

Trip Report: Snowshoeing Around Clark Lake
January 11, 2003
By Chris Hallaxs
Posted GreatLakesHikes YahooGroups.Com Message Board

Something possessed me to go try to find my way out across my 'favorite' tag alder/cattail/cedar bog after it got dark tonight. I see I've been at it about an hour and a half. I swear it felt like 3 hours. All this fluffy new powder is a hell of a drain on the leg muscles. No animal tracks, but nothing can move much until this snow has a few days to settle out and firm up, though it may pay to follow my tracks back through in 24-48 hours, as stuff will probably pick up the snowshoe-track "highway" I put through tonight. My earlier tracks were obliterated by the new snow from the last couple of days. Near the end of the walk, the moon came out from between snowsquall clouds for a moment. That was gorgeous in all the snow-laden trees. It stayed about long enough for my eyes to adjust to the almost-blinding brightness, then it suddenly seemed to get very very dark and it started snowing like hell again.

It's not bad going at all after having a trail broken. Once or twice I doubled back for a short distance after running into a wet spot or other dead end as I made my way through the brush. Walking on the broken trail is negligibly more difficult than just walking on packed ground. Not for the first time I got to thinking how nice it would be to have several people to keep trading off on the trailbreaking chore.

I wimped out in the wetter areas of the swamp, which are crisscrossed with numerous little streamlets out in the grassland/cattail area. They are all bridged over with snow now, but there are some places where the previous snow melted down to water, which then froze up to ice, and now the new snow blew across and filled in the waist-deep hole in the snow, but it's soft. Even through the clouds, the half moon, and the stars provide enough light with the snow to see, but you miss out on the subtle details, like contours of the snow surface. About the third time I took a step and ended up in snow up to my waist and pulled out my snowshoe with slush freezing all over it, I decided to 'cheat' and break out a little bit of light.

I didn't need much. My red CMG Infinity that lives on a string around my neck was more than enough.

The rest of this company's product line I don't know about, but doesn't seem much remarkable. However, the Infinity Tasklight is a fantastic thing. (blatant plug--maybe they'll send me a pile of free lights :-)
http://www.cmgequipment.com/Infinity_New.html

The end of my route intersects the local ski trail, which I then follow out to

the west end of town. Well, sort of follow. I sometimes wonder what people think when they follow the trail and keeping seeing my tracks alternately cross or briefly follow the trail over and over again. If the woods is open enough to permit easy going, and I know where I want to go, I travel in mostly straight lines, perhaps curving around ridges so as to not go up and down hills so much. Conversely, they seem to make ski trails winding to enhance the scenic route effect, I guess.

Not to worry, Jundog, in this deep fluff, it didn't make any hard ridges to scrape off ski wax--it's all knee deep pillowfeathers :-)

Actually, I suspect if anyone uses the ski trail tomorrow, they'll wish I went all the way around it, unless the groomer makes it through first.

I maybe should do more bushwhacking after dark. It's good practice for using a compass, which I'm not much in the habit of doing. I can't see far enough through the woods in the dark to support my usual method of repetitive sight-range landmarks/dead reckoning. While my favored method works better in that it has evolved to fit working through terrain where you have to pick a winding path through instead of being able to go where the needle points, I'd probably learn something from forcing myself to do something different.

Speaking of picking routes, has anyone else ever noticed that there is like One True Way between any two points in the woods, it seems? I mean, if you concentrate on just finding the easiest, least brushy way through, and worry about direction only secondarily, you can go through several times and find yourself practically walking on your own tracks half the time without even noticing it. Even though I pretty much take a different route every time through, because my tracks keep getting wiped out by new snow, there are a few areas where I seem to walk past the exact same trees almost every time through. Something about the geography or thick and thin areas of brush is apparently forcing me through particular areas without me even noticing.

Hmm...and of course, I can't finish this without first going off on not one, but now a secondary tangent. In regards to the "one optimal route" thing, I seem to find myself incidentally following game trails when going off-trail, and have learned it pays to follow these, at least a bit. They come and go, so there's no need to worry if you keep losing and picking them back up ever little ways, but a few years ago, I learned a hell of a lesson concerning game trails. I wanted to walk around the east and north side of Clark lake, north of the Tahquamenon Falls, in order to see Betsy lake, simply because I'd never actually set eyes on it. For most of the day, I was following deer tracks on and off in the bog as is usual, and then at one point the deer trails all kept veering off the main one and going totally somewhere else, until I encountered the unusual situation of an area totally devoid of any game trails at all. Basically, all the trails that I'd been incidentally following all at once very decidedly

turned off and went somewhere else--not anywhere else in particular so much as everywhere else but where I was going. As I pressed on, I got into the worst brush I have yet to ever seen before or since. It took me most of the day to go a mile. At one point, I dropped my water bottle and it fell down in the brush under my feet, and I had to take a large knife and chop through the brush so I could reach down and get my water back. Imagine acres and acres of living brushpile growing on an expanse of waist deep black pudding. Sometimes, my foot would slip off the roots I was walking on, and sink thigh-deep in mud until my foot happened to hit another root and stop me. In short, this area was so bad the animals don't even go there. I pay more attention and give more thought now to where the animal trails go.

Since it took me so long to get over there, I found myself on the wrong side of the lake as it got dark. This wasn't a huge deal. I didn't have to be to work tomorrow. I could stay, or I could walk back in the dark. However, the brush I had just been through did NOT seem like an option I wanted to try in the dark. I grabbed two dead trees off the shore, and with one under each arm to sort of float me in case the bottom was too muddy and wanted to suck me down, I walked back across Clark lake to get back to the south side. I sort of skirted the east side slightly, but basically walked right across it. Unless the other side is much deeper, or I miraculously missed the deep holes, the whole thing is 5 feet deep. It was mid July, there was a full moon in a clear sky, and it froze that night, yet the water was warm--it had been around 90F that day, and staying in it was better than being in the air. I got back to my car at 1am, dripping wet, covered with black mud to my chest, shaking so bad from some mix of exhaustion and cold that I could barely get the key in the door lock, and my legs so tired I was getting up to three cramps at the same time per leg. LOL. I felt an odd but great sense of achievement that This Day Had Been Seized! (note for the safety conscious: the cold was not a huge issue in terms of danger, as I only got cold after I got out of the water and walked the 10 minutes back to the car. Actually, this probably would not have even been that bad, except I was pretty drained of energy at that point.)

To totally finish up completely off topic of anything I started on, in accordance with my personal tradition, if you want to walk to Betsy Lake as I did, I've since been told the west side of Clark lake is a MUCH easier route to get around to the north side. I went the other way, because I was guessing otherwise from what I saw. The preferred way by far would be to canoe across Clark Lake. This would be a cinch. You can walk easily on an abandoned road from the parking lot to Clark lake, and there is a nice high and dry path on the north side of Clark Lake that goes straight to a boat landing on Betsy. I've always wondered if the fishing is absolutely fantastic back there because not many people bother to fish an area where they have to carry the boat twice for perhaps 10 minutes at time?