

CONNECTICUT

# Woodlands

WINTER 2024

## Steps in the Snow

A MAGAZINE OF THE CONNECTICUT FOREST & PARK ASSOCIATION



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### CONTRIBUTOR'S *Spotlight*

**Jennifer Sprague** loves hiking in all seasons but finds winter to be a magical time for a walk in the

woods, especially if she's on snowshoes. In her ode to the growing sport (see page 12), she writes that snowshoeing can range from a meditative solo experience to a grand adventure with friends. When she's not working or recreating outside, you can find Jen helping to conserve open space as a board member of the Meriden Land Trust. We caught up with Jen to learn more about her passion for snowshoeing and conservation.

**You grew up loving winter, but didn't try snowshoeing until you were in your 30s. What inspired you to first try it?** One of the great things about snowshoeing is you can just go out for an hour if you want to. Winter activities like skiing are expensive and you typically devote a whole day to it. But with snowshoeing, you can go at your pace

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**On the cover:** The Highlawn Forest Trails, located behind CFPA's Rockfall headquarters, are the perfect place for snowshoeing. Photo by Jennifer Sprague.

for as long as you want. When I first started snowshoeing, I was working to lose weight and didn't want to lose momentum just because it was cold outside. I could be active and embrace winter at the same time—a win-win!

**For winter enthusiasts like yourself, reduced snowfall means having to venture further and further north to recreate. Do you envision a point when you might have to give up the sport?** Last year's winter broke my heart a little bit, I admit. But giving up winter recreation is not something I want to envision. For now, I choose to take pleasure in what winter we have and try to do my small part to protect our future winters.

**What role do you see local land trusts playing in addressing the climate crisis?** Land trusts are doing amazing work, some going as far as tackling urban farming or sustainable housing. In Meriden, we're focused on conservation of natural landscapes and green spaces. Open

spaces are an important factor in protecting groundwater and air quality, providing essential habits, and improving biodiversity. Many land trusts also offer educational programs and recreation information.

**Besides snowshoeing, how else do you like to spend the winter months?** I like to hike, downhill ski, and walk my dog daily even if the weather is bad. I hope to try winter camping someday, too! When I am not outside, I like to watch cheesy Christmas movies, snuggled on the couch with my yellow lab, Clark.

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## Editor's Note

On a recent trip to Louisiana, our family had the opportunity to explore a cypress swamp where we saw scores of herons, egrets, and other birds, and some two dozen alligators casually resting on half-submerged logs. Throughout the tour, our guide, a local fisherman named Jimmy, talked about the swamp's unprecedented low water level, which was down more than three feet. He pointed out hidden "trails"—water pathways—that were "beautiful" but too shallow to navigate at that time. "I wish I could take you in there, but it's too low," he lamented as we floated past on a carpet of duckweed.


I was struck by Jimmy's concern about the drought. He never used the words "climate change," but everyone knew exactly what he was talking about.

There was a time not too long ago when scientists were struggling to convince folks that climate change is a real threat to lives and livelihoods. But today the symptoms of a hotter planet are being felt in the everyday lives of people from Connecticut to California. The question now is how aggressive we can be in holding carbon emissions in check even as we adapt to a warmer world.

In times of doubt, I draw hope from the actions of ordinary citizens who are working to chart a more sustainable future: the passionate volunteers who maintain our vast Blue-Blazed Hiking Trail System; the teachers who are educating folks about the beauty and magic of the natural world; the advocates who are having courageous conversations and dismantling barriers so that everyone feels like they belong in the great outdoors. I am hopeful because of what *you* are doing to create a more positive world, and grateful for your ongoing support of CFPA.

I wish you and yours a peaceful holiday season, and a healthy and happy 2024.

I'll see you outside,



Timothy Brown  
Editor

## The Connecticut Forest & Park Association, Inc.

The Connecticut Forest & Park Association (CFPA) is a 501c3 nonprofit organization that protects forests, parks and the Blue-Blazed Hiking Trails for future generations by connecting people to the land. Since 1895, CFPA has enhanced and defended Connecticut's rich natural heritage through advocacy, conservation, recreation, and education, including maintaining the 825-mile Blue-Blazed Hiking Trail System. CFPA depends on the generous support of members to fulfill its mission. For more information and to donate, go to [ctwoodlands.org](http://ctwoodlands.org)

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## From the President

By Rich Croce

**A**S WE MOVE TOWARD THE END OF 2023 AND THROUGH THE HOLIDAYS, we at CFPA have much to be thankful for. As a Board of Directors, we are thankful for our incredible staff, donors, and volunteers who run, fund, and support our programs. As Board President, I am particularly thankful for the work this past year of Clare Cain who has served as our Interim Executive Director following Eric Hammerling's departure in June. Clare has done a tremendous job in this role, and every person associated with CFPA owes her a "Thank you" for her tireless work!

At CFPA, we also have much to look forward to. On January 15, Andy Bicking will take over as Executive Director. Andy comes to CFPA from Scenic Hudson, a conservation organization located in New York's Hudson Valley where he currently serves as Director of Government Relations & Public Policy. Previously, Andy served in several leadership positions at Scenic Hudson where he has been employed since 2000 and where he was a volunteer for the two years prior. Andy's commitment to conservation, advocacy, environmental education, and trails is the perfect match for CFPA and we are thrilled to have him as our new Executive Director. Welcome, Andy!

*Rich Croce is an attorney with an office in Middletown. He lives in Groton Long Point with his wife, Peggy, their son, Gordie, and their Black Lab, Charlie, who never fails to amuse.*



## Zoar and Lillinonah Trails

By Jeff Frantz

**W**e had only hiked two-and-a-half miles along the Zoar Trail when we decided to stop for a short break. It was hard to breathe in the hot and humid July air, and we had been battling voracious mosquitoes the entire time. My wife, Lynn, looked at me and asked, “Are we sure we really want to get into this?” This was our first time on the Zoar Trail; we wanted to get a feel for what we might be taking on as CFPA trail managers. I was not surprised by Lynn’s reaction and had been silently thinking the same thing. The entire Zoar Trail system, including side trails, is about 10 miles. At this point, we had gone less than halfway and were just hiking—never mind working—on the trail.

