Snowshoes Serve Up Forest Solitude...and Powder

The path we're following is well-tracked, but on either side of us and extending deep into the forest there's virgin powder—and lots of it. After all the storms, it's feet deep, burying tree branches and obscuring shrubs.

The surface layer of the powder has a microscopic crust to it after a week's exposure to sun and warmer temperatures. My ski poles pop through that crust effortlessly, releasing entombed fluffy pow-pow like air escapes from a balloon. Same with those ahead of me—Fred and Linda Goldsmith from Goldsmith's Boardhouse, and Linda's sister Dixie Madden.

We're not skiing this beautiful powder—the days of untracked at the resorts ended hours after the most recent dump (and I played a big role in flattening out the powder!). Rather, we're getting our fix of freshies on snowshoes, arguably the fastest-growing way to play in the forest during winter. And the only way to find untracked snow days, even weeks, after snowstorms.

It's also about the cheapest way to get out and play during winter. There's no lift ticket to buy, and Atlas snowshoes cost just $15 to rent for the day at Goldsmith's Boardhouse. Other than that, you probably have the rest of the equipment already, like Sorels or good hiking boots for footwear, ski poles, jeans or snow pants, and pack with water bottle, but if you're missing something, Goldsmith's rents or sells it.

Besides being cheap, snowshoes take folks into Big Bear backcountry that can't be viewed by car or even from a resort chairlift. Summer hiking trails make for great snowshoe destinations, and with this season's snow the possibilities are endless. Bring a picnic—maybe a little wine, sandwiches, whatever fits in your pack—and see a side of Big Bear that you didn't know existed.

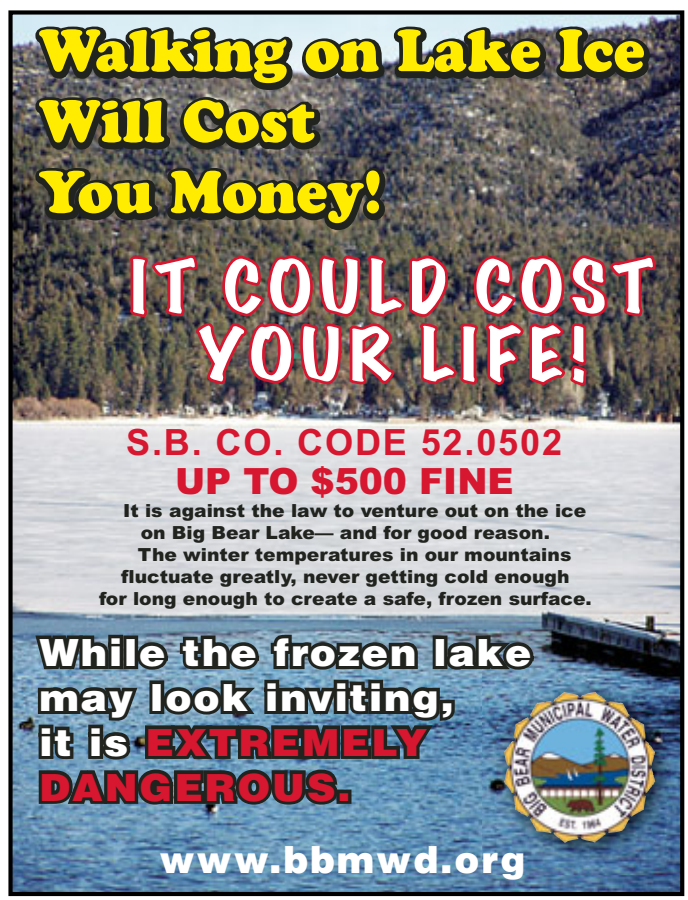
Hatchery Road, for instance, is one of the places Goldsmith's Boardhouse directs snowshoers. It is a sun-drenched area in the East Valley that rarely has enough snow to explore... except for this year! North shore locations, usually too exposed to sustain snowshoeing, were also good in 2010.

Naturally, Goldsmith's Boardhouse knows where to send first-timers who never dreamt they would actually get off the beaten path. "The biggest worry folks have is that they'll get lost," Linda Goldsmith says. "We've never had a customer we've sent out get lost."

We're at the opposite end of the Valley from Hatchery, near the Millcreek area as we shoe along Cabin 89 trail, hugely popular with mountain bikers, after parking on a wide spot on 2N10. Others have been here, evidenced by the well-packed path we're on, but we don't see a soul.

"Last time out here I saw a small bobcat," Fred Goldsmith says. Coyotes, birds including hawks and the occasional deer are also often viewed, but on this day we're only treated to endless expanses of powder-filled bowls, and distant views of frozen Big Bear Lake. At one point we cross a frozen drainage that no doubt will be soon flowing briskly with spring runoff.

Much of our terrain is fairly flat and level, so we just have to step much like walking to get through the white. Occasionally though we have to veer under or around branches still drooping with snow that impede our way. I find the front cleat on the bottom of each shoe helps to dig in when the snow is hard and we have to climb. Sometimes, it's so deep my ski pole slides all the way in, up to my hand in white.

After trekking a mile or so, our group stops for lunch. Here, a picnic spot is anywhere we care to sit, so Dixie pulls out salami, cheeses, crackers and olives out of a gourmet picnic box. We munch and take in our

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