

Roundtable Discussion of Winter Hiking and Camping

Backpacking Light staff discuss how to get the most out of any winter trip from day trip to multi-day expeditions.

by Ken Knight | 2007-03-27 03:00:00-06

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Looking down upon the Manistee River from the Manistee River Pathway, Michigan.

Introduction

Winter camping and hiking can be very rewarding. Travel in winter, whether it's a day trip or multi-day expedition, doesn't have to be scary as long as you come equipped with the right gear and attitude. It affords opportunities to see the world in a completely different light. Winter not only brings its own physical

challenges for backcountry travelers but also affects you psychologically in good and potentially bad ways. If you embrace the challenges and learn how to get through the short days and long nights, winter trips can be a source of great beauty and joy.

In this companion article to the [Winter Camping and Hiking podcast](#) I will look briefly at some of the key points to making a winter trip a success. This is by no means a comprehensive look at how you should go winter camping. With this article and the podcast it is my hope that you will develop an enthusiasm for winter travel and begin to explore the possibilities on your own. While the challenges are varied and great, the rewards are equally so.

Key Points in Winter Camping



Mike Martin is wearing his usual layering system during a backcountry ski tour of West Willow Peak outside of Mullan, Idaho. During the 3000 foot climb in 30 degree weather, he unzipped the hip zips on the Arc'teryx Beta AR pants for ventilation. On his torso, he used the REI Powerdry Zip-T alone when the wind was calm, and added the Cloudveil Prospector Hoodie as needed for protection from precipitation and breezes. REI All Season Mitts were worn or carried on the handles of the ski poles as needed to regulate hand warmth. Now, on the peak, the wind has picked up, so he's zipped up the

pant vents, added a shell mitt, and donned an Integral Designs eVENT Jacket as he prepares for the ski down.

When it is cold out you need to keep yourself warm. That sounds obvious but it is vital and in some ways easy. However, it is also easy to get wet - from outside moisture and your own sweat - while trying to stay warm. Getting wet makes staying warm during breaks and over the long-term considerably more difficult.

Keeping the following points in mind will help you have successful winter trips of any length. While this list is not exhaustive it does touch on facets of winter travel that everyone has to deal with whether on a day trip or out for several nights in the remotest locations.

Keep Warm Without Getting Wet

All of us agree that it's easy to stay warm when moving, especially when pounding through deep snow. While insulated clothing is essential for stops, far lighter clothing is needed when you are on the go. Clothing that wicks moisture away from you and blocks the wind will go a long way to helping you regulate your temperature. Dress in layers.

Keep your feet and hands well cared for. Most people know to keep their hands warm with good gloves or mittens, but they neglect their feet - just wearing the thickest socks they can find. That may work in the short-term but consider using a true winter footwear system instead. Vapor barrier clothing can shine even in temperatures that are not too much below freezing. If you keep your feet warm and dry you will be much more comfortable. It is notoriously difficult, even for people with good circulation, to rewarm their feet once they get very cold. It's even more difficult to warm your feet if they are wet too.



Ken Knight in Little Cottonwood Canyon, Utah. Dressing in layers is an important key to managing warmth and staying dry. I encountered far warmer temperatures on this trip than I had expected. Being able to fully vent my Wintergreen Designs Expedition Shell kept me cool. When night fell I could put on insulated clothing beneath the shell and still be comfortable. Like the other participants in this podcast I prefer softshell pants (an older version of the Climawool Light pants Ibex now sells).

Find a hat and hood combination that will keep your head warm without sweating. People tend to think you lose the most heat from your head. This is actually not true. However, it does feel that way with wind blowing against your face and neck, so wearing a hat and/or hood that will block the wind is a good idea. For some, like Ryan Jordan, this means wearing a wool baselayer with a hood and a windshirt. I prefer a more traditional approach of a wool hat and my winter hardshell.

Eat, Eat, Eat; Drink, Drink, Drink

As you burn the calories staying warm, you must replace the energy by eating. Pick foods you can cook and eat easily. It does no good to select items that become rock hard and inedible. While you are eating all your favorite foods, remember you need not worry about spoilage. And don't forget to drink plenty of fluids. It is very easy to forget to drink water when it is cold.