It’s not like we were inexperienced in the outdoors. We were both lifetime hikers and had explored the Blue-Blazed Hiking Trails for decades. I was getting close to retirement and looking for ways to spend my time. I had started home brewing wine in our basement and was catching up on projects around the house, but I felt like I needed more outlets since Lynn was still working. Searching online, I discovered that the Blue-Blazed Trails are maintained by volunteers. I joined CFPA, and soon received an email asking if I would build some notice boards (the small map boards located on trails) as I had listed carpentry as one of my skills. I was happy to do so and a couple of weeks later, I dropped off the completed boards at CFPA headquarters. While

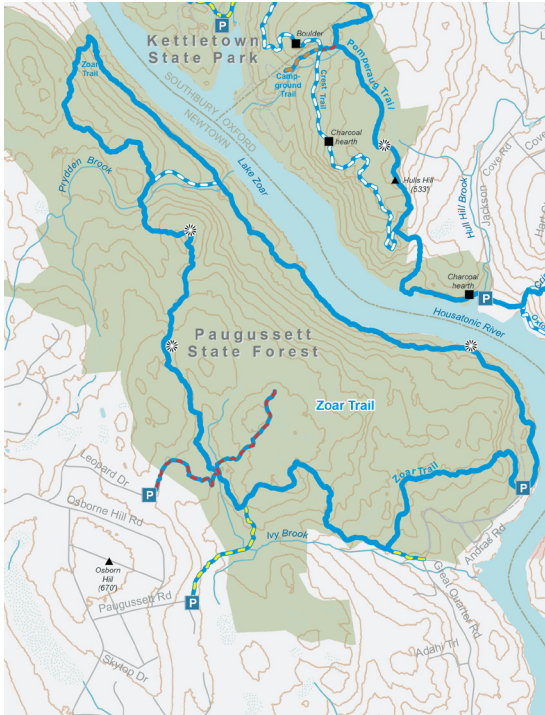
there, I was asked if there were any other opportunities I might be interested in. When they mentioned Trail Manager, I thought it sounded like fun.

So here we were hiking the six-and-a-half-mile Zoar Trail loop in Newtown to see what we might be getting into. At that moment, managing the entire trail felt overwhelming. (My wife thought its only redeeming feature was the beautiful waterfall we encountered). But after some discussion we decided to give it a try.

The Zoar Trail hadn’t had an official trail manager for a couple of years and there was a lot of work to be done. Our first task was to update all the blazes. We

had received some great training and guidance from other CFPA volunteers so we had a good sense for what we needed to do. We decided to break the trail into smaller sections. This helped us tremendously; we could work a couple of miles at a time. We also began our work in the fall without the oppressive heat and bugs. Many hikers stopped to thank us for our work, but one encounter was particularly entertaining. A solo hiker came up to us and said that the last time he’d taken his young daughter hiking, she had asked how the blazes got on the trees. He had replied that he wasn’t sure. He asked if he could take a picture of us painting a blaze so he could share it with his daughter, and he called us, “The Blaze Fairies.” Since then, many others have referred to us in the same way.

We always make a point of talking with people on the trail and asking what would make their hiking experience more pleasurable. Several people mentioned that with so many intersections, they would occasionally get lost, so we worked with Clare Cain, CFPA Trails Director, to develop “You Are



Here” maps and mounted them at key intersections. The trail also borders multiple neighborhoods and has many unmarked trails, which can be confusing, so we often hand out maps to hikers. On one occasion an elderly man saw us painting blazes and walked us back to a tricky stream crossing that we had just blazed and showed us how it was unclear which way to go. We decided to put up trail arrows at that intersection. Now we have employed that technique throughout all the trails we manage. I’m proud to say we no longer hear so many comments about hikers getting lost.

I attended a sawyer course and got permission to cut trees and clear them from the trails. Even though I have used a chainsaw for decades, the training was incredibly insightful. We now walk the trails regularly to look for downed trees, mark them on a map, and return soon after to clear them.

**T**he hikers we have met have been overwhelmingly gracious of our work. Everyone thanks us for volunteering to keep the trails up and clear. Last summer, the Zoar Trail needed a new bridge to replace a deteriorated old log crossing. Alex Bradley, CFPA Trails Stewardship

Coordinator, with help from the Connecticut Woodlands Conservation Corps, brought in the necessary materials by boat. Athletic Brewing Company in Milford closed their doors for the day and had all their employees come up to help haul lumber and blaze a new trail to the bridge. It was all very exciting, especially when our first hiker walked over the new bridge.

It is incredible how, in the span of about eight months, we went from almost not accepting the manager position to not only enjoying it, but actually looking forward to working on the trail. Besides spending time with our family and grandchildren, working on and improving the trails is one of our favorite things to do! Eighteen months after we began working on the Zoar Trail, we heard that another trail in Newtown, the Lillinonah Trail, needed a trail manager. This time, when I mentioned it to Lynn, she was immediately all in! CFPA was a little hesitant at first as we were still fairly new to trail management, but we were able to convince them that we were comfortable with the updates on the Zoar Trail and had developed a “method” to maintain it.

Today we manage both the Lillinonah and Zoar trails—some 18 miles in

total—and we get double the rewards. One of our favorite times to hike is after a fresh snow when the woods are peaceful and pristine. When working, we always wear our CFPA hats and talk to people about the organization and how important it is for the preservation of our beautiful, Blue-Blazed Hiking Trail System!

*Jeff and Lynn Frantz of Southbury are trail managers for both the Zoar and Lillinonah trails. Jeff is retired from Branson Ultrasonics Corp in Danbury and Lynn is a School Support Nurse in Region 15. In addition to hiking, they enjoy traveling and spending time with their children and grandchildren. They also are home winemakers specializing in small batch custom varietals and blends.*





## CFPA Welcomes Andy Bicking as Executive Director

**A**ndy Bicking has been hired as Executive Director of the Connecticut Forest & Park Association. He will assume his new role in January.

Andy comes to CFPA from the Hudson Valley where he most recently served as Director of Government Relations and Public Policy for Scenic Hudson, a conservation organization with a storied past. In the early 1960s, a small group of concerned citizens took their fight to protect Storm King Mountain all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, where—remarkably—they won their case. Today, environmental law textbooks celebrate the Scenic Hudson Decision that guaranteed the right of legal standing to individuals who want to intervene in land use decisions on environmental grounds.

“My experience expanded as Scenic Hudson grew,” Andy said during a recent interview. “That’s a unique vantage point. The community that supports CFPA is thinking about how to increase its impact and improve its overall position. I’m looking forward to working with the team to guide that growth.”

