

NATIONAL

# On Trail



**MAKE  
TRACKS!**

**Grab your snowshoes and hit the trail this winter**

*By Joan Burton*

**Snowshoer on Huntoon Point  
Photo by John D'Onofrio**

# Northwest Explorer »

*Snowshoeing is just like winter hiking*—with the addition of tennis racket-like gear attached to the soles of your boots. And unlike skiing or other winter activities, you don't need stylish clothing or expensive accessories. You don't need advanced techniques to stop or turn. You don't need to buy lift tickets. And best of all, it can be as easy or strenuous as you like.

But why snowshoe? Most importantly, it's to get out in beautiful surroundings and enjoy a leisurely—or challenging—stroll through silent winter scenery. Learning is fairly easy, it can be an excellent source of aerobic fun, and it can get you outdoors during a season when you crave outdoor activity. Plus, snowshoeing can offer access to destinations you may have seen in summer, but which take on a whole new face blanketed in snow.

If you're just beginning, plan to rent your first pair of snowshoes. The pros at REI and other winter sport shops can help you determine the best length of snowshoe for your height, weight and snow conditions. There are two distinct types of snowshoes, defined by their binding styles. Free-pivot bindings are ideal for easy terrain, winter camping and carrying loads, because snow doesn't build up on the deck of the snowshoe. Pre-sprung bindings hold the snowshoe closer to your foot so you have more control, and are better for stepping over obstacles such as trees and branches or jumping creeks.

In addition to your snowshoes and winter apparel, bring along trekking or ski poles for balance. Your clothing can be the same breathable, layered parka and pants combination you use for hiking or skiing. Remember that you will be exercising



Megan MacKenzie

## Hurricane Ridge

**Mileage:** 3–6 miles round trip

**Elevation Gain:** Up to 800 feet

**Map:** Green Trails 135: Hurricane Ridge

**Permit:** National Park Pass

**Directions:** From Port Angeles, drive 17 miles up Hurricane Ridge Road to the end, and park at the visitor center. Sign in with the ranger on duty.



Paul Raymaker

## Lake Keechelus

**Mileage:** 4 miles out and back

**Elevation Gain:** 200 feet

**Map:** Green Trails 207: Snoqualmie Pass

**Permit:** Sno-Park Pass with Groomed Area Tag

**Directions:** From Seattle, drive east on Interstate 90 to exit 54 for Hyak; turn left on Forest Road 2219 for 1.5 miles to Hyak Sno-Park.



John Porter

## Lake Kelcema

**Mileage:** 10 miles out and back

**Elevation Gain:** 1,600 feet

**Map:** Green Trails 110: Silverton

**Permit:** None

**Directions:** From Granite Falls, drive east on the Mountain Loop Highway; 12 miles past Verlot, park at the end of the plowed road.



Janelle Walker

## Mazama Ridge

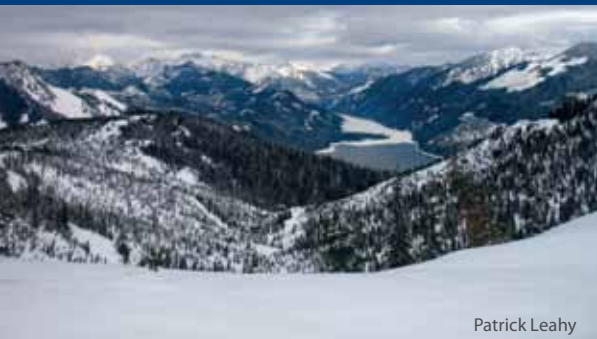
**Mileage:** 6 miles round trip

**Elevation Gain:** 900 feet

**Map:** Green Trails 270S: Paradise

**Permit:** National Park Pass

**Directions:** From Tacoma, drive east on State Route 7, turning left on State Route 706 at Elbe; continue east, through the Nisqually Park Entrance, to Paradise Lodge.



Patrick Leahy

## Amabilis Mountain

**Mileage:** 8 miles up and back

**Elevation Gain:** 1,600 feet

**Map:** Green Trails 207: Snoqualmie Pass

**Permit:** Sno-Park Pass with Groomed Area Tag

**Directions:** From Seattle, drive east on Interstate 90 to exit 63 for Cabin Creek; turn right to the Cabin Creek Sno-Park.



