

NORTHERN EXPLORING



WINTER 2023



ABOVE THE SNOW, BELOW THE STARS

**SEEKING SOLACE AMONG THE TREES
ATTEMPTING THE UNUSUAL
REBUILDING HISTORY**

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WINTER 2023

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABOVE THE SNOW, BELOW THE STARS

Story by Teah Dowling
Photography Provided

Page 6

SEEKING SOLACE AMONG THE TREES

Story by Skylar Hunyadi
Photography by Rob Fountain

Page 16

REBUILDING HISTORY

Story by Shelley Hazen
Photography by Mark Kurtz

Page 26





SEEKING SOLACE AMONG THE TREES

Story by Skylar Hunyadi
Photography by Rob Fountain

A practice that encourages disconnecting from the chaos of modern life and reconnecting with the natural world, resulting in a powerful sense of peace, sensory snowshoeing calls upon your senses to experience nature in a new and more mindful way. This season, immerse yourself in the wintry beauty of a North Country forest with the help of Adirondack Riverwalking & Forest Bathing.

In winter, we usually retreat indoors to the warmth of fireplaces and the coziness of indoor activities. But these colder months in the North Country are captivating with beautifully snow-blanketed trees and even the winter sun can still offer some valuable vitamin D, so time should be spent outdoors. One option is sensory snowshoeing. A unique guided experience, this activity invites people to find comfort in the snow-laden landscape of the forest.

Sensory snowshoeing has roots in the Japanese practice of forest bathing. About 30 years ago, forest bathing began to counteract the declining health of the population. The Japanese Ministry of Health noticed how the fast-paced urban life negatively impacted people's physical and psychological well-being, so they utilized the forested landscape surrounding the major cities as a source of restoration and calm. Nature sensory trails were created in various forests in Japan, and guides were



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trained to help people attune and relate to nature in a healing way. Today, forest bathing takes the form of winter activities like sensory snowshoeing.

Amos Clifford brought forest bathing to North America when he founded the Association of Nature & Forest Therapy (ANFT) in 2012. The association offers an experiential certification process, following its mission to “support planetary health by nurturing heart-centered relationships between all peoples and the more-than-human world of nature.” The hands-on part of the training prepares future guides for the physical and emotional aspects of nature therapy. After six months of remote training and a four-day in-person immersion, individuals can lead experiences as Certified Forest Therapy Guides.

Adirondack Riverwalking & Forest Bathing owners Helene Gibbens and Suzanne Weirich have certification through the ANFT. Since 2017, Gibbens and Weirich have guided sensory snowshoeing and riverwalking tours. “It’s about connecting people to nature in a different way,” says Gibbens, “helping to experience ourselves as a part of nature.” Each nature wellness tour aligns with their mission: “to enhance human health, as well as foster human care for nature.”

Sensory snowshoeing is founded on the idea that people feel better after spending time in nature. For Gibbens and Weirich, journeying outside in the winter provides an opportunity also to journey inward and find solace in snow, away from the hustle and bustle of everyday life. “I enjoy being in the cool crisp air. It





makes me feel alive, alert and more joyful,” says Weirich. “When I get back indoors, I always feel more focused and have more mental clarity.” Naturally, the body may feel some chill during a sensory snowshoeing outing, but an in-depth experience will leave you with an inner warmth carried back into everyday life.

How To Prepare

Sensory snowshoeing begins with preparation. It's crucial to dress warmly, head to toe, for a good 10 degrees colder than the actual temperature. Because outdoor sessions have many moments of stillness, the body does not generate much body heat. It's generally recommended to bring the following items:

1. Warm hat, gloves or mittens
2. Layers you can add or remove easily (no cotton)
3. Wool socks and insulated winter boots
4. Snowshoes (can be provided)
5. Windproof/waterproof jacket
6. Windproof/waterproof pants (ideally)
7. Backpack with any snacks and medical items
8. Water bottle



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What To Expect

Once the proper outdoor gear is on, the waivers have been signed, and guides and group members have gathered on the outskirts of the forest, the real experience begins. While conveying a short way into the woods, the guides give a history of sensory snowshoeing, an overview of their training and what to expect for the next hour and a half. During this brief reprieve before trekking deeper into the forest, guests are asked to silence their technology and truly immerse themselves. "What I see in nature gives me insights into my own life," says Weirich. An essential part of sensory snowshoeing is noticing the qualities of nature and taking in its wisdom.

Sensory snowshoeing is structured by two to five sensory activities, depending on the length of the session and how long each activity is facilitated. The activities aim to deepen

the connection to nature and more mindfully engage with the five senses. For example, one activity invites you to explore the multitude of textures in the forest, perhaps finding new and interesting qualities to touch and even taste. Another encourages you to "befriend a tree" in the forest by observing its physical and symbolic qualities and being open to the wisdom it holds. "It helps us reconnect with ourselves, as well as with nature," says Weirich. These activities are best experienced in person but can be described as "tranquil" and "soothing." "It gets us out of our busy minds," Weirich adds. Guests are often asked to share what they notice after each activity but are always welcome to keep their experiences private. A sensory snowshoeing session is also marked by a beginning and ending ritual, easing you into the wintry forest and gently back into the modern-day world.

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Feel The Benefits

Connecting to nature, be that as part of an immersive experience or through daily routine, is hard-backed by science as a beneficial practice. According to a 2020 study by the European Centre for Environment & Human Health at the University of Exeter, it takes 120 minutes in nature to gain a sense of well-being and feel healthy. The findings of this study highlight that those individuals who spent two hours per week in green spaces reported positive mental, physical and emotional health.

After sensory snowshoeing, one may feel a sense of peace and newfound ease as they emerge from the trees more connected to the natural world. The impact of sensory snowshoeing can also surpass the experience, soothing the anxiety, anger and other intense emotions that build up so that we can re-enter daily life renewed and ready to go. It's also common for those who experience daily anxiety to report a noticeable decrease in symptoms after a sensory snowshoeing session. "We guide people to use their senses to slow down," says Gibbens. "And then there's a healing that happens within ourselves and with our relationship to nature."

See The Beauty

Although North Country winters have a bad reputation for being harsh and uninviting, locals continue to find beauty in the colder months. The scenery of the Adirondacks is transformed into a winter wonderland — rich with trees and trails to explore. "Often people think, 'Oh, it's too cold to go outside,' and they

stay indoors," says Weirich. "Sensory snowshoeing gets you up close to the beauty of winter and to the stillness of the forest."

With an abundance of fast-paced winter activities, go for something slower this winter; connect with the beautiful white landscape, and find some solace among the trees.

Adirondack Riverwalking & Forest Bathing offers guided trips in the Saranac Lake and Lake Placid area. Sensory snowshoeing trips can be booked from December through March, weather depending. To learn more or book an experience, visit adirondackriverwalking.com; call 518-637-2963 or 518-651-6560; or email adirondackriverwalking@gmail.com.

Skylar Hunyadi is a freelance writer and licensed mental health counselor. She has lived in the North Country since 2004 and has a passion for sharing the beauty and opportunities of her home.





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