Andy began his career supporting volunteers on trail and park stewardship issues before transitioning to education and community engagement work. He eventually moved into policy and government relations, where he has focused on municipal-level land use planning and zoning, amongst other priorities. “It’s been a fun way to connect the dots, from the hands-on work that helps people enjoy the outdoors, all the way up to the big picture policies and programs that help enable them,” he said.

He also brings a wealth of advocacy experience to CFPA. He was a member of the legislative team that ran New York’s \$4.2 billion “Clean Air, Clean Water, and Green Jobs Bond Act” campaign, which passed in 2022 with overwhelming support. He has worked on several pieces of legislation related to climate resiliency and land stewardship on agricultural and waterfront lands, and advocated for New York’s “30 by 30” law to include urban conservation. And for the past 20 years, he has worked on the federal Highlands Conservation Act, and recently helped to reauthorize the legislation. Connecticut is one of four states that benefits from that program.

Andy grew up in Wilmington, Del., in a family of conservationists. Nearly every month, his family would venture to Pennsylvania’s Highlands to camp. When he was in 5th grade, they relocated to a small town in northeastern Ohio. It was there that his love of nature and the outdoors flourished. “We were fortunate and privileged that my parents bought a house that backed up to a 60-acre preserve with a beautiful river running through it. It was an incredible backyard playground,” he said. But by the time he graduated from high school, a freeway had pierced the town.

“It devastated the character of the community,” he said. “It’s still nice by most measures, but farms went under; woodlands were developed. It really focused my attention and made me realize that these places need to be saved and cared for and stewarded, and that people and organizations were behind that work. The values of protection, stewardship, and connecting people to nature have been with me my whole life.”

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# A Plan for Everyone



**The state's latest outdoor recreation plan is directed by someone who knows how it feels to be an outsider in the outdoors and is working hard to create a space where everyone belongs.**

**By Timothy Brown**

Connecticut may be the third smallest state by area but is home to a wide range of outdoors recreation opportunities, from hiking and mountain biking, to fishing, camping, and boating. In addition, New England's distinctive and dramatic seasons provide recreationalists with year-round adventure. Itching to get on some skis? Winter is coming. Tired of the cold and snow? Book your campsite now because spring is right around the corner.

But experts say that not enough people know about these opportunities, and only a fraction of the state's diverse communities are accessing parks, forests, beaches, and other natural settings to recreate.

The Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan, or SCORP, is both a landscape-scale analysis and a blueprint for understanding who is—and, critically, who is not—recreating outdoors so that resources can best be allocated to serve all constituents. The SCORP is a requirement for states to receive funding through the Land and Water Conservation Fund, a federal program that supports the acquisition and development of park and recreation lands.

In 2023, the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP), the agency tasked with drafting the SCORP, partnered with the Center for

Community Engagement and Social Research at Central Connecticut State University to conduct a variety of surveys—the Avid Outdoors Enthusiast Survey; the Statewide Demand Survey; and the Town's Survey—in an effort to be more inclusive when developing the latest version of the five-year plan, which goes into effect in 2024.

Dr. Akiebia Hicks is overseeing the development of the new SCORP. She says that while previous plans have focused on DEEP's role in outdoor recreation, the goals, objectives, and strategies outlined in the current plan will be more relevant to municipalities, nonprofit organizations, and other partners in the state.

“When I came into this role, my biggest goal was to ensure that this wasn't just a document that sat on the shelves and collected dust,” she said. “I wanted anybody in the state of Connecticut to be able to pick up this document and say, ‘This is how this applies to me.’”

Demand for outdoor recreation has risen dramatically since the pandemic. In 2022, an estimated 17 million people visited Connecticut's state parks and forests, a 75 percent jump from pre-pandemic levels. This rapid increase in use has taken a toll on recreational facilities and placed additional demands on the workers who manage

them. Using the surveys, DEEP has identified several areas for improvement. For example, the SCORP outlines strategies for enhancing the visitor experience, such as ensuring visitor safety, repairing and replacing infrastructure, improving the cleanliness of bathrooms and other facilities, and monitoring unlawful and forbidden activities. It also outlines opportunities to implement new volunteer programs, including serving as ambassadors to the public, so that DEEP, which is short-staffed and struggling to keep up with skyrocketing demand, can focus on other priorities.

The statewide surveys, which were conducted in English, Spanish, and Mandarin, didn't only reveal how folks are using parks and forests, but also identified some of the barriers to outdoor recreation in Connecticut. "We wanted to know what user groups are in the most need," Hicks said. "What can we do serve the greatest populations?"

Previous SCORPs pointed to a lack of transportation as a serious barrier to outdoors recreation. In response, DEEP created the Park Connect program to shuttle folks from cities to state beaches such as Hammonasset or Sherwood Island during the summer. But this time, a lack of awareness was one of the key barriers identified in the surveys.

"Connecticut is a beautiful state with many opportunities for recreation, but certain communities aren't aware of what we have to offer in state parks," said Hicks. "How can we communicate that more to a broader community?"

In addition to surveying folks inside state parks and forests, DEEP also surveyed individuals outside of those spaces. Surveys conducted outside of state parks and forests reflected Connecticut's rich racial and ethnic diversity, but that diversity wasn't represented inside the parks. Hicks says it was an "a-ha" moment for the agency.

"We found that most people from those demographics, they're recreating, they're just not coming to state parks and forests. Maybe they're going to their municipal parks and recreation centers that are closer to their homes," she said.

Personal safety and accessibility issues were other barriers identified in the Statewide Demand Survey. For example, a lack of accessible trails can prevent individuals who use wheelchairs from recreating. In response, DEEP is planning to deploy all-terrain wheelchairs in 10 parks throughout the state.

Hicks is using the data to better understand the barriers to outdoor recreation and to curate statewide goals associated with the plan. Goals range from improving equity and sustainable access, particularly for underserved populations, to safeguarding natural resources in the face of increase recreational use, to climate change, which is also an agency-wide initiative.

She has also worked with the SCORP Advisory Committee, a diverse group of recreationalists from across Connecticut, to ensure mutual support for the plan. All committee members were able to review the draft surveys and provide feedback before they were finalized. Hicks says she's committed to continuing to meet with the advisory committee and external partners, including CFPA, after the plan is published to ensure its success.