Jim Kuresman

## Lake Valhalla

**Mileage:** 7.5 miles round trip

**Elevation Gain:** 1,700 feet

**Map:** Green Trails 144: Benchmark Mountain

**Permit:** None

**Directions:** From Seattle, drive U.S. Highway 2 to the Mill Creek exit. U-turn back onto westbound US 2 for 1.5 miles; park in pullout before Smith Brook Road.

strenuously, so you may not need too many warm layers. Waterproof boots are essential to avoid cold, wet feet (the new Keen Revel got high marks with the *Washington Trails* gear team as an insulated winter hiking boot). Before leaving home be sure your boots fit the bindings snugly and securely. There's nothing more annoying than trying to walk in snowshoes that won't stay on. And remember, you're still hiking, so carry the Ten Essentials, including extra water, snacks and socks.

**TIP: Wearing gaiters helps prevent snow from filling up your boots**

Now just choose a destination. Many of Washington's Sno-Parks offer groomed or marked snowshoe trails, and similar to ski resorts, they are divided into easy (green), intermediate (blue) and difficult (black) categories. Regular hiking trails also offer a variety of snowshoeing options, but be sure to check road conditions and trailhead access before heading out.

You more experienced snowshoers may want to avoid the crowds at the Sno-Parks and more popular locations in order to find more solitude in the backcountry. Always make sure to carry a map and compass (or GPS), and know how to use them. In addition to your Ten Essentials, you may also want to carry a portable backpacking stove, for melting snow for water or making a hot meal. Educate yourself in avalanche awareness techniques (see sidebar at right) and always pay attention to the weather around you. Backpacking and snow camping can be a fantastic winter escape, but be prepared to deal with the extremes.

Following is a handful of snowshoe trails—from beginner to expert—to help you get out there this winter and enjoy some spectacular winter mountain scenery. Give one of them—or all of them!—a shot and you just may find that hiking is not a summer-only activity.



## Getting Started

Whether you're an expert or a first-timer, **Hurricane Ridge** in Olympic National Park is one of the most spectacular places to snowshoe in Washington state—and on clear days you'll be treated to bird's-eye views of Mount Olympus in all her winter splendor. Beginners can wander the lower-level ridgelines and meadows, while more advanced—or ambitious—snowshoers can go for Hurricane Hill. From the visitor center, start westward on fairly level grade, following the ridgeline. You'll pass through winter-coated forest and have nice views of the valleys below. At 1.5 miles the "road" comes to an end in a broad meadow. This makes a good turnaround point for beginners. To tackle Hurricane Hill, proceed right up the ridgeline, past two avalanche chutes, to the top. From the summit, take in 360-degree views of the Olympic Range, Puget Sound, Mount Baker, Glacier Peak, and the Strait of Juan de Fuca.

For a nice location in the Central Cascades, try the Iron Horse-John Wayne Trail along the south shore of **Lake Keechelus**. This is a treat for new snowshoers, especially if it has been recently groomed. Because of its easy accessibility, it can often get crowded on nicer days. The trail is the former route of the Milwaukee Railroad, so it's generally level and smooth. Views along the way are forest on the uphill side and open on the lakeshore side, with a great outlook over the frozen lake and up to Rampart and Keechelus Ridges. At 2 miles you'll come to the base of a large avalanche chute. This makes a good turnaround point.



## Step It Up a Notch

For a more strenuous trail head out to Deer Creek and the **Lake Kelcema** trail. From the parking area, the route proceeds up the Deer Creek Road—watch out for tubers and sledgers on the lower portion.

Your path steadily gains in elevation, while views are mostly forested. A few “windows” through the trees offer peeks of Bald Mountain along the way. Passing 2.5 miles, views improve as you continue climbing, the surrounding forest transitioning from second growth to old growth. Cast a glance behind you for a panorama of Big Four Mountain and Sperry, Vesper and Little Chief Peaks. Leave the road at the 4.5 miles and snowshoe up the creek for the last half a mile; look for trail markers. During heavier winters there can be many downed trees along this part of the trail. Arriving at the frozen lakeshore, Bald Mountain looms above, with Devils Peak visible to the east.

