

# OF NATURALISTS AND CROSS-COUNTRY SKIS\*

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The winter life-style of many self-propelled prairie people has gone through a drastic change over the past three years. Back in the 60's, the mere suggestion of such change would have produced incredulous stares. However, this change did occur and it was due entirely to the blossoming of Nordic skiing from Scandinavia on the Prairies. No group of people has experienced this turnabout of life-style more so than naturalists, i.e., those who have a certain awe and reverence for natural environments.

Most naturalists, prior to the winter of 1970/1971, spent from November to March reminiscing about the past snow-free season and planning for the next. Although the urge to continue outdoor activities at a steady pace through the winter was there it was rarely strong enough to overcome the obvious discomforts. Some hardier types ventured out a few times each winter but even their activities were curtailed by the elements.

There is no escaping the fact that humans on foot are no match for the outdoors in winter. Even when the temperature is tolerable and the air is still, a person can trudge only so far through deep snow before exhaustion sets in. Snowshoes make going easier, but for most people snowshoeing has little or no innate appeal. Therefore naturalists, for all their deep commitment and dedication to the outdoors, made very few tracks in prairie snow, prior to 1970.

This situation changed dramatically with the advent of cross-country

skiing. All the reasons for not being outdoors in winter suddenly disappeared. Twenty below was no longer unbearably cold; snow now aided rather than hindered travel; and winds were just as likely to be refreshing as bone-chilling. A cross-country skier, dressed moderately, can remain outdoors all day in the heart of winter and still be comfortable . . .

Moving effortlessly on cross-country skis, one could almost believe man and skis evolved together over the ages. It is an odd society that promotes winter travel by machine rather than cross-country skis. Still, the ideal trail for the lone cross-country skier is a power-toboggan track under an inch or so of new snow.

Snow in its limitless variations is a fascinating substance that never ceases to intrigue the cross-country skier. Travelling 10 or more miles a day through various plant communities, the skier makes many contacts with animals and their sign. These contacts are easier to interpret during winter because sight is not obscured by leaves or a dull background as in summer observations, and most activities are recorded in the snow. Besides, winter residents are both few in number and kind and tend to lead uncomplicated lives compared to the complex fauna of summer.

On the trail you may come across a snowshoe rabbit that has fallen prey to a winged predator and then, farther on, specks of blood mark the spot where a vole's future was decided by a weasel. Random thinking ceases abruptly as a Ruffed Grouse bursts from its snow roost just inches from the tip of your left ski. You observe that a snow-roosting grouse is not the

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easy prey one might think. On diving into the snow it tunnels several inches before coming to rest. Any subsequent disturbance near the roost or strange shadow cast over the bird produces the startling blast-off of a snow-shrouded grouse.

You stop for a moment and three deer cross the trail about 100 yards ahead, browsing as they move along slowly in response to the lay of the land and the bush. Pondering these observations, it soon becomes clear that survival is the dominant theme in the winter world of wildlife.

A prairie winter can be a tough adversary and the thought of survival is never far below the surface of a cross-country skier's mind. The skier soon learns that it is wiser to roll with winter's punch than to meet it head on. Stay in the trees and avoid the wind; absorb the warmth of the sun; escape snow drifting that bares the ground and fills in return trails. On sunny, windless days, head for the open fields and lakes and enjoy the windpacked snow and the freedom to roam anywhere. Pattern your skiing behaviour after wildlife behaviour — react to the weather and snow in such a way that you minimize discomfort. Don't fight the elements — blend in with them. Have several favourite areas with different features so that after reading the elements you can select the best area for the existing conditions . . .

Winter is a season of several distinct moods that are soon felt by the naturalist/skier: **November and early December** — Ominous season; shortening days; moderate temperatures; shallow snow; fast skiing; blue wax. - **Late December to mid-February** — Silent season; deep freeze; survival; slow skiing; light green wax. **Late February and March** — Delightful season; lengthening days; warm; crows, horned larks and geese; fast skiing; klister.

The middle stage of winter is a bottleneck that tests the mettle of both skiers and wildlife.

