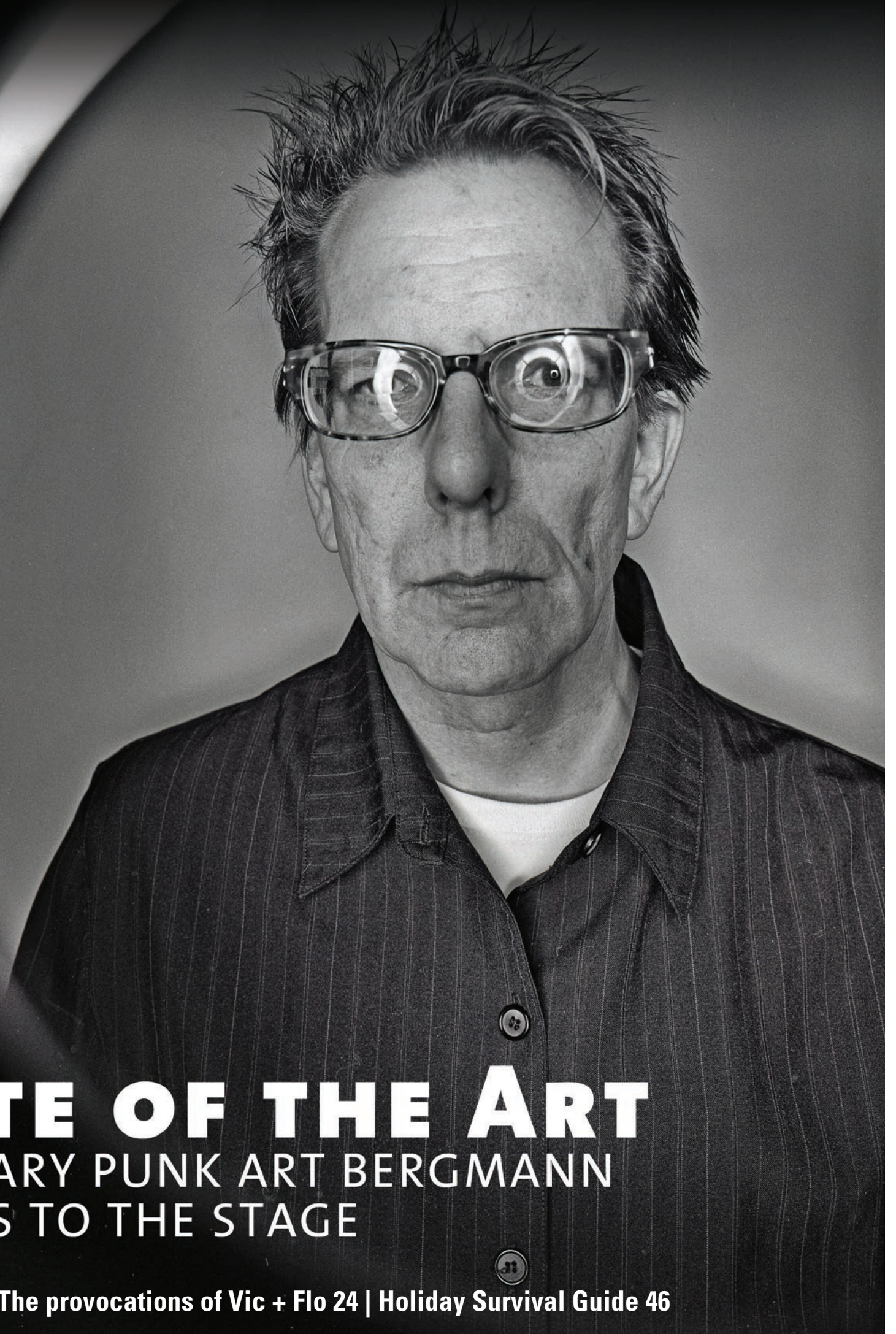


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SNOW ZONE // SNOWSHOE

EXPLORING JASPER BY SNOWSHOE

A quieter way to explore the mountains



// Jared Bernard

The snow is falling and Jasper National Park beckons. The beauty of Jasper's mountains is dramatically augmented in the winter, for every ridge and crevice is enhanced by an outline of snowy frost, and one of the best ways to get out there and take advantage of it is by snowshoe. Every year millions of people visit Jasper National Park in the summer for hiking or sightseeing, and many visit Marmot Basin in the winter, but fewer think of snowshoeing once they arrive. If you're tired of the crowds and costs associated with skiing, scared of the reports of snowmobilers getting in accidents or even if you just want to spice up your winter repertoire, consider adding snowshoes to your gear.

This is the time for solitude and peace. Yet, go to Marmot Basin and you might wonder where all the solitude went. Much like the summer season, solitude does not await in the easily accessible venues, but only in Jasper's back country and the only way to see it is to get in there by either cross-country ski or snowshoe.