We favor large amounts of hot chocolate in the morning and evening, sometimes spiked with Java Juice packets. Larger dinners than we would ever consider the rest of the year usually include a typical backpacking meal plus soup with a hot drink. During the day snacks and lunches vary quite a bit but we all agree that increasing the amount of fats is important. Each of us have our favorite way of doing this.

Even if you are going out for just a day trip don't skimp on the food. While it is true that you will most likely end your day back in a nice warm place (even if you are doing a hut-to-hut trip) with good food, you still must eat during the day. You won't regret bringing extra food and plenty of water.

Keep Your Stuff Dry



Steve Nelson is using an Equinox poncho tarp over a Bozeman Mountain Works bivy sack at Loch Leven Lakes in the Sierra Nevada near Lake Tahoe. In the right conditions a tarp, especially pyramid-style shelters like the Kifaru tipis, Titanium Goat Vertex tents, and Black Diamond MegaLite - all of which have been used by participants in this podcast, is an excellent shelter for keeping your stuff dry.



Ryan Jordan likes the ease of setup of a small, single wall tent while mountaineering, or traveling long days. The simplicity of a freestanding tent with good pole support shouldn't be underestimated in deep winter conditions when every bit of energy must be conserved. Here, his Black Diamond OneShot stays upright and stable, even in the midst of a winter blizzard that brought more than three feet of new snow in 24 hours.

Do your best to keep your gear dry. Keeping your insulated clothing and sleeping bag dry is vital. But keeping the rest of your stuff dry is amazingly helpful too. If this means you need to pack gear and clothing in lightweight drybags then do that. It's hard enough to put cold clothing on or pack up a cold shelter. It's even harder to do these things when the gear is cold and wet.

If your clothing gets damp during the day don't be afraid to sleep with it on at night. Your body heat will do a superb job of drying things out, especially if you are lucky enough to be camping in cold dry climates.



Will Rietveld and Janet Reichl moving into one of their hidden backcountry igloos - five trips so far this winter.

If you have the time and it is sunny, try to air out your gear. Even when the ambient temperature is quite cold, a bright sun will do a very good job of drying gear in a relatively short time.

Enjoy the Different Social Setting

Winter trips have a different feel about them in camp. While sitting around a campfire during a spring, summer, or fall trip is fun, we all agreed that something extra special is added on a winter trek. Not only does a campfire help pass the time during the long nights but the sense of camaraderie is enhanced as the night deepens. Count yourself lucky if you can sit around a campfire on a clear winter night watching the stars come out and the moon rise overhead.

Just Get Going

It's hard to get moving in the morning. Unless you are Will Rietveld staying in a pretty warm igloo each night (and there is a lot to be said for that approach), getting out of the warm sleeping bag and starting morning chores is tough. Do your best to “multi-task.” Get water boiling for breakfast and start taking down the shelter right away. If you went to bed with hot water have some right away to warm yourself up. It doesn't take much to get over that hump.

Final Thoughts

There is a great deal to learn to make your winter trips happy ones. Starting small and learning from others is probably the best way to go. If you are nervous about setting up a tarp or tent each night and don't have the where-with-all to build igloos, consider base-camping trips using either your own shelter or a hut in the backcountry. Even for those of us who enjoy moving camp from place to place this is sometimes just what the doctor ordered.

Winter changes the landscape. Everything sounds different, looks different, smells different, and feels different. While the environment brings with it its own extra set of dangers and concerns, winter camping and hiking can be done safely and in some cases without adding too much more gear to your three-season kit. Understanding the challenges, physical and mental, and learning to deal with them is only a matter of time and effort. The rewards are worth it.

About the Author and Podcast Participants

Ken Knight, Backpacking Light Production Editor, Ann Arbor, MI.



The author pulling his pulk towards Hoist Lakes in central Michigan. On this path wearing snowshoes was not necessary. Had I strayed off-trail that would have quickly changed.