**Mazama Ridge** at Mount Rainier's Paradise area offers an especially scenic intermediate-level snowshoe route, in the midst of snow-covered alpine meadows. From the parking area near the lodge, climb above the guide huts and head east to the Mazama Ridge Trail, crossing Edith Creek on a footbridge above Myrtle Falls. Continue eastward up out of Paradise Valley to the beginning of the route. Climb steeply another half a mile to reach the crest of the ridge with its snow- and wind-sculpted trees at 5,700 feet. From the ridge crest admire views in every direction—south to the peaks of the Tatoosh Range and north to mammoth Mount Rainier, all draped in a winter blanket. Add more to your outing by following the ridgeline south, first along the east side to views of Reflection and Louise Lakes below, then back up the west side through more winter meadows, and back to where you started.

**TIP: On shared trails, avoid walking in cross-country ski tracks**



## Experts Only

Ready for a challenge? Try **Amabilis Mountain**, lying inconspicuously above the groomed trails of Cabin Creek. From the Sno-Park, start up fairly level Forest Road 4826, being sure to avoid ski tracks. After just a quarter of a mile, turn onto Forest Road 4822 and begin your ascent—the snow-covered road gains 2,100 feet in 4 miles! The trail is often groomed only to the 2-mile overlook, where you will have climbed about half the vertical elevation gain to the top. Views from this point are fair and include the weather tower at Stampede Pass and the vertical clearcut ski run for The Mountaineers' Meany Lodge. Here the road divides, and either choice will take you to the top: the right-hand option being longer, the left-hand option being more challenging. Amabilis has a broad rolling summit with spectacular views in all directions. Look for Lake Keechelus and the Yakima River Valley to the southwest. Note that one false summit often has a prominent snow cornice.

A popular summertime destination for many hikers and backpackers, **Lake Valhalla** also makes a rewarding advanced snowshoe route. Begin by heading up Forest Road 6700, first through a patchwork of second-growth forest and clearcut meadows, then heading up the ridge until you reach a hairpin turn in the road at 4,000 feet. Veer westward, traversing the hillside toward the head of Smith Brook Valley, crossing the Pacific Crest Trail, and into the Nason Creek valley, where you'll look down at beautiful Lake Valhalla below. Continue around the lake basin at 4,800 feet, and drop to the shore. Across the ruffled lake water sweep breezes from Stevens Pass, while above you are Jove Peak, Lichtenberg Mountain, Valhalla Mountain, Nason Ridge and Skyline Ridge.

Want more? Turn to this month's Take a Hike section on page 43 for four more snowshoe routes, including Mount St. Helens, Mount Rainier, Mount Baker, and Snoqualmie Pass. And for even more winter destinations—snowy and not—check out the Trip Finder at [wta.org](http://wta.org). ♦

*Joan Burton is a long-time hiker, cross-country skier, snowshoer, and the author of Best Hikes with Kids: Western Washington and the Cascades.*

## Avalanche Awareness

Snow and winter weather conditions change constantly, affecting the potential for avalanches in backcountry areas. Be flexible about your destination, and plan for an alternative destination if you see avalanche warnings or sudden weather changes.

Factors that influence avalanche activity

- \* Heavy snow in recent days
- \* Rain in snowy areas
- \* Sudden warming

In general, avalanche danger is particularly high during warming trends or after a heavy new snowfall. Steep, north-facing hillsides are prone to avalanche activity in early winter, when sunlight cannot reach the slopes and help consolidate snowpacks. South-facing slopes are generally more dangerous during spring due to excess meltwater acting as a lubricant underneath snowpacks. Wind across ridgelines causes snow to build up and create dangerous cornices on the leeward sides. Avoid going onto or under a ridge with a potential cornice.

The Northwest Weather and Avalanche Center evaluates hazard levels with these warning categories:

- **Low:** Mostly stable snow. Generally safe.
- **Moderate:** Areas of unstable snow possible. Use caution on slopes.
- **Considerable:** Unstable snow and avalanches likely. Exercise extreme caution.
- **High:** Snowpack very unstable and avalanches probable. Travel not advised.
- **Extreme:** Highly unstable snowpack on all aspects. Damaging or life-threatening conditions exist—go elsewhere.

Always check snow and weather conditions before you go with the Northwest Avalanche Center at [www.nwac.us](http://www.nwac.us), or call the recorded message at (206) 526-6677.

Finally, know your own ability, and use common sense when attempting any winter trail. If conditions appear questionable, turn back or consider an alternate location.