"Transparency is what we need in a document like this," she said. "I don't want to have a user group feel like they weren't included in this planning. So, we try to be as inclusive as possible. And we're going that extra mile to make sure that people are represented in this SCORP."

The key, she says, is to listen to Connecticut's diverse communities, not just the folks who are most often seen in ads for outdoors gear.

"We need to make sure our messaging is fair, and when I say 'fairness,' I mean we're not coming to these communities just for our gain. We're not coming in to collect data just for us; we're coming in to let you know what we have to offer and to work with you."

Hicks well understands how it feels to be an outsider in the outdoors. A native of south Georgia, she grew up in a family of hunters, but it wasn't until she was in college that she first set foot in a national park. Just months before she was to graduate from college—the first person in her family to do so—she learned that she needed to complete an internship. She created a social post asking for leads. A former high school English teacher, who also happened to be President Jimmy Carter's niece, replied that there was an open position at the Jimmy Carter National Historic Site. Hicks applied and soon was offered the job.

The internship included running President Carter's boyhood farm. Hicks learned blacksmithing and animal husbandry, and grew cotton, sugarcane, rice, and peanuts. She saw President Carter often and had several conversations with him about her future plans. Throughout college, she'd planned to become a high school political science teacher and coach. But the internship changed her trajectory; Hicks decided she wanted to become a park ranger.

After the internship ended, she worked at national parks in Alabama and Georgia before accepting a position at Little River Canyon National Preserve in Fort Payne, Ala. She loved her job and her coworkers. She got to meet people from all over the world and spent her off-time recreating outdoors.

"It's one of those jobs where you're like, 'I shouldn't even be paid to do this,'" she said. "We would kayak on lunch breaks and hiked every day."

Hicks lived in park housing just minutes from the park. She would often walk to work, but the water in the housing wasn't potable, so she would occasionally drive so she could fill water containers to bring home. One day, as she was driving to work on the one-lane gravel road from her house, she encountered a car approaching from the opposite direction. Hicks slowed down to let the other driver pass. He slowed down as well, stopped next to her, and shut off his car. Hicks assumed he was a neighbor who wanted to meet her.

Instead, the other driver, who happened to be white, restarted his car and backed up, blocking Hicks. He got out and walked over to her car. She introduced herself, to which he replied, "What are you doing here?"

Hicks was confused by the question. She was wearing her National Park Service uniform and badge. She responded that she was a park ranger, but "that's when things really got weird."



The man proceeded to accuse her of being an imposter. Hicks started recording the incident on her phone. He told her that she didn't belong there; that she couldn't afford to live there. She was stunned.

"In the recording you can hear me laughing because I was just so shocked," she said.

The man threatened to call the cops. Hicks insisted that she lived there, that she wasn't trespassing. He asked what house she lived in. Fearing for her safety, she refused to tell him. The man said he didn't care about her safety.

An officer arrived. Hicks texted a friend who was a law enforcement park ranger, who offered to come help diffuse the situation. But the cop harassed her and asked her where she lived. Again, Hicks refused to answer in front of the other driver. Eventually her coworker came and verified that Hicks was a federal employee at the park. The officer finally let her go. For Hicks, it was a life-changing moment.

She says her supervisor was supportive but had never experienced anything like this. He offered to get her another gun, which they did. A coworker had a more unusual solution. He suggested she get a Confederate flag for her house (all her neighbors flew one) so folks wouldn't know where she lived. As unbelievable as it may seem, they went to the Dixie store and bought a Confederate flag.

"At that point, I realized I had to blend in until I could get out of there," she said.

Hicks hadn't been considering graduate school, but the experience made her want to know more about other people of color's experiences in parks. "I knew I wasn't the only minority who had gone through something like that," said Hicks. "What happened is probably unique to me, but those (types of) situations are not unique."

Hicks applied to graduate programs. President Carter wrote her a letter of recommendation, which still hangs on her wall.

**A**s a doctoral student at Clemson University, Hicks studied the experiences of Black employees in the National Park Service, probing the question of how to empower people of color employees once they've been hired.

"There's so much talk about how we need to 'increase diversity,'" said Hicks, "but that messaging is so harmful to the employee. I can go to any place, and I may be the most qualified person there, but there's going to be somebody who doesn't think that I belong. I can be a park ranger in full uniform standing next to a white intern and a visitor is going to go right up to that intern with a question."

Mentorships can be helpful and having a supportive community is critical, Hicks says. "One of my goals with my research is to be not only empowering employees who work in those places, but also providing management tools," said Hicks.

Diversity initiatives won't work, she says, unless the people of color who are already employed are empowered and happy. Otherwise, it becomes a revolving door: an organization hires a person of color; they don't feel supported and end up leaving; the organization hires more people.

"I like to think about sustaining diversity and recruiting diverse talent. I don't like just 'increasing diversity.' I don't think it comes from a genuine place. I don't think it's effective, and it does nothing to address the problem.

We shouldn't focus on increasing diversity until we have the tools to sustain diversity.

"Nature looks different for everyone," she said, "and nature was used as a form of oppression in the past. As long as it's 'Leave No Trace,' we have to stop the gatekeeping and telling people how to recreate in the Eurocentric way because recreation looks different for everybody."

Hicks is trying to spread a counter-narrative to the notion that people of color don't like the outdoors. "Black and brown bodies have been in nature," she said. "We are in nature, despite all these obstacles that have been set up to prevent us from being in these spaces." Still, she's haunted by her experience at Little River Canyon.

"I'll never be used to racism. I've seen it a lot, but that experience was still shocking to me," she said. "Every time it happens, it makes me reflect on how harmful respectability politics are. I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing, I'm not bothering anybody, but it doesn't matter. How educated you are; it doesn't matter. Badge, uniform. It doesn't matter what you have, or what you've accomplished, people don't care about that. You're still just a Black or brown body. No one's immune to racism."

*Timothy Brown is the editor of Connecticut Woodlands.*

**Connecticut is a beautiful state with many opportunities for recreation, but certain communities aren't aware of everything we have to offer in state parks.**

# Chasing Winter's Allure

## An ode to snowshoeing

By Jennifer Sprague

**A** glistening blanket of fresh white snow covers the forest floor, hiding all evidence of autumn. As the breeze hits the treetops, tiny flakes fall like glitter, catching the sunlight as they dance their way to the forest floor.

### Selecting your first pair of snowshoes

Choosing a pair of snowshoes is based on three main factors: your intended terrain, snow conditions, and the load weight (of you and your gear).

