Book Reviews

Snowshoeing: From Novice to Master, 5th edition

Gene Prater; edited by Dave Felkley

Seattle, WA: The Mountaineers Books, 2002

US \$16.95, 207 pages, softcover

As the summer heat begins to wane and as fall approaches once again, I begin to look forward to winter and its unique sports that I so enjoy. To learn a bit more about one of my favorites, snowshoeing, I picked up a time-tested reference on one of the simplest, cheapest, and yet most adventurous of the winter sports. The fifth edition of *Snowshoeing: From Novice to Master* is all it promises and more—an excellent reference with a lot to learn for everyone at any level of the sport.

Snowshoeing is a rapidly growing sport, with an estimated 1 million US participants in year 2000, compared with about 400 000 in 1992 (I was one of the 400 000!). It has come a long way from a utilitarian method of snow travel favored by Native Americans (it was largely responsible for their ability to function in winter) and early trappers to a modern recreational sport with organized races under consideration for inclusion among the Winter Olympic Games. Snowshoes have come a long way, too, from complex affairs of wood and rawhide to lightweight, plastic, brightly colored devices with easy-to-use bindings.

Many factors have fueled the rising popularity of snowshoeing, including more convenient and less cumbersome snowshoe designs; its relative low cost; the ease of learning; an increasing number of organized events; an aging and active population looking for low-impact outdoor fitness-oriented sports; and the accessibility of popular hiking areas to snowshoers in the winter, both on and off trail. As the price of alpine ski tickets continue to rise, and my family continues to grow, I think my family and I will be looking for less expensive and more active ways to enjoy the great winter outdoors—snowshoeing may just be the direction we will head.

Snowshoeing: From Novice to Master is, simply put, a great book on the subject. It is probably as close to a complete reference as you may find and includes sections on the history of the endeavor and the different designs of snowshoes and how to go about picking and fitting snowshoes for your particular needs and geography. The book describes in detail the traction aids (eg, claws, poles), bindings, and appropriate attire to keep you warm and dry. Chapters also cover physical conditioning and snowshoeing technique (including walking, running, climbing, and descending). The book con-

tinues with some very timely information on route finding, avalanche and other safety concerns, basic first aid and winter wilderness medicine, and a very nice chapter on snow caves and winter camping and otherwise how to stay comfortable in blizzard conditions while in the woods. The book concludes with a chapter on snowshoe running and racing—useful information because the popularity of winter snowshoe running races is rising rapidly.

The current author-editor (Felkley) owns a snowshoe guide service along the Front Range of Colorado and sprinkles very practical tips throughout the book in little sidebars labeled “BIGfoot says.” My favorite one is a blank space on the page preceded by “BIGfoot says—this is what a winter whiteout looks like:”! But most of the sidebars actually have some writing in them, and they serve as useful additions to the book and include a lot of practical and useful advice.

If you hanker to get outside in the winter and tromp through the snowy silence, if you have only a few (hundred) dollars to spend on a new winter sport, if you want to get some exercise and take up a new hobby, if you want to try backpacking in the winter, if you want to bag a few winter peaks, or if you need to travel over vast snowy regions for whatever reasons, then this book is for you. Even if you are an expert on snowshoes and climb and descend like a yeti, you will likely be able to take away a plethora of new information, tips, and tricks and have an enjoyable read. Pick up a copy before the snow flies, and be prepared for some winter fun.

Rob Hamilton, MD
Redding, CA, USA

The High Altitude Medicine Handbook, 3rd edition

Andrew Pollard and David Murdoch

Abingdon, UK: Radcliffe Medical Press, 2003

US \$45, 193 pages, softcover

This is the third edition of this popular text, which forms a concise and easily readable introduction to high-altitude medicine and physiology. The book addresses the needs of physicians advising their patients who plan to travel to high altitude, and it is a useful self-reference for the first-time visitor to high places. Its size and ready reference format make it an essential addition to an expedition medical kit or traveler’s library. Unfortunately, the micro pocket-sized version that accompanied earlier

editions is no longer available. However, the book is small enough to take along in all but the most tightly packed backpack.