All of us are within easy reach of natural areas . . . Within the limits of a

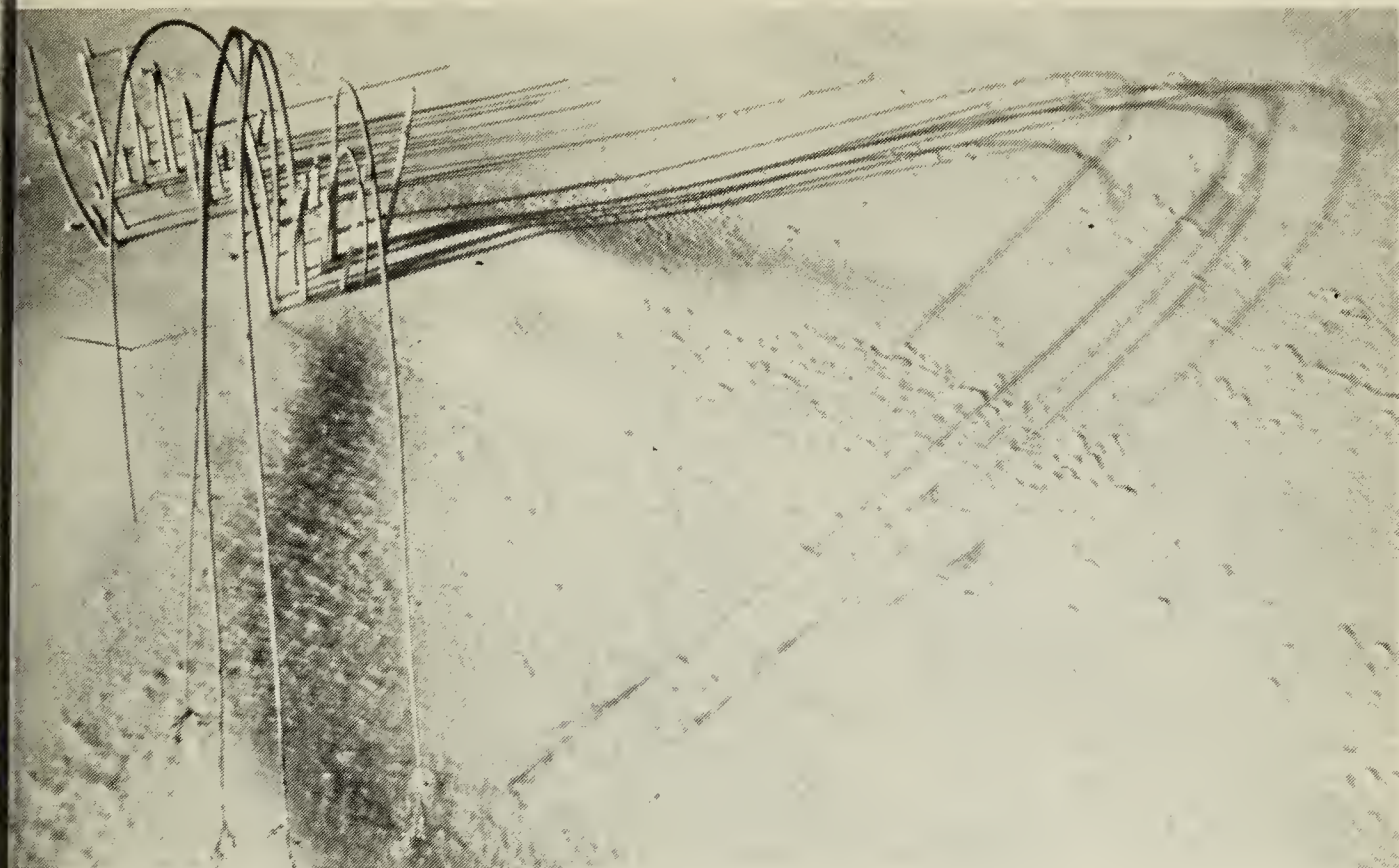


Winter skiing

D. J. Niema

city, there are several sites which present opportunities for almost instant skiing without the need for automobile travel. Walk or bus to the nearest park or golf course. Or better yet, get on a river and ski for miles . . . As the cross-country skier moves silently, mile after mile, over the winter landscape, there is much time for thinking, and certainly the inspiration for thought is abundant.

Part of the appeal of cross-country skiing lies in its powers of mental and physical conditioning. As a sport it is rated, along with swimming and squash racquets, as tops for its ability



Winter bulrush

J. B. Gollop

to free the mind and exercise the body. New skiers are cautioned to dress in several light layers so that one or more may be removed after the first 20 minutes on the trail. Problems and pounds melt away along with the miles. This will come as no news to anyone who has cross-country skied for some distance. For the uninitiated, rent some equipment and head for the nearest golf course or park after the first snowfall. With a little practice you should be able to cover four or five miles an hour and will burn up a lot of calories in the process.

Cross-country skiing is not for everyone. Some prefer hockey for its excitement and bodily contact, or downhill skiing for its thrills. But for those people who are meant for cross-country skiing, the discovery of the sport may have a profound effect on their life-styles. To some the appeal is so great that they now find the off-ski season to be as frustrating as they once found the months of November through March. There was a time when the departure of waterfowl each fall heralded the season for indoor activities. Now fall migration is seen by many persons as the harbinger of cross-country skiing while the return

of birds in the spring is a sad portent of the snow-free season that lies ahead.

What do cross-country skiers dream of around the fireside? They dream of long wilderness trails, over diverse and challenging terrain, free of power toboggans, and with remote overnight cabins. Of contacts with a variety of wildlife that serve to bring a new awareness of nature to the skiing experience while providing occasional respites from the steady, rhythmic stride. They dream of lighted trails near the city where they can go in evenings after work, and of moonlit nights which hold a special wonder and appeal. (Skiing dark nights on tricky terrain will quickly overtax the cross-country skier of average skill.) Dreams are also made of flowing springs and open rapids along the trail where fierce thirsts may be quenched. And finally they dream of trails through deep, clean, soft snow, and of times when skiing is fast and a single waxing will last all day. Humble though these dreams may be, cross-country skiers are a pretty undemanding lot and ask little more than to truly touch and explore the deep beauty of Nature's silent season.