If you plan on heading to rolling or mountainous terrain, you will want a pair of snowshoes with moderately aggressive to aggressive crampons. In steep terrain, you may also want a heel lift. On flat terrain, a basic pair with modest crampons will do.

A heavier person requires more flotation, or a larger-sized shoe. Snowshoes are measured by length and typically range from 21-to-36 inches. If you're between sizes, a larger size will give you more flotation, while a smaller size will offer more maneuverability. Think about your snowshoeing goals and the conditions you're most likely to encounter. More flotation is generally desirable in deep powder conditions, while less is needed for packed trails.

The prices of snowshoes can vary significantly. High end gear often means a higher-end price, but a decent beginner pair shouldn't break the bank. Gently used shoes and poles will work just fine for most conditions! Check online gear trade sites or used goods stores for a pair of pre-loved snowshoes.

The allure of winter calls me to explore. Relishing the solitude of the snowy woods, I let my thoughts slowly float away. It's just me and the quiet landscape. The only sound I hear is the clip-clap, clip-clap of my snowshoes. The air is crisp, and my nose is cold, but my body stays warm as I move through the forest. My arms automatically know what to do, planting my poles in soft powder beside me.

I grew up loving winter in upstate New York—building snow forts, sledding, skiing, and ice skating on a nearby pond. But I didn't try snowshoeing until I was in my 30s. At the time, I didn't know anyone who snowshoed or where to borrow gear, so I asked for a used pair of snowshoes for Christmas. Snowshoeing quickly became one of my favorite outdoor activities; an outlet to beat the cabin fever of winter. A decade later, I am still plodding along on the same pre-loved pair.

Since I began snowshoeing, several of my friends and relatives have also taken up the sport. The learning curve is far less steep than skiing or snowboarding, no lessons are required, and if you are comfortable with your balance while walking, you can learn how to snowshoe. It's a great winter-time activity for people of all ages and fitness levels. My parents, who are in their 60s, regularly snowshoe in the woods behind their home; my sister's child took up the sport when they were only six years old.

I love a leisurely pace on flat terrain, but also the heart-pumping challenge of a steep uphill climb. Winter descents are much kinder on the knees, with snowshoes absorbing some of the shock of rough and rocky trails. It's a great workout and a way to see stunning landscapes from a unique wintry perspective. When I am alone in the woods, I find snowshoeing can be a meditative experience; with friends, it becomes a grand adventure.

**C**onnecticut offers many hidden gems for snowshoeing. A few of my favorites are the Highlawn Forest and Wadsworth Falls State Park, both near Middletown; Lake Wintergreen at West Rock Ridge State Park in Hamden; and the grounds of the Hill-Stead Museum in Farmington. At the Highlawn Forest, located at CPFA Headquarters in Rockfall, you'll find a handful of trails, including the 2.2-mile Herbert's Way, a relatively flat loop that winds through a mature hardwood forest and a former Christmas tree farm that has grown into row after row of towering conifers. Just down the street, at Wadsworth Falls State Park, you can pause at the covered bridge before heading to two waterfalls. Here you're likely to see other winter enthusiasts on their cross-country skis and fat bikes. You can also access the trails at the Wadsworth Mansion's Parklands, which are open to the public daily from sunrise to sunset.



Top: A snowy trail at Wadsworth Falls State Park. Above: The author's parents in Vermont. Right: Exploring Lake Wintergreen in winter.

Heading south to Hamden, the 1.5-mile loop around Lake Wintergreen takes you past rocky outcroppings and views of the icy lake. For a longer outing, you can access additional trails in West Rock Ridge State Park, including the popular Blue-Blazed Regicides Trail. In Farmington, the Hill-Stead Museum offers three miles of trails that connect to the Blue-Blazed Metacomet Trail.

While Connecticut offers many parks and trails ideal for snowshoeing, a rapidly changing climate has made finding good snow more challenging in recent years. The local winter sports industry is adapting to the impacts of climate change. Some downhill ski areas with snowmaking technology offer uphill passes for snowshoers,

which can be an option if natural snow is scarce. Nordic centers typically offer snowshoe passes and rentals, and some offer snowmaking and lighting. If you're seeking pristine powder, an adventure to northern New England might be for you. Last winter, during a snow drought here in Connecticut, I headed north to Vermont and New Hampshire where snow was more abundant. One of my favorite places to snowshoe is the AMC Highland Center in Crawford Notch in the White Mountains, where guests can borrow snowshoes, boots, and clothing from their L.L. Bean Gear Room.

If you're looking to gear up for a snowshoe adventure, your needs will depend on your intended terrain. In

addition to snowshoes, I find ski poles handy for balance, probing the terrain for unstable conditions, and helping you to get up when you fall. They also serve as great mitten holders. The rest of your gear can likely be repurposed if you hike or ski. I find that the clothing I wear to shovel my driveway works for a local snowshoe hike, including a waterproof outer layer, a warm hat, gloves or mittens, waterproof boots, and wool socks. If you plan to explore more mountainous or backcountry terrain, you may need to invest in more technical gear.

You'll also want to consider safety and emergency gear. When adventuring outdoors, I try to always carry the 10 essentials: nutrition, hydration, insulation, sun protection, illumination, navigation, fire, repair kit, first aid, and emergency shelter. It gets dark early in the winter, and you never know when a delay or injury could keep you outdoors longer than expected. Carry a small backpack with your necessary items and throw in a Thermos of hot cocoa for good measure. I find that winter adventures are always better with some cocoa.

Winter in New England can be spectacular, and snowshoeing is one of the best ways to experience this magical season in all her glory. The Farmer's Almanac is predicting above-average snowfall this year, so if you haven't tried snowshoeing yet, this is your opportunity. And if you are looking for a reason to love winter, snowshoeing just might be your sport.

*Jennifer Sprague is a marketing professional and freelance writer. She serves on the board of the Meriden Land Trust. Her favorite outdoor activities are camping and (you guessed it) snowshoeing.*



## COMPASS

After snow, in the morning quiet  
I begin to read  
which way the storm  
blew in last night  
by looking at the trees.

There's a syntax of snow  
brush worked  
along the northern flanks  
of their dark trunks,  
and this

white calligraphy  
makes me stand, like the trees,  
upright, and more still.

Each moment the earth unrolls its scroll  
of images,  
asking only to be received  
breath

by breath,  
then released.

