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Gearing up for winter

Winter is a great time to go backpacking, but your summer gear might not do the trick

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Jay Burchyett knows as well as anybody that backpacking season never ends.

While trail traffic drops as soon as the temperatures do each fall, Burchyett says if you have the right gear winter backpacking is as fun as a summer trip.

Burchyett, a hard-goods manager at the Tacoma REI store, teaches winter camping clinics each year, and one of the lessons is that not all summer gear is suited for backpacking in the wintertime.

The most obvious seasonal specific gear is clothes. Winter backpackers should dress in layers including a synthetic base layer, a warm layer and a waterproof outer shell. They also should use waterproof boots and gloves, wool socks and never wear cotton, says Burchyett.

But some items aren't as obvious, like a shovel and, if you hike with a dog, booties for your pet, says Backpacker's Supply manager Andrea Wagner.

While buying seasonal specific gear can get costly, backpackers can always rent from sports stores. Beyond clothes, here are some suggestions for gearing up for a backpacking trip in the winter season.

1. REI Mountain 2 tent \$299 (footprint: \$30)

A typical three-season tent usually won't cut it in the snow. A four-season tent has extra poles to make it sturdier. "The positive is it can really take the elements," says Burchyett. "The downside is they are typically heavier and more expensive." The two-person REI Mountain 2 tent is \$299 and weighs 9 pounds. Its three-season counterpart is \$169 and weighs less than 6 pounds. An additional \$30 will get a footprint for the tent that will help keep moisture out.

2. Voile Telepack Snow Shovel \$40

A shovel is a must in the snow for digging out an area for your tent or for emergency situation like testing slopes for avalanche hazard. "Shovels made with metal are best even though they are a little heavier," says Wagner. "They hold up better."

3. SMC Sno-Tent Anchor \$2 each

"Typical tent stakes won't work in the snow," says Burchyett. "They'll pull right up." However, SMC Sno-Tent Anchors are wider than traditional stakes and have holes that fill with snow so they'll stay in place.

4. Marmot Never Summer \$249

All sleeping bags aren't created equal. Not even close. You should know your sleeping bag's rating before you go winter camping. Burchyett recommends a bag rated to zero degrees, such as the Marmot Never Summer. He also recommends a synthetic bag over a down bag. Synthetic bags are heavier and take more room in your pack, but they provide more insulation than a down pack if they get wet.

5. Pacific Outdoor Equipment Cruiser Lite \$64

A sleeping pad is for more than cushioning in the winter. It's also an important layer of insulation. A typical air mattress can

make for a cold night sleeping on the snow. “The air in the mattress will be as cold as the ground you are sleeping on,” says Burchyett. He also recommends a full-length pad rather than shorter shoulder-to-hip pads.

6. Therm-a-Rest Z-lite \$35

Burchyett says he carries two pads in the winter. A self-inflating pad and a foam pad like the Therm-a-Rest Z-lite. The foam pad adds cushioning and insulation and weighs less than a pound. The pad can be carried on the outside of a pack.

7. Gregory Palisade 80 \$319

A bigger sleeping bag, a heavier tent and extra winter clothes means you’ll need a big pack. Burchyett uses a 3,500-cubic-inch pack in the summer, but in the winter upsizes to a 5,000-cubic-inch pack like the Gregory Palisade 80. It has eight compartments, including one for a sleeping bag.

8. REI Duck’s Back pack cover \$24

A pack cover not only keeps your pack dry while you are hiking around in the elements, but it can also cover your pack at night so you can leave it outside if you don’t have room in your tent. “I think they are an absolute must in the winter,” says Burchyett.

9. MSR Denali Classic Snowshoes \$140

Snowshoes are a must for winter hiking to keep you and your gear above the snow. The MSR Denali Classics are a good choice, says Burchyett, because they fit almost any boot – even ski boots – and have steel traction rails that run the length of the snowshoe. Tail extensions can be added to the snowshoes to keep you from sinking in deep powder or from the weight of an overloaded pack. MSR sells 4- and 8-inch extensions for \$30.

10. Leki Summit Antishock Trekking Poles \$100

Trekking poles are a matter of personal preference for hikers, but a good pair of poles – even ski poles – provides additional stability when hiking on tricky winter terrain. If your poles have small baskets, larger ones might be needed for hiking on snow. Snow baskets are usually about \$7. They are pole specific, so make sure they fit your pole before you buy.

11. Black Diamond Spot headlamp \$40

Winter backpackers don’t have the luxury of 15 hours of daylight as they do in the summer. A good headlamp is a must. The Black Diamond Spot has four LED lights and runs on three AAA batteries. The headlamp has three levels of brightness and a strobe setting for signaling for help.

12. CamelBak StoAway \$39

Hydration systems like Camelbacks are commonplace for summer hikers, but the drinking tubes on basic systems are sure to freeze in the winter. The Camelback StoAway has an insulated 100-ounce reservoir and tube and a covered bite valve to keep the system working when it gets cold.

13. Outdoor Products insulated bottle holder \$10-13

Those that prefer water bottles over hydration bladders can have their water supply freeze up in the cold, too. Outdoor Products makes insulated bottle holders for 1- and 1/2-liter bottles. The holders are also designed to keep hot drinks warm.

14. Ruff Wear Grip Trex Boots \$60 for four

Wagner says she once made the mistake of taking her dog on a backpacking trip without boots for the dog. “His paws were freezing,” she says. “I felt terrible.” The boots are also designed to give the dog extra traction in the snow. Ruff Wear also sells doggie boot liners for \$10 for a set of four.

15. Little Hotties Hand Warmers \$9 for 10 pairs

“I always take hand warmers,” says Wagner. “They are cheap and they work great.” The tea bag-size heat pouches might

be called hand warmers, but veteran hikers know you can just as easily drop them in your socks, hat, sleeping bag, pants or any place else you need a little heat.

16. Lithium batteries \$6 and up

Lithium batteries last longer than traditional alkaline batteries in cold weather.

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