

SKI AND SNOWSHOE TRACKS TRACE WINTER PLEASURE

Close to home and really varied

By Katharine Fletcher; photos by Eric Fletcher

Because Ottawa gets tons of snow and few thaws, it makes sense to get out there. Otherwise, winter can seem awfully long if you're just staring out the window.

Where to go? Here are some favourite trails that could fit on anybody's destination list. See you there?

GATINEAU PARK

Gatineau Park has 57 kilometres of snowshoe trails and more than 200 kilometres for skiers. The National Capital Commission (NCC) website supplies information on trails, fees, and trail maps. Before going, take note that snowshoeing isn't permitted on ski trails; and leave the dog at home – they're banned from all trails.

If you're a novice snowshoer, start at the visitor centre, 133 Scott Rd., in Old Chelsea, with free parking and the Sugarbush trailhead. It leads to trails 60 and 61, both easy. And when you need to get in from the cold, the centre has a small museum, toilets, a public lunch room, helpful staff and trail maps.

If you're a newbie, hold off buying snowshoes, and rent some instead at the visitor centre. That way you can start finding out

which kind suits you. You can also buy your snowshoe season pass there or online. An added benefit is a 15 per cent reduction at Le Nordik Spa for awesome thermo treatments after hours on the trails. Check the NCC website for details on how to snowshoe for free.

My favourite trail connects P17 at Wakefield just off Highway 5, to Healey Lodge, a former Irish family's farm house now renovated as one of the park's day cabins. 'Shoe' along and imagine the Irish community of some 100 or so settlers here in the late 1800s.

Other great snowshoe spots include Wolf Trail which climbs to a rocky lookout on the Eardley Escarpment. You get there from parking lot 13 on the Meech Lake. Take binoculars to look for rough-legged hawks or bald eagles once you're up top. Or park at P19 at Lac Philippe and venture onto trail 73 – a circuit of the entire lake which starts about 300 metres past the vehicle barrier. Or head to Lac Renaud and its cabin along trail 74 which starts near the service buildings. These trails are a bit more remote and very, very pretty.

Cross-country skiing in Gatineau Park includes 50 trails and groomed parkways. They open up exploration of beaver meadows, forest, lakes, ponds and sometimes rugged, sometimes gentle, terrain. There are classic and skate ski trails, and others shared with snowshoers. Pick the kind you want.

If you are up for a daylong meandering trip, take Trail 1 and traverse the park's spine from Old Chelsea to McKinstry Lodge and press on to the fire tower above Lusk Falls.

If you're a competitive skier, sign up for the Gatineau Loppet which runs Feb. 13–15. From children to long-distance experts, there are races for every level.



BEYOND THE PARK

On the Ontario side of the river, Mer Bleue (ncc-ccn.gc.ca/places-to-visit/greenbelt/mer-bleue), off Anderson Road east of Ottawa from the 417, is an internationally designated wetland. Its boardwalks span an ancient (almost 8,000 years old) bog's boreal habitat. Ski alongside stunted tamaracks and black spruce and take in the wide-open character of this special spot.

In Quebec, Ski Pontiac (skipontiac.ca) in Norway Bay is the work of long-time residents Connie Renaud and Shirley Russell. They've built a cross-country skiing and snowshoeing destination for families and enthusiasts who want an easy to intermediate outing. Says Connie, "We're expanding our 10-kilometre network of groomed, tracked trails this year and yes, we'll still be doing some full-moon skis."

Further east on the Ontario side is the Larose Forest (prescott-russell.on.ca) with snowshoeing, classic and skate cross-country skiing on groomed trails. It welcomes novices and offers one of the best chances to actually spot a moose in the whole region.

Then there's the Greenbelt (ncc-ccn.gc.ca/places-to-visit/greenbelt). Gotta love our city with its more than 150 kilometres of cross-country skiing across it. Choose groomed ski trails at Shirleys Bay, Stony Swamp, Pine Grove, or Greens Creek, or strap on snowshoes or skis for the Sir John A. Macdonald parkway along the Ottawa River.

Ski or snowshoe to work anyone? Many Ottawans skate to work along the Rideau Canal, but why not shake it up? Ski, skate or 'shoe to the office. Now, that's one cool New Year's res! ■

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