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TRAVEL

Great snowshoe hikes near Boston

Once we’ve got 6 or more inches of snow, go for it. You’ll love the sensation of floating atop the white stuff.

By Diane Bair and Pamela Wright Globe Correspondent, Updated December 30, 2020, 2:00 p.m.

Mia Bilezikian of Boston snowshoed through the Public Garden. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

Got a pair of snowshoes, or can an outdoorsy buddy hook you up? Toss ‘em in the car and head out for a day of adventure and exercise, Bigfoot-style. You can’t help but social distance with giant shoes on your feet, and a face mask will help keep you warm as you wander the trails. Keep an eye out for animal tracks or simply enjoy the loveliness of winter. Think lacy ice whorls on a river, peeling white birch trees, snow-covered lichen . . . winter’s beauty reveals itself as you tromp around at a gentle pace.

We discovered these primo spots while researching our guidebook, “Snowshoe Routes: New England.” The trail descriptions here are meant to give you a sense of what to expect — they’re no substitute for trail maps — so download a map before you go. Snow can obscure trail blazes and markers, so it’s easier to get lost in winter. Never snowshoed before? There are several good tutorials online, like REI’s “Beginner’s Guide to Snowshoeing,” www.rei.com/learn/c/snowshoeing. Once we’ve got 6 or more inches of snow, go for it. You’ll love the sensation of floating atop the white stuff.

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Blue Hills Reservation

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Can a place so close to the city feel like wilderness? Yep. At 635 feet, Great Blue Hill is no Matterhorn, but it’s the tallest of the Blue Hills, and the surrounding area offers plenty of options for snowshoe trekking. The reservation comprises 7,000 acres, ranging from Quincy to Dedham, and Milton to Randolph, so there’s plenty of territory to explore! This urban escape is laced with 125 miles of trails. Cross-country skiing is allowed, although trails are not groomed for that. So, as always, do the polite thing and plop your big feet alongside any ski tracks, not on top of them. It’s more fun to break your own trail anyway. Before heading out, download a trail map at www.mass.gov/doc/blue-hills-trail-map-guide/download. To make it easy to navigate, they’ve placed white wooden markers on trees at trail intersections. The four-digit number on the marker corresponds to an intersection number on the DCR Blue Hills trail map.

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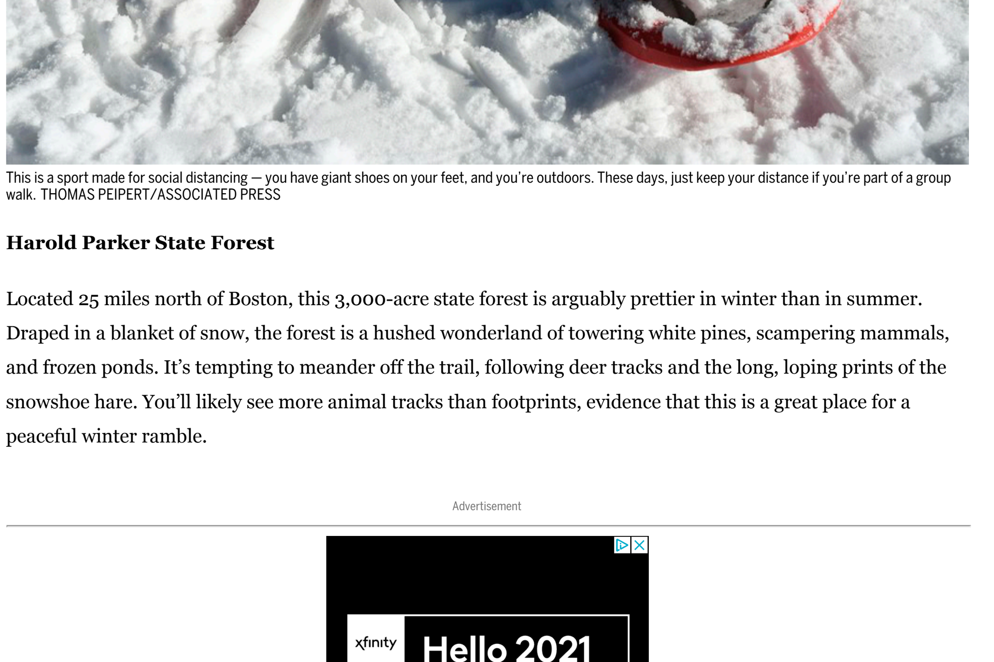
Here are a couple of worthy options, both reachable via the parking lot at Houghton’s Pond on Hillside Street in Milton: Follow the yellow dot trail, Houghton’s Pond Loop, and enjoy piney woods and pond views. With its gentle hills and mostly flat terrain, this 1-mile loop is great for families and beginners. Head counter-clockwise around the pond, and the trail will lead you back to the entrance.

For a longer trek — 2 miles, about two hours, with some long, gradual slopes — consider the green dot loop trail around Tucker Hill. From the visitor center, follow the green dots up the paved hill to intersection #2070. Turn left onto Tucker Hill Path (green dots) and follow the loop clockwise around the base of Tucker Hill amid stands of spruce and beech trees. Keep right at intersection #2096 to stay on the green dot trail. At intersection #2070, retrace your steps downhill and past the bathhouse to return to the parking lot. 840 Hillside St., Milton; 617-698-1802; www.mass.gov/locations/blue-hills-reservation.