I don't know how a brushstroke of snow  
unleashed by a passing storm  
and inscribed  
onto the daily silence of matter  
becomes a transient,  
an even useless,  
beauty.

But this beauty is my compass.

*Margaret Gibson*

*Margaret Gibson, Poet Laureate of Connecticut (2019-2022) has published 13 books of poems, most recently the trilogy Broken Cup, Not Hearing the Wood Thrush, and The Glass Globe. A new book, Draw Me Without Boundaries, will be published next fall. She is also editor of Waking Up to the Earth: Connecticut Poets in a Time of Global Climate Crisis.*



# GOOD FIRE

**Indigenous peoples have used controlled burns to shape the land for millennia. Today, in the face of global climate change, such Indigenous practices may be more vital than ever.**

**By Peter Lok**

**T**here is a widespread belief that when Europeans arrived in what we now call Connecticut, they discovered an untouched wilderness inhabited by a few, simple natives. But this is a myth. Rather, they found a beautiful mosaic of forests and fields just beyond the beaches of the Sound they called Lange Eylandt, Long Island. In 1935, Stanley W. Bromley, an entomologist and Connecticut resident, compiled descriptions of early travelers to pen “Original Forest Types of Southern New England.” In it, he writes: “On one subject, all are in accord and that is the observation that the original forest was, in most places, extremely open and parklike, due to the universal factor of fire, fostered by the original inhabitants to facilitate travel and hunting...The burning of the forests and grasslands, it must be remembered, was a universal custom among aboriginal people, not only in the Americas, but in many other regions of the world as well.”

At the time of contact, the Pequots were the largest tribe in Connecticut. They spent the winters hunting and trapping from camps in the foothills above the river valleys. In the spring they moved near the rivers to catch shad that migrated upstream in great numbers. The summer found them in large villages along the shore, tending their fields and taking fish to dry on their racks. They harvested clams and quahogs, whose meat they ate and from whose shells they made wampum, which sanctified important ceremonies. These summer villages gradually became more permanent settlements, and the more time they spent in them, the more they sought to adapt them to their comfort and convenience.

Surrounding the palisaded villages were large, fertile fields where the women grew corn, beans, and squash. The nearby forests were carefully tended parks, with large trees comfortably spaced so light reached through the canopies, encouraging the growth of tall grasses and berry patches. White-tailed deer browsed in the mottled shade and sunshine, stalked by stealthy warriors who provided meat for their families.

Periodically, the Pequot lit carefully controlled burns, clearing underbrush and fallen limbs. The burns killed thin-barked trees and saplings, making more room for nut-bearing chestnuts and oaks. With each burn, the

**We sit anxiously on the edge of our seats  
awaiting the coming disaster of global climate change.  
We have watched it approaching for decades.  
It has arrived.**



DEEP workers watch over a prescribed burn of grassland habitat near the Long Island Sound. Photo courtesy of Christopher Martin.

forest soil layer grew darker with carbonized leaf litter, which increased the average temperature in the spring when nut flowers might be jeopardized by late frosts. The improved nut harvest meant more food for people and animals, including rodents, turkeys, squirrels, raccoons, and bears. Burns also promoted the growth of blueberry and raspberry patches, strawberry vines, medicinal plants, and of the grasses that were forage for deer and moose. The clearer forest made it easier to move silently, to see wildlife, and to find an unobstructed flight path for the hunter's arrows. The fires destroyed nesting places for ticks and other biting insects and burned their eggs. The Pequots shaped their habitat with skillful use of fire. It was good medicine.

Today we are in urgent need of their Indigenous knowledge. This year is on track to be the hottest ever recorded. The heat turns the brush-cluttered forests into kindling. Some scientists say there is no longer a wildfire season in the western U.S. and Canada; wildfires now threaten year-round. As of this writing, 2023 has seen two-and-a-half million acres burned in the United States and 37 million acres burned in Canada, creating thick smoke that this past summer hovered over Connecticut and damaged our air quality. We sit anxiously on the edge of our seats awaiting the coming disaster of global climate change. We have watched it approaching for decades. It has arrived.

It seems clear that we cannot continue to ignore the accumulation of wildfire fuel in our forests while we hope that improving fire suppression techniques will let us control the spread of wildfires. The promise of Indigenous methods of fire control is beginning to gain more attention. Dr. Robin Wall Kimmerer (Potawatomi), champions Traditional Ecological Knowledge, or TEK, a concept that describes a symbiotic network of connection between people, plants, and other animals. All forms of life require our respect. All our fates are linked. Controlled burning rejuvenates the soil; grasses flourish in the fire's wake; vegetation feeds the herbivores; the herbivores feed the carnivores. All flourishing is mutual.

The Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) has implemented three controlled—or *prescribed*—burns this year, at the Matianuck Natural Area Preserve in Windsor, the Suffield Wildlife Management Area in Suffield, and the Machimoodus State Park in East Haddam. These burns were planned to improve habitats for the endangered grasshopper sparrow (*Ammodramus sava-narum*) by removing invasive plants to encourage the growth of more favorable grasses. They also eliminated wildfire fuel that had accumulated in these sites. According to Christopher Martin, DEEP's Director of Forestry, the burns were very successful, and he has scheduled meetings to discuss potential new burns for 2024. Detailed plans must be formulated and permits obtained well in advance. Springtime is when the humidity and ground moisture is safest, but choosing when to execute a burn is a day-to-day decision. A large work crew with varying skills is on standby until the decision to "go" is made. Indigenous employees at DEEP have participated in these controlled burns in the past.

The Indigenous Peoples Burning Network (IPBN) was created in 2015 by the Yurok, Hoopa, and Karuk tribes in northern California to revitalize traditional Native American fire practices. The IPBN now includes tribes from New Mexico, Minnesota, and Oregon, and others from North Carolina, Texas, and Washington have expressed interest in joining. Although today most prescribed fires are managed by non-tribal government agencies, these Indigenous knowledge holders are offering their expertise as partners in the efforts. Such a network could bring invaluable experience to bear on any number of conservation problems. Indigenous people have always thought of themselves as stewards of the land and have much to teach about how to better care for it for our grandchildren.