A 5-year gap since the previous edition means that a lot of information has been updated, making this a worthwhile purchase for readers with the older editions. In addition to having the bulk of its text updated, this edition now includes chapters on relevant legal issues as well as children at altitude.

Considering its modest size, this book does an excellent job of covering all the necessary sections and it leaves few topics uncovered. Although some of the chapters may be quite short and even superficial, this is more than compensated for by an extensive bibliography at the end of each chapter.

The volume includes a small collection of color photographs that illustrate life and medicine at high altitude. They are a pleasant addition to the text; however, they are not especially relevant to the text or the problems covered within.

Overall, this is a well-written and well-organized book covering the majority of topics important to medicine at high altitude. It presents the information in a clear and easy-to-read format. In fact, the book can be easily read from cover to cover, giving the neophyte a rapid introduction to this topic. The book will make an equally worthwhile addition to the library of the high-altitude traveler and both medical and nonmedical trek leaders.

Gerald Dubowitz, MB, ChB
San Francisco, CA, USA

Between A Rock And A Hard Place

Aron Ralston

New York, NY: Atria Books (Simon & Schuster),
2004

US \$26.00, 354 pages, hardcover

The tale of this young man's ordeal is legendary, even though it occurred not too long ago in April 2003. Who is not familiar with the accident that befell Aron Ralston in Blue John Canyon, where he set loose an 800-pound boulder that trapped his arm and nearly cost him his life? Who is not aware that he mustered the courage and determination to amputate his own hand in order to free himself and live to tell the story? Which of us who know his story has not asked him- or herself, "Could I do the same thing? Could I cut off my arm to save my life?"

It was with maximal anticipation that I sat in the front row at the Wilderness Medical Society Annual Meeting in Snowmass, CO, to listen to Aron tell his tale. And tell it he did. I have listened to world-class mountain

climbers describe harrowing adventures on the highest peaks, to divers relate sagas of shark attacks and abandonment at sea, and to firefighters relive miracles that saved them in the belly of the beast, but I have never been riveted to a speaker like I was to Aron Ralston. He edited his tale masterfully so that we could share first in his fear, fatigue, thirst, and demise and then weep tears of joy at his rescue and salvation. His narration was wilderness medicine to the maximum. If anyone in the audience ever goes anywhere without first letting someone know his or her destination, I will be astounded.

I spoke with Aron a couple of times after his presentation, because he also attended the Wilderness Medical Society meeting to support his medical education as a search-and-rescue team member. My conversations with him left me with the impression of a man who is still processing what all of this means. By his description, he came to this harrowing crossroads because of a confluence of youthful exuberance, passion for the outdoors, determination, spontaneous adventure seeking, athleticism, poor planning, remarkable family and friends, and a profound will to live. In the process, he has made a name for himself but at the expense of a permanent physical handicap and bouts of despondency. It is too early to tell, but I am hopeful that he will always appreciate the gift he has acquired to offer sound advice and hope to those who will most benefit from his ministry.

Without letting anyone know his destination, Aron had embarked from Aspen, CO, on an outing as a solo canyoneer in Utah. He was an experienced climber but, as he points out often in the book, prone to putting himself into dangerous situations. He accidentally dislodged a boulder, which fell and pinned his arm to a canyon wall. He then spent 5 nights in the canyon, deteriorating physically but remarkably holding himself together mentally. He recounts in detail his thought processes and activities as he consumed a precious 22 ounces of water and 2 desiccated burritos, then went without food and water. To try to stay warm at night, he wrapped his limbs with a rope and kept his head in a bag. His situation prevented sleep for 120 consecutive hours, and he had no choice but to drink his own urine. Certain of his impending death, he scratched his name, birth date, and "RIP" on the sandstone wall. For posterity, he recorded his condition and thoughts daily on a video camera. On the sixth day, he managed to free himself by the only means available: he fractured both bones in his forearm and then completed an amputation of his hand and wrist with a barely adequate multitool. To complete his survival journey, he rappelled a 60-foot rock wall and walked for several hours with his arm wrapped in a CamelBak, which was then secured to his chest. When