This is a sport made for social distancing — you have giant shoes on your feet, and you’re outdoors. These days, just keep your distance if you’re part of a group walk. THOMAS PEIPERT/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Harold Parker State Forest

Located 25 miles north of Boston, this 3,000-acre state forest is arguably prettier in winter than in summer. Draped in a blanket of snow, the forest is a hushed wonderland of towering white pines, scampering mammals, and frozen ponds. It’s tempting to meander off the trail, following deer tracks and the long, loping prints of the snowshoe hare. You’ll likely see more animal tracks than footprints, evidence that this is a great place for a peaceful winter ramble.

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The forest offers 35 miles of trails and fire roads, but going off-road is half the fun — you can trek around the park’s 11 ponds amid forests of central hardwood, hemlock, and pine. Make sure you’ve got a map handy while exploring this sprawling property: www.mass.gov/doc/harold-parker-state-forest-trail-map/download .

One to try: The blue-blazed 3.1-mile Stearns Pond Trail. This loop begins and ends at the park’s headquarters. Start at Gate 3, and heading counterclockwise, follow Beach Road to Gate 4 and turn left. Trek around Stearns Pond on Stearns Pond Road, and leave the pond, turning left on the trail, and proceed to Harold Parker Road. Cross the road at NA30 and continue straight at NA31. At this point, you can walk back along Harold Parker Road to the park headquarters. 305 Middleton Road, North Andover; 978-686-3391; www.mass.gov/locations/harold-parker-state-forest.

Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge

Here, beavers rule. You’ll see evidence of their activity everywhere, including beaver lodges, felled trees, and tree stumps gnawed to sharpness by these toothy critters. Any kids in your party will want to see the animals, but that’s not likely — in addition to stick lodges, beavers live in tunnels they dig in the banks of lakes and rivers. But looking for beaver signs will keep things lively on this kid-friendly hike.

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Set 40 miles west of Boston, this 1,700-acre refuge lies along about 8 miles of the Nashua River. For decades, one family owned and farmed the land; later, the refuge was part of Camp Devens (later, Fort Devens), an army base. In 1974, the land was turned over to the Fish and Wildlife Service.

The 2-mile interpretive trail offers an overview of highlights. It begins at the parking area and then follows the riverbank, crossing two oxbow ponds, and returns along Tank Road. Allow about two hours to cover it on snowshoes, taking in views of the 56-mile Nashua River, forest and wetland habitats, and a beaver pond.

As mentioned, this is a fun one for kids, but changeable Massachusetts weather can make it hazardous; the loop is sometimes impassable due to flooding, or icy in melt-freeze conditions, so you may need to adjust your route. The highlight — besides the beaver’s handiwork — will be the portion of trail along the river and the mosaic-like pattern of ice crystals that add sparkle to the winter scene. The parking lot is at the end of Still Water Depot Road, Harvard; 978-443-4661; www.fws.gov/refuge/Oxbow/.

Ravenswood Park

Literature mavens might recall the Lord of Ravenswood, in Sir Walter Scott’s 1819 novel “The Bride of Lammermoor.” Perhaps landowner Samuel Sawyer, who preserved the land in the late 1800s, thought this part of Gloucester resembled the hills of southern Scotland. Hard to say, but it’s an enchanting landscape nonetheless.

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Giant boulders dot this 600-acre property, deposited by retreating glaciers thousands of years ago. In winter, they look like giant snowballs. Other elements include kettle ponds and Great Magnolia Swamp (a glacial bog). Fernwood Lake is technically on city land, not part of the park, but it adds to the scenery. Also notable is the variety of trees at Ravenswood — you’ll tromp past oak, birch, beech, maple, white pine, mountain laurel, and even sweetbay magnolia (uncommon here.)

Among the 10 miles of carriage paths, the 2-mile orange-blazed Ledge Hill Trail is a favorite of families. To reach it, you’ll head down Old Salem Road from the parking lot and then take a right. To make a longer route, head left off Old Salem Road to yellow-blazed Magnolia Swamp Trail to Fernwood Lake Trail (blue blazes), heading back along Old Salem Road. That 4.8-mile, porkchop-shaped loop will probably take you 2½ hours or so, and offers open views of a small lake.

An intriguing landmark here is Hermit’s Plaque, a verdigris plate mounted on a boulder along Old Salem Road and Fernwood Lake Trail at junction #23. This marker honors Mason A. Walton (1838-1917), who built a cabin here and was an expert on the park’s flora and fauna. Over the years Walton communed with local wildlife, including red squirrels, catbirds, white-foot mice, and raccoons. Some became his pets, and were the subjects of Walton’s nature studies. Given his unique lifestyle, visitors began to seek out the romantic “Hermit of Ravenswood.” His 1903 memoir was called “A Hermit’s Wild Friends or Eighteen Years in the Woods.” 481 Western Ave., Gloucester; 978-526-8687; thetrustees.org/place/ravenswood-park/.

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