*Peter Lok's writing has appeared in The Bark and Love, Dog. He and his wife, Sandra, devote much of their time and affection to their three Golden Retrievers, and are active in local therapy dog and rescue work.*





# Experiencing Magic Outside

## A conversation about outdoor equity with Joseph Dickerson

Since the pandemic, there has been a significant rise in the number of people recreating outdoors. Still, research suggests that Black Americans represent fewer than 7 percent of visitors to parks and other wilderness settings, and nearly three-quarters of those who recreate outdoors are White, according to the Outdoor Industry Association's 2023 annual report. There is a myriad of reasons for this so-called "nature gap," from the historic, intentional, and systematic exclusion of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) individuals from parks and other protected areas to present-day discrimination. Environmental organizations across Connecticut are working to address these injustices. As has been widely reported in this magazine, CFPA is committed to incorporating the needs and perspectives of people of color and other historically marginalized groups into its strategic plan, programming, organizational culture, and policy priorities.

The Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) recently hired Joseph Dickerson as the Senior Advisor for Outdoor Equity. A native of Washington State, Dickerson previously worked in both corporate and nonprofit settings, and he's the former president of the Connecticut Outdoor Recreation Alliance. An avid mountain biker, he co-founded the Rolling Anvils Youth Cycling Club, an intersectional mountain bike team based in Hartford, and he ran the BICI Co bike shop for four years.

We sat down with Dickerson to learn more about his new position, and the role that DEEP can play in improving equity in the outdoors. This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

**What excites me is thinking about how we spark joy and create the conditions for people to have that magical "a-ha" moment in the outdoors.**

## Why did DEEP feel it was important to create this position at this time?

DEEP has a lot of people who are well-intentioned and have put together independent strategies for their own division, but there hasn't been someone at the agency to manage and push forward on stakeholder engagement—particularly with communities of color—the ways in which we offer DEEP services to a broad set of communities and in how we recruit and retain diverse talent. If we really want to push this ball forward, we have to be thinking comprehensively about how we approach these issues at DEEP.

My role is to think broadly and strategically about the entire agency. I report to the Environmental Conservation Division, however, I'm meeting with the entire DEEP team. I've also been digging into individual experiences—what has gone well and what has not? The agency hasn't changed a whole lot in a long time; it's made incremental changes. But we have a unique opportunity to hire new talent that expands the perspectives here at DEEP. However, because our processes of outreach and recruitment are so scattershot, we don't know where people

are looking that's being successful. If we want to have different results, we have to think differently about where we outreach, who we outreach to, and how we build our pipeline.

### **Why did you want to do this work at DEEP?**

I was managing a small community foundation, providing grants to individuals and nonprofits across Connecticut that were working on environmental sustainability and quality of life projects. In coming here, I was intentional about looking at who is on the team. I've interviewed for other organizations in the outdoor space. Some organizations have not done what I would consider the base level work around outreach such that a position like this would even have a chance of being successful. Does the team already recognize that this is an issue? Have they already recognized that they want to take steps to address the issue? And have they taken steps to start to develop consensus and a broad outline of understanding amongst the whole team about why that matters and why they're not doing well at it? If that fundamental awareness isn't there, trying to come into this kind of a role and build that awareness takes up all of the time, and rather than doing the work, the job becomes more about trying to convince people that they should do the work. That's not where I want to put my time. At DEEP, there's a broad recognition that we have to address these issues. There's a comprehensive understanding that traditionally the agency has not done this well. And if we don't think strategically about it and work on it, we won't make any progress.

### **Growing up, did you spend a lot of time outdoors?**

My dad was an Army Ranger, so obviously he was extremely competent in the outdoors. But growing up, I don't really remember going camping or hiking. Our neighborhood had a lot of woods around it with places to hike. But my true entrée into the outdoors, the moment when I experienced true magic, was flyfishing. Flyfishing led me into hiking, and then into mountain biking. I went really hard into mountain biking for a few years, and I still bike,



but flyfishing is what I understand about the outdoors. Hiking and biking were offshoots and really just ways to get further into places to catch more fish.

### **Many environmental organizations have a difficult time hiring people of color, particularly for leadership positions. What do environmental organizations need to do in terms of recruiting and empowering diverse talent?**

In some of these—I would call them legacy environmental and conservation organizations—there tends to be a lot of weight of individuals who are on the board and who are ingrained in staff positions. Board members represent what work the organization has started to do around outreach. You can look at many conservation organizations and tell how far along that process (they are) by what they've done on the board. Have they started the conversations to expand who is represented within the power structure of the organization? If they have not, why? We're often surrounded by people who look like us, live like us, and love like us. That's okay, but it does mean that when you outreach, and you say this (individual) would be a great board member, it's exactly like who's already on the board. Many conservation organizations have a broad membership base. It takes a significant amount of leadership, often

started at the board level, to lead the conversation with donors and members around why we as an organization should be going in this direction. If you bring in a diverse candidate, especially in a leadership position, and they are tasked with leading that conversation, it creates an oppositional approach that the diverse candidate is trying to overcome. The organization must already be convinced that they want to do the work; they're ready to do the work. That's a very different situation for a diverse candidate to step into because they know they're supported and they're not stepping out on skinny branches. And if (the organization) doesn't directly address race and diversity as an outright perspective within the interview and hiring process, that's also a red flag. If they're really thinking about it, they'll address it. But a lot of organizations are really scared to even bring it up. And to me, that is not a good place to be.

### **What does equity in the outdoors mean to you?**

What excites me is thinking about how we spark joy and create the conditions for people to have that magical "a-ha" moment in the outdoors. How do organizations create the circumstances for people to have multiple experiences outside until it clicks? We don't know how long that's going to take; you don't know when that

magic is going to happen. But you can constantly create the conditions and circumstances and make sure that people are there to experience magic. If you're not in the outdoors, you're not going to experience the magic of the outdoors. So there has to be the fundamental circumstances for people to experience the magic of the outdoors. Part of that is for people to feel welcome and recognized when they are there; to feel safe; to feel like people are talking with them, not at them. Those sorts of fundamental things are what I'm thinking about.

### **What role does intersectionality play in creating equity for all?**

Intersectionality as a perspective is incredibly valuable. If you're thinking of things with intersectionality as an element of the way you want to see change happen, it benefits everyone. For example, addressing wheelchair accessibility also makes a huge difference for people who are elderly. The more that we address intersectionality, the more that we create the circumstances for people, wherever they happen to fall within the spectrum, to go out there by themselves and feel comfortable.

