



TREK INTO THE NEW YEAR

Jackson County Snowshoe Opportunities Provide Path to Healthy Lifestyle

The dawn of a new year is the perfect time to strap on some snowshoes and start trekking, and not just because January typically brings fresh snow to tramp through. This family-friendly activity is also a great way to check off a few New Year’s resolutions, the most common of which is getting more exercise, according to a Statista Global Consumer Survey. That same survey lists spending more time with family and friends and living more economically among the top five New Year’s resolutions, with spending less time on social media and reducing stress following closely behind.

Snowshoeing will help you reach all of those goals. It’s an easy activity to take up and stick with, as it requires no special skills; that old adage “if you can walk, you can snowshoe” is really true. However, don’t be fooled into thinking snowshoeing is just a walk in the park. Breaking through snow requires a little more energy and provides an aerobic workout, which can be as strenuous as you want to make it. It won’t feel like hard work, though, if you focus on the peaceful winter landscape around you.

Because it’s a simple, low-impact activity suitable for everyone from young children to senior citizens, snowshoeing is a great way to enjoy some outdoor fun with family and friends. It’s also a low-cost activity,

with no need for a lift ticket or club membership to participate. All you really need are warm clothing and a pair of snowshoes, which can often be rented and even borrowed.

And of course, you need a stretch of snow, which isn’t hard to find in our state at this time of year. You can snowshoe in your own backyard—literally—or head out to the nearest park. If you want to venture out a little farther and explore the unique scenery found in different areas of Wisconsin, head to any of the state’s many parks, forests, and recreation areas, most of which are crossed with trails suitable for trekking.

Winter Wonderland Snowshoe Challenge With about 200,000 acres of public land including state and county forestland, Jackson County is one such area with an abundance of trails that take trekkers through some of Wisconsin’s prettiest winter wonderland.

The scenery is reason enough to plan a Jackson County snowshoeing outing, but if your goal is to also work through some of those resolutions, a community snowshoeing event might provide an extra bit of fun and motivation.

The Winter Wonderland Triple Snowshoe Challenge is a free, monthlong event sponsored by Jackson In



Action (JIA), a community coalition dedicated to promoting healthy lifestyles (see sidebar). The event consists of three weekends of snowshoeing at three different parks in Jackson County between mid-January and mid-February. Participants register online at jacksoninaction.org and then hike through the courses on their own at any time from Friday at 10 a.m. through Sunday at 3 p.m. each weekend of the event, logging into their account after each course to indicate completion. Each completed course earns an entry into the grand prize drawing for a pair of snowshoes.

The courses range in length from roughly a mile to just over 3 miles, and they get progressively more challenging although all are suitable for most ages and fitness levels. JIA has made participation as easy as possible, with few restrictions and rules: People are free to tackle as many of the individual courses as they are able, and even to turn around mid-course at any point if necessary; those who don't have snowshoes are

welcome to simply hike the courses in boots instead; and no times are kept or recorded.

"This is not a race; we're just trying to promote physical activity," said Kathleen Clemons, JIA coalition member from the Ho-Chunk Health Department.

Clemons and fellow JIA member Dawn Jacobson, a public health specialist at Jackson County DHHS, are actively involved in organizing the snowshoe challenge. Clemons marks the courses, while Jacobson handles promotion.

Product of the Pandemic

Ironically, the successful, participation-friendly format of an event organized to promote healthy lifestyles is due largely to a public health threat.

"It definitely was borne out of the pandemic," Clemons said of the month-long setup that both participants and sponsors have embraced. "We always

Snowshoeing is a great way for the whole family to enjoy Jackson County's beautiful winter landscape. (Photos courtesy of Black River Area Chamber of Commerce; inset photo by Woody Meyer)

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had a Family Snowshoe Day, so it was always held on one day, at one time. But last year, like with everything else, we had to kind of think outside of the box.”

She and Jacobson came up with a way to continue the annual snowshoe event safely, spreading it out over multiple weekends, and over different venues, to allow for appropriate social distancing. Jacobson described the switch in format as one of the “little silver linings of COVID,” as the pandemic-driven changes also helped with another challenge the organizers had faced even before social distancing was a concern: the unpredictable winter weather.

“You’d plan it in advance, and then it would always be the coldest day of the year, or you’d have freezing rain, so there was always a chance you’d have to scramble,” Jacobson pointed out. “That’s just how winter is here.”

Also, spreading the event over three weekends and three courses brought the added bonus of showcasing two more of the area’s beautiful parks. With these extra benefits, the flexible, pandemic-driven format is here to stay.

“We had really good participation last year and this format was really well received, so we decided this is the model we’re going to continue with, moving forward,” Clemons said.