One obstacle that may prevent you from getting out your wallet to buy some snowshoes is money, but just compare that to the costs associated with major winter sports in Jasper. If you want to rent downhill skis, you're looking at \$20 – \$56 per day, plus a lift pass that will cost ap-

proximately \$80 per day. Of course you also need that lift pass for snowboarding, and the board itself rents at \$30 a day. If you choose to buy, those downhill skis will run \$200 – \$800 while snowboards cost \$500 – \$930. Snowmobiles are not allowed in Jasper National Park, but you can go snowmobiling in some areas just outside of Jasper, where you can rent for \$253 a day. If you want to buy one of these, you might as well buy a car. Don't forget that each 10.8-gallon tank of gas will cost you about \$47 around Jasper. All told, you're spending at least \$100 a day to ski, \$110 to snowboard or \$300 to snowmobile and none of it grants serenity. Conversely, snowshoes sell at \$90 – \$305, and merely \$10 a day to rent. No extra costs.

Now you might suppose that snowshoeing won't give you the same intense exercise as skiing or snowboarding. After all, downhill skiing burns between 408 and 594 calories (kcal) per hour and snowboarding is also 340 – 571 per hour. Cross-country skiing burns 476 – 600 calories per hour. These are ranges for a person weighing 150 lbs, based on information from University of Vermont physiologist Declan Connolly, *Fitness* magazine, self.com, healthstatus.com, and Calorie Count (caloriecount.about.com). The ranges here do not reflect

varying weight, but rigour of exercise.

In contrast, snowshoeing burns 500 – 1046 calories per hour. This is because snowshoeing is a cardiovascular workout similar to being on an elliptical training machine. Designed to prevent your legs from "post-holing" through deep snow, the snowshoe provides a wide surface area that not only makes you take wide steps, but you also must lift your snowshoe straight up when you begin to step. The pivoting foot plate on most snowshoes means your ankle can still rotate as you lift your foot straight up. The result is a low-impact cardiovascular exercise that targets your calves and quadriceps while going uphill, and your hamstrings while heading downhill. Using snowshoe poles also works your triceps, biceps and pectoral muscles. And when you are breaking trail as the leader in a single-file group, you employ your hip flexors as well as your quadriceps to get through that deep untouched snow. For this reason, some marathon runners and other athletes snowshoe to keep themselves in shape through the winter months.

Sometimes we natural-born hikers forget about snowshoes. We see the short number of daylight hours and the hibernated appearance of Jasper's forests and mountains and we just figure that we're snowed in for another year, wallowing in

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seasonal depression. Yet snowshoeing is essentially just hiking on top of a layer of snow, allowing you to continue to explore Jasper's beautiful back country. It requires virtually no lessons because it's almost as simple as walking, unlike skiing or skating. Even trails you know well appear newly transformed under a delicate blanket of white.

If you think Jasper is lifeless in the winter, maybe you simply haven't tried the right activity. To see gray jays fluttering through a canopy of fir, or elk moving silently through a stand of spruce, you need to be quiet. The crowds at Marmot Basin or the roar of a snowmobile engine will drive away most wildlife, but activities like snowshoeing and cross-country skiing will enable you to stealthily get into the back country. Once you are away from all the din and back among the crystallized mountains and streams, you'll find a peaceful crisp world cloaked in winter.

When you drive into Jasper National Park in the winter, you may look around and find yourself asking where all the snow went. If you're here for winter fun, this may be like a slap in the face. But, there are strong westerly trade winds that whisk through the mountains and basically clean out most of the snow along the major highways in Jasper. Along the Yellowhead Highway, the Athabasca River is flanked by sand dunes that are deposited by these winds. As powdery snow is much lighter than sand, the same winds make short work of any wintery look to the scenery. Yet all you have to do is get off the highways and venture back into the forests to find all the deeper snow you'll need for a great snowshoeing experience.

When you look at the maps of Jasper in the winter, you'll see myriad roads and trails that have been groomed for cross-country skiers, and in fact, may be off-limits to snowshoers. However, in some cases you can still snowshoe on these trails if you simply walk alongside the groomed tracks. Plus, there are other great spots to snowshoe to where no one else can go. Below are a handful of snowshoe locations to explore in Jasper National Park.

Pyramid Bench: This hike can be as long and as difficult as you'd like because there is a network of trails here. Therefore, you can choose between a number of trail heads at intervals along Pyramid Lake Fire Road: one right in town behind the pool and activity centre, one for the Cottonwood Slough at kilometre marker two, another at the Pyramid Stables at 3.5 km and one at the end of the fire road.

This can be a great place to take your kids if you hike the easy 4.6-km round trip hike along Trails 6 and 6c to Patricia Lake from the trail head at the stables, or go two kilometres one way along Trail 8 to Mina Lake. Those looking for more of a challenge can get some exercise by snowshoeing up and down the more difficult hillsides along Trail 2. Although close to town, you are likely to spot some fresh tracks of cougars and wolves. These are generally secretive animals and will normally hide from you instead of attacking you. To give these animals their space, the park asks that you don't stray from the trails.