### **What is DEEP doing to bring folks from diverse backgrounds into the outdoors?**

It starts with creating broad-based awareness. One of the great things that Dr. Akiebia Hicks has found in directing the SCORP (Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan; see our story on page 9), is that the leading barrier in getting people from all different backgrounds into the outdoors isn't transportation, or gear, or time, it's simply awareness; simply knowing what's here. It's also helping people recognize that we already have huge diverse populations of people who access Connecticut's state parks. You go to some of our

lakes in the summer and they're packed with people who are not speaking English. But sometimes people who are doing the outdoorsy thing don't think of themselves as being "outdoorsy" because that's not the image that fits in an REI catalog. Many people from diverse backgrounds are doing outdoors things, but they aren't counted as outdoorsy, and they may not even count themselves as outdoorsy, because the conversation up to this point has excluded them and denigrated their experience of the outdoors. The more that conservation agencies like DEEP meet people where they are and ask them for their perspective, the more that that creates opportunities for dialogue. The more that we broaden that conversation and include those voices in the story, the more accurate it will be in understanding who is recreating and who loves the outdoors. And we'll be more effective at pulling people into the conversation about conservation and climate change and caring about the way in which the natural world is suffering as a result of human interaction, and how we can change to help support being in balance with the natural environment.

### **We often hear that representation is important. How does representation apply to your work at DEEP?**

I've already drank the Kool-Aid. I look like an REI catalog. I have a flannel, a merino wool shirt, these wicking pants. However, a lot of the conversation around being representative will be finding people who are coming out for their first or second time, maybe with Latino Outdoors or Outdoors Afro, or with a youth trail ambassador program in Bridgeport. Those kinds of conversations with people who don't have the fancy gear and are maybe a little nervous about coming out for the first time. That level of outreach and connection over a sustained period of

time shifts the narrative of "it's white guys with very hard chin lines and military haircuts," to one of a Black guy with a big beard and flannel, to maybe a 60-year-old Black woman who's getting outside on a hiking series because someone invited her to join them.

### **You're saying it's a question of dismantling stereotypes about who is recreating and what outdoor recreation means.**

Just being in your neighborhood, going outside, and going for a walk together—it's building community; it's building connection; it's building awareness of the natural environment right where you are without having to go anywhere. If you meet up with some urban hiking groups or Black birding groups (you'll see) they're just people who've got their Jordans on and their Bulls jersey and they like looking at birds.

For a long time, when I would show up for bike rides, I was really decked out. I had my fancy Lycra super suit, gloves, and clip-in shoes, and they all matched. And I would show up to these community events and look like I had a big, big stick stuck somewhere. So, I started to show up in casual gear—a t-shirt, a helmet, and some shoes. Just show up in some normal stuff. When the youth on our Hartford Rolling Anvils team first start riding with us, they show up in jeans and their fancy Jordans. We focus on helping the kids to understand what they need for the ride to stay safe. Eventually people will follow a natural progression around what feels right for them in the outdoors, and the level of investment that feels right for them. But if we start from, "this is what it looks like to be out—fancy merino shirt, fancy pants, and \$200 hiking boots,"—people are like, "this isn't really for me." If you even show up in regular old, ratty shoes, you can have a great time. You don't need all the other stuff.

**Many people from diverse backgrounds are doing outdoors things, but they aren't counted as outdoorsy because the conversation up to this point has excluded them and denigrated their experience of the outdoors.**



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### CFPA Welcomes, *continued from page 8*

Today, Andy loves hiking, camping, and cycling with his wife and two kids. "These activities nourish us," he said. Both of his kids were involved in Outdoor Service Guides, a national organization that offers inclusive scouting programs to youth from all backgrounds, and his wife, who grew up in the Pacific Northwest, enjoys live fire cooking. He has fond memories of hiking the northern section of the Mattabesett Trail as a college student, and says his family is looking forward to exploring other Blue-Blazed Hiking Trails. "It's something that's core to our being and we can't wait to explore," he said.

When asked why he wanted to work at CFPA, he talks about the Association's mission. "It touched on the four corners of my career: education, land stewardship, advocacy, and management, and felt like a natural fit. There's a deep bench of expertise that exists between the board, staff, volunteers, and partners, and a real passion among

its donors. CFPA is leaning forward into the challenging issues facing conservation today—climate change; community-based work; embracing justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion principles—while at the same time maintaining a healthy respect for the strong history of the conservation movement. CFPA is looking at the world holistically and identifying its strategic role to provide the great services of outdoor recreation and nature for all people."

But, as with his work at Scenic Hudson, it was the people of CFPA that most inspired him.

"The people were really the core, from the moment that I was greeted by the staff and the board all the way through the interview, it was clear that this is a community that is really tight; they share a lot in common; they are open to new ideas. They are doing the real work and want to keep doing the real work. That was so inspirational to me."



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## Pathways

The earliest known snowshoes—essentially solid blocks of wood with crude bindings—were created by nomadic hunters in Central Asia around 4,000 B.C.E. Eventually the technology spread to present-day North America where Indigenous peoples developed the more familiar lace-framed, tennis racquet-style. They customized their snowshoes to fit their local ecologies, naming the designs after the animals who inspired them: swallowtail, beavertail, bear paw. Here in the Northeast, for example, snowshoes tended to be shorter, which facilitated easier travel through dense forests. Tribes typically used white ash for the frame and rawhide from deer, moose, and caribou for the webbing. Far from being a form of recreation, snowshoeing was a collective activity critical for travel, hunting, and fur trapping in the deep snow. Early European settlers, who were ill-prepared for such snowy winters, gradually appropriated the use of snowshoes, a fact which Thomas Wickman, professor of history and American studies at Trinity College and author of “Snowshoe Country: An environmental and cultural history of winter in the early American Northeast,” argues enabled their survival and facilitated colonial expansion throughout the region.

Over the succeeding centuries, snowshoes became popular amongst winter enthusiasts. In the 1840s, snowshoeing clubs began to appear throughout Canada and the northern United States. They organized races, which led to improvements in the design and construction of the snowshoes. By the middle of the 20th century, lighter-weight aluminum frames had replaced the traditional wooden ones. Today, snowshoes come in a variety of shapes and styles for every type of adventure, from a casual walk on level ground to traversing soft powder and rocky terrain higher in the mountains.

In the above photo, taken in 1905 by Edward B. Morris at an unnamed park in Connecticut, we see two women snowshoeing in full-length dresses adorned with furs.

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