Changes that were made to this year’s Winter Wonderland Triple Snowshoe Challenge simply build on last year’s successful format. In response to feedback, organizers expanded the event’s weekends to include Fridays this year, to accommodate area schools that want to incorporate the snowshoe challenge as a class activity.

To further encourage youth participation, JIA used proceeds from a previous successful fundraiser to buy 25 pairs of snowshoes for the Melrose-Mindoro and Alma Center-Humbird-Merrillan grade schools this year.

Three Courses The first leg of the Winter Wonderland Triple Snowshoe Challenge is held January 14–16 at East Arbutus County Park, located on the shores of Lake Arbutus on Jackson



Smrekar Trailhead

The Black River State Forest in Jackson County is filled with great places to enjoy snowshoeing, including the Smrekar Trails that start at Smrekar Road, 4 miles east of Millston just off County Road O.

This road, providing access to a cluster of four multi-purpose trail loops ranging in length from 1.2 miles to 8 miles, has connections to Dan Smrekar, longtime member of the Jackson Electric Cooperative Board of Directors. Smrekar’s grandparents farmed in the area, which is now largely forestland owned by the state. In fact, Smrekar said his family is the

last to privately own property in this area.

Among the Smrekar trail system is a 1.6-mile loop for snowshoeing, offering relatively flat terrain as well as a small stretch of more rugged topography. This trail begins at the Smrekar Trail parking lot at the trailhead off County O. The Smrekar parking lot also has a warming shelter and access to drinking water.

Snowshoeing is allowed anywhere in the Black River State Forest except for those trails groomed for cross country skiing.

(Photo courtesy of Black River Area Chamber of Commerce)

Electric Cooperative’s lines (W7898 Duck Hill Rd., Merrillan, WI 54754). The course begins at the Boat Landing Parking Lot.

The challenge continues two weeks later, January 28–30, at the Skyline Golf Course (612 N. 11th St. in Black River Falls). An 18-hole public golf course, Skyline also offers winter recreation opportunities including snowshoeing, cross

country skiing, and sledding.

“It’s like a little hidden treasure here that a lot of people don’t know about,” Clemons said.

The third and final leg is held at the Wazee Lake Recreation Area, also on Jackson Electric Cooperative’s lines (N6302 N Brockway Rd., Black River Falls). At 1,300 acres, this is Jackson County’s largest county park, the focal



Jackson In Action Sets a Healthy Pace

Jackson In Action (JIA) is a community coalition that promotes healthy lifestyles for children, their families, and the greater community. The organization was founded in 2011 in response to a survey showing Jackson County ranked low in health and high in poverty among other Wisconsin counties.

With the help of generous local sponsors, JIA volunteers organize activities throughout the year that provide low-cost or no-cost programs that encourage healthy habits and take advantage of the outdoor recreation opportunities available in Jackson County.

"We want to make physical activity available without any barriers in cost and accessibility," said Dawn Jacobson, JIA member and a health specialist at Jackson County Department of Health and Human Services, one of JIA's 12 community partners.

In addition to the Winter Wonderland Snowshoe Challenge, JIA sponsors the following:

- **Pace and Pedal**, a run/bike duathlon with a 5K color fun run/walk and a youth color fun run
- **Laces to Leaders**, an eight-week program for youth in grades 3–5 focusing on building self-confidence and a positive self-image while training for a 5K fun run
- **Hunter & Hiker Fitness**, a program designed to prepare hunters and hikers for the fall season with walking, hiking, and strength training
- **Move with a Doc**, an educational program presented by a local doctor followed by a group walk around the area
- **Harvest of the Month**, a nutrition program showcasing a different fruit or vegetable each month to encourage healthy food choices

Thanks to JIA's efforts, Jackson County has been recognized as a Wisconsin Active Together Community by the statewide organization Active Wisconsin.

To learn more about Jackson In Action, please visit jacksoninaction.org or call 715-284-4301 ext. 365.



The Wazee Lake Recreation Area, located on Jackson Electric Cooperative's lines, is the county's largest park and site of the final leg of the Winter Wonderland Snowshoe Challenge. (Photos courtesy of Jackson in Action)

point of which is Wisconsin's deepest inland lake. In the winter, the park provides 11 miles of ungroomed cross-country ski trails.

Wazee Lake Recreation Area's sprawling size means there are multiple options for courses. Clemons designed this year's path a little differently from last year so return participants can experience a different part of the park.

Snowshoers can enjoy any or all courses at their own pace, on their own time, as a solo jaunt or with a group. And of course, visitors are

welcome to explore the three sites at any time, even beyond the dates of the snowshoe challenge. The details don't matter to Clemons, Jacobson, or anyone else at JIA—they just want as many people as possible to get outside, get active, and enjoy the county's winter wonderland.—*Mary Erickson*

To learn more about the Winter Wonderland Triple Snowshoe Challenge, call 715-299-0870 or visit jacksoninaction.org/winterwonderland.