Valley of the Five Lakes: Here is an easy

4.2-km round-trip trail suitable for a family outing. The trail head is located nine kilometres south of the start of Highway 93 on the south end of town. This quaint little trail will take you over a mixed forested hill and down past a frozen streambed cloaked in frosted willows. The path continues around the lakes, which should be easy enough even for your little snowshoers.

Wabasso Lake: This trail to Wabasso Lake is easy and about 6.2-km round trip. To get here, drive 14.6 km south along Highway 93 from the town. You'll travel through forest and up an icy trickling stream to emerge on the shore of Wabasso Lake, onto which you can walk and explore if the lake is frozen. This trip is great for getting your feet wet (not literally, the lake should be frozen), for doing more adventuresome trips or just a great place to spend a day snowshoeing.

Bald Hills: Bald Hills exemplifies the rolling terrain of the park's eastern mountains, gentle enough to allow for good snow accumulation. Located at the end of Maligne Road, this is a great destination for higher elevation snowshoeing. At 10.4 km round trip and moderate difficulty, this trail has been groomed for cross-country skiers, so be mindful not to walk on their tracks. The ascent is somewhat steep in sections. At about 2170 metres of elevation, you'll reach a horse hitch with a great panorama of Maligne Lake and Samson Peak. The trail beyond here to the northernmost of the Bald Hills will likely be much less trodden than the way up, so if you venture this way you'll need your navigational skills. You'll also need to exercise extreme caution due to avalanche zones. Do not approach steep snowy parts or go near or under overhanging ridges of snow. At the 2300-metre summit of the North Bald Hill, you'll be granted a superb wintery vista of the Maligne Range to the south and mounts Kerkeslin and Hardisty to the west.

Geraldine Lookout: Depending on recent snowfall, this difficult 19-km round-trip trek can be done without snowshoes for most of the way. That's because you have to walk so far along the closed Geraldine Fire Road—seven kilometres each way. Geraldine Fire Road can be reached by heading south from Jasper for nearly seven kilometres on Highway 93, turning right onto 93A, and then right onto Geraldine Fire Road after 23 km. This road is also groomed for skis, so be mindful and don't disturb the tracks. Here you're at the icy cascade of Athabasca Falls, where torrents frozen in motion plunge over the quartz formations into the sandstone gorge below. When you at last reach the trail head to Geraldine Lakes, you'll find another trailhead to the right



// Jared Bernard

leading just 2.5 km one way to Geraldine Lookout. In the summer, this is just a short trail used by mountain bikers, but in the winter, this trail really gets snowed in. You'll only be able to snowshoe about a quarter of the speed at which you can hike, and that's beside the steep 225 metre elevation gain on the way to the lookout. What makes it all worthwhile is the breathtaking view of Edith Cavell's south face crisp with snow, as well as Needle Peak and lower Whirlpool Valley to the west.

Wilcox Pass: This eight kilometre round-trip trek is nice and easy in the summer, but spectacular and moderately difficult in the winter. The trailhead is 3.1 km south of the Columbia Icefield Visitor Centre on Highway 93, in the same parking lot as the Wilcox Creek Campground. Here you'll get an ethereal panorama of Mount Athabasca, Mount Andromeda and Athabasca Glacier. You'll need all your navigational skills here to find the way as it may be buried under snow. For an even greater adventure, keep going through the silent serenity of Wilcox Pass at an elevation of 2370 metres to Tangle Falls, where you should have a buddy drop off a car to make this an 11.2-km one-way through-route. Definitely be aware of avalanche risks when heading into this terrain.

Big Bend: Here is a relatively easy 13-km round trip that you could turn into an over-nighter if you want a winter camping experience. Starting at Sunwapta Falls located at kilometre 55 along Highway 93, cross the bridge over the stunningly beautiful icy limestone canyon—with your snowshoes off, of course—and follow the signs toward Fortress Lake. After 6.5 km, you'll reach the campground at Big Bend, so named because it is on the edge of a great curve in the Athabasca River. If you are prepared and want to make this a more elaborate trip, continue to Athabasca Crossing, a campground nine kilometres further upstream. Either way, I recommend staying the night in Big Bend in the tranquil frosty shadows of Dragon Peak and Mount Quincy because snowshoeing is very slow going.

Always check trail conditions and ensure you have a topography map, navigational skills, first aid kit, a lighter, the means to call for help and sunglasses to protect your eyes from glare off the snow. Avoid higher elevations or walking under unsupported bluffs of snow because you can get caught in an avalanche. Always give yourself plenty of time for day hikes by starting very early in the winter—and even earlier over the peaks of the mountains.

JARED BERNARD
JARED@VUEWEEKLY.COM

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