.”

Our hunt Friday ended early. The dogs were exhausted after just 90 minutes in the field instead of a more routine three or four hours. We were fine, but one certainty looms on the horizon. More snow in Wisconsin. And if you’re not properly prepared, from the feet up, you will be the one heading home early.

Dog-tired. *W*

Jerry Kiesow has written a book, “Tales of the Peshtigo Putzer” which includes fishing and hunting and many other yarns on a variety of outdoor activities, including snowshoeing. To order, go to www.publishamerica.com. For an autographed copy, send \$24.00 to Jerry Kiesow, PO Box 203, Grafton, WI 53204. The cost covers book, tax, packaging and shipping.



If you can't reach the birds, or deer, or rabbits, you don't even have the opportunity to score. The right snowshoes will get you there. (Jerry Kiesow)