

On the Wild Side – as autumn ends

By Deborah Greaves October 2009

Here come the joys of winter. Crackling fires in the grates of those who can still burn wood, and gently licking flames in the fireplaces that are gas-fuelled. Hot-buttered rums for the grown-ups and hot chocolate for the kids. Crisp air nipping at our cheeks when we're outside.

Here comes the pain of winter, too. Dark afternoon interiors, brown and slimy garden plants, murky skies. The cost of rigging up our vehicles with snow tires. Treacherous and icy paths, sidewalks and stairs. Footwear, clothes and dog paws that are cold, wet and sloppy. Exhaustion, cold feet and aching fingers. Banks of ice chunks left by snowploughs. If you stay inside too much, the grey will get to you.

For some of us, winter is a world of possibilities. For some of us, the sight of the first frost, then the first flakes, makes our hearts sing. Snowboarders and skiers dash to tech shops and retailers to get their skis and boards tuned or replaced. Snowshoers move their gear closer to the outside door. All of us who love the divine Okanagan winter are shuffling through our jackets and mitts, checking our sleds and packs and feeling that anticipatory zing.

We wait, our blood singing silently. Restlessly we wait for those first flakes of snow, then the requisite hand's depth accumulation for some sports, snow to the thighs for others.

Those of us who have snow-ready dogs note our pets pacing, raising their heads to test the air with their noses. They know what the heavens have in store for us long before their guardians do. The dog at our house has become more morose when he doesn't go out with us, and is more arrogantly high-spirited when he does. All flags flying, his coat thickening, Solo wants more food. He's trying to supercharge himself to be ready for anything out on the trail.

Those of us who appreciate the sensuous and adventuresome pleasures of winter in the Okanagan gaze with fondness at long underwear, coats and hats and ice-fishing gear, at skates and mitts and our cameras. It's rarely colder than minus fifteen celcius; yet, the snow when it comes is almost always light and dry.

When temperatures swing back and forth between freeze and thaw as night gives way to day, we're sometimes treated in the upper elevation areas to one of Nature's loveliest outdoor décor treatments : hoar frost. The kids may giggle when they hear of it. It's a photographer's delight, anyone's visual treat: crystals of ice mixed with the previous day's snow coating each leaf, pine cone, branch and grass blade to create a sparkling and whimsical display. In moonlight or when the sun shines, it's glorious.

Shannon Lake might freeze again this year. The ice-fishers, though sometimes woefully messy, are among the happiest-looking human beings I've seen. There were hundreds of them on Shannon Lake last winter, smiling and contented, picnicking, visiting and

catching fish. A couple of them assisted my fitness and cholesterol-reduction program by keeping me informed on the thickness of the ice.

For several weeks, while the ice on the lake was eighteen inches thicker or more, I walked and trotted around the frozen perimeter at lunchtime with my ice-grabbers on my boots. I may have looked like a fool, but the numbers improved and the dog was happy.

Anyone who's made my acquaintance has heard me talk about snow shoeing. It's a sport that's inexpensive, democratic, physically warming and undemanding. There are no rules, no expensive uniforms and no fees – unless you want to support the trail work of a wonderful club like Telemark or Nordic. You can go for as short or long a trek as you wish. You can trek on Crown Land, a friend's ranch and in parks. Snowshoes can be rented for less than twenty dollars, purchased used from a rental outlet sometimes for a hundred, or borrowed from a friend for free. If you can walk, you can snow shoe.

You can snowshoe in the daytime. If work hours get in the way, you can put on a headlamp and snowshoe at night, which is just as much fun but requires that a few more people come along. It can be a sweaty or chilly business getting the snow shoes strapped on your boots and your packsack organized at the start of the trail, but once you're walking you either cool down or warm up, and you can feel the week's stress leaving your body.

Though some people run and race on snowshoes, leisure snow shoeing is a perfect example of Slow Visit Exploration. You walk, talk with your friends, plop down in the soft snow to sip from your thermos, and enjoy the whitened surroundings. You'll spot animal tracks – more than you may have expected.

However you like to savour it, when you layer on some fuzzy clothes, a hat and warm boots, winter in the outside Okanagan can be delicious.