I've been an avid backpacker for the past decade and day hiker for longer than that. I have been lightening my load the entire time. My winter travels are primarily in my home state of Michigan with the occasional couple days elsewhere. My preferred means of travel is by snowshoes. I have taken trips using base-camps as well as moving from place to place each night. I have traveled light and sometimes

heavier when pulling a pulk. I tend to prefer using a tent when I winter camp. While pitching a tent limits my flexibility, it is usually far easier for me to set up. However, like the others, I do appreciate a good pyramid-style tarp. Typical conditions can bring nighttime temperatures approaching 0 °F with potential windchills considerably lower, especially when near one of the Great Lakes. Daytime highs are generally in the 20 °F range.

Ryan Jordan, Backpacking Light Co-founder and Publisher, Bozeman, MT.



A February snowshoe trip into the northern Bridger Range requires less gear than you think. Enough gear for a two-night trip easily fits into a GoLite Jam, even when winter temperatures dip down to zero degrees.

Ryan does the bulk of his wintertime backcountry travel in the mountains of the Yellowstone Ecosystem. His primary mode of travel is on randonee skies or snowshoes. With nighttime temperatures that dip as low as -20 °F, Ryan uses vapor barrier clothing as a key component in his sleep system, which usually includes a snowcave or tarp. As winter evolves

into spring this year, Ryan will switch to an ultralight waxless touring ski setup and a skijoring harness for his 80 pound black lab, Maia, and attempt longer distances over snow, hoping to travel as much as 50 miles per day.

Mike Martin, Backpacking Light Sleep Systems Editor, Coeur d'Alene, ID.



Mike and his hiking companion "Joey" on a day hike at the Cougar Bay Preserve outside of Coeur d'Alene, ID. Because of the thin, hardpacked snow, he's opted for Kahtoolas instead of snowshoes, and has brought Gossamer Gear Lightrek poles with small baskets instead of ski poles with powder baskets.

Mike Martin is a relative newcomer to winter camping. He had the misfortune of growing up in snow-free southern California, so it is only during the past 7 years in North Idaho that he's had a chance to have a second childhood building snow caves and forts, and having snowball fights with his kids. Mike's winter activities consist mostly of done-in-a-day snowshoe and ski tours and weekend snow-camping trips.

Steve Nelson, Backpacking Light Winter Systems Editor, Marin County, CA.

Swirling snow at Crater Lake, Oregon. Steve is in a deep well between trees, in an Arc'teryx jacket using Northern Lites snowshoes.



Steve has been backpacking and playing in the snow since he was a kid growing up in upstate New York. Now living in California, he backpacks throughout the Sierra Nevada and Cascades, and has a special love for winter camping, snowshoeing, and backcountry skiing. He travels fast and light, is always on the lookout for ways to safely shave ounces from gear, and never met a storm he didn't enjoy.

Most of his winter activity these days is in the Sierra Nevada, and runs the gamut from snowshoeing and peak bagging to skiing and winter base camping. His trips vary from lightweight (bivy sack and snow trench) to moderate (often pulling a pulk).

Will Rietveld, Backpacking Light Packing and Shelter Systems Editor, Durango, CO.



Will Rietveld on snowshoes after a recent snowstorm in the southern Rockies.

I have done quite a bit of winter camping over the years. Most were overnight or two to three day trips where we traveled on skis or snowshoes and slept in a snow cave or tent. My biggest winter trip was an 8-day outing in the Yellowstone backcountry where we skied in, established a base camp, and slept in a tent, snow cave, and igloo. I have also gone on several hut to hut trips, where we reserved huts in advance then skied or snowshoed from hut to hut.

Last winter my wife and I discovered igloo building using the Grand Shelters Icebox Tool, and learned how to use the tool. This winter we built our own igloo hut system. Now our preferred system of winter travel is to snowshoe to an igloo for an overnight stay, or snowshoe from igloo to igloo. Nighttime temperatures in an igloo are around freezing, compared to below zero outside, so our igloo camping is plush compared to multi-day trips and sleeping in a tent in frigid temperatures. The other Backpacking Light staffers are hardcores compared to me.

Igloo camping is easy compared to a tent in winter. It's warm and roomy inside, it's quiet inside when it's windy, we don't have to bump the snow off if it's snowing, there's no problem with cooking inside, and it's much easier to keep water and gear from freezing. Buring two or three candles inside provides enough light and warmth to make the evenings very comfortable. It can get too warm inside if we run our stove too long, but that's a problem I don't mind having.

[MP3 File](#)