

Winter Backpacking Tips

from The Lightweight Backpacker™ @ www.backpacking.net

Contributors:

Mark Clayton, Don Childrey, Brian Raichle, Andy Sowers (12/94).

PLANNING A TRIP

When planning a winter trip, especially in the snow, remember that travel will be much slower than in the summer. Reduce your mileage goal by 50% to 60%. Daylight hours are fewer in the winter, which will also limit your time. Normal activities around camp take longer in cold weather.

Three-sided A.T.-style shelters can be used comfortably in the winter by hanging a tarp across the open side to block the wind. The result is a roomier and sturdier place to sleep, cook, and pack. Tarps are much lighter to carry than winter tents. These shelters are usually not used much in the winter so finding space is not much of a problem.

CLOTHING

Dress in layers so you can easily adjust your clothes to regulate body moisture and temperature. Three types of layers are considered normal: a liner layer against your skin (longjohns), an insulation layer (fleece), and a water- and wind-proof outer shell.

In the winter, COTTON KILLS. Cotton loses its insulating qualities when it gets wet, whether from rain or sweat. Cotton also takes a long time to dry out. Wool or synthetic materials are much better suited to cold weather conditions.

Your boots should have waterproof outer shells such as oiled leather or plastic. Even though fabric and leather boots may have Gore-tex linings, the outer layers will absorb water which will eventually freeze, placing a block of ice next to your foot.

Protect against heat loss through your head by wearing a toboggan, balaclava, etc. Over half of your body heat can be lost through your head. One saying goes, "If your feet are cold, put on a hat."

A balaclava helps protect your face and neck from cold and wind. It can also be worn as a toboggan or scarf.

Do not wear too many pairs of socks. If the blood flow to your feet becomes constricted, your feet will get cold regardless of how many socks you have on. Tightening your boot laces too tight will constrict the blood flow as well.

Make sure your gloves, especially liners, are not too tight on your hands. If they are too tight, they can constrict the blood flow and keep your hands from warming up.

Gaiters will keep snow, rain, etc out of your boots and therefore help keep your feet drier and warmer. Gaiters also add another layer of material around your lower legs to help keep them warm.

Attach "dummy cords", or security cords to your mittens to prevent losing them in windy or snowy conditions.

Carry extra gloves or liners to change into if your first pair gets wet. Gloves can be dried out overnight in your sleeping bag.

Be sure to carry plenty of dry socks. Wet socks can be dried overnight in your sleeping bag, preferably by placing them close to your body.

FOOD and WATER

Include plenty of carbohydrates in your diet to provide fuel for hiking and for simply keeping your body warm.

One-pot meals for supper are the easiest way to cook in the winter. Food should be easy to fix and tasty enough to be appetizing.

Drink plenty of water, even though you don't think you are thirsty. Dry winter air will dehydrate you quickly without you noticing until it is too late. Water is necessary for your body to generate heat. A good rule of thumb for checking hydration is the color of your urine. Urine will be light colored or clear if you are properly hydrated.

Keep your water bottles from freezing in your pack by putting them in a wool sock or insulated bottle cover. You can make bottle covers by taping closed cell foam around your bottles.

Water mixed with something such as Gatorade, lemonade, etc will freeze at a lower temperature than plain water.

Water filters are not suited to below freezing weather. Water left in the filter matrix can freeze and split the internal seals, destroying the effectiveness of the filter.

Chemical water treatments take longer to work in colder water. Give the chemical time to work if you are treating cold water.

When melting snow for water, put a small amount of water in the pot first to keep from "scorching" the pot before the snow starts to melt.

Carry a few coffee filters to strain water melted from snow. Snow invariably contains bits of dirt, leaves, bugs etc that you might not want in your drinking water.

In below-freezing weather, turn your water bottles upside down so that the ice forms at the bottom of the bottle instead of in the opening.

The extra time needed for cooking and/or melting snow for water will require you to carry more stove fuel than for summer trips.

SHELTER

Three-season tents may not be sturdy enough to handle the high winds and snow buildup that sometimes accompany winter storms. They may also be too ventilated to provide much shelter from a blowing storm.

On the other hand, with "mild" winter weather, three-season tents can work fine for winter camping.

Select a tent site that is sheltered from the wind if possible. Hanging a tarp between trees can help block the wind from your tent if needed.

Try to avoid any vegetation and set your tent up on snow if possible. Snow is the ultimate "No Trace" campsite because all signs of your camp will disappear when the snow melts in the spring.

Pack down the snow where you want to set up your tent before you set it up. Otherwise your body will melt a deformation into the loose snow. When that deformation refreezes it will make changing your sleeping position quite uncomfortable.

In windy, exposed campsites on snow, dig a hole 1-2' deep in which to set up your tent. This will reduce the amount of wind that blasts your tent. Digging out a 1'-2' deep pit under the vestibule area of the tent makes getting in and out of the tent easier.

Attach 4' - 6' of cord to each of your tent stake-out points so you can use rocks or logs for anchors if the ground is too frozen to drive in stakes or the snow is too soft to hold a stake.

Regular tent stakes usually don't work very well in snow. Instead you can use snow flukes or special snow stakes or skewers for anchoring your tent.

When camping on deep snow, you can fill 1-gallon size freezer bags with snow and tie your stake-out cords to them for deadmen anchors instead of using stakes.

DURING the DAY

Adjust your layers of clothing by adding or removing to prevent heat buildup and sweating. Zippers in the armpits of rain shells or fleece jackets work well to vent heat and moisture. Too much moisture in your clothes will make you cold as it evaporates.

If you stop for a long break or at the end of the day, put on your insulation layers before you cool off too much, otherwise your body will have to work harder just to warm you back up.

Instead of stopping for a long lunch, snack on food all during the day at short breaks. This will keep you from cooling down too much and having to adjust your layers of clothing too many times.

Carry a small insulated thermos-type bottle full of a hot drink or hot soup. If you get cold or just want a warming snack, you will already have something hot prepared.

Be aware of the signals your body is sending you. Cold fingers or toes indicate you should stop and address the cause of the problem if possible. Cold toes can be caused by bootlaces being too tight.

Carry a water bottle on your pack hip belt to make it easier to drink when you get thirsty. Hip belt pouches are also a good place to carry small snacks.

IN CAMP

If you know you will be on snow of 2-3 foot depth, carry a snow shovel to aid in fixing a tent space and digging out a kitchen trench. Dig a trench about 2 feet deep and 2 feet wide. Sit on one side of the trench (on a pad), place your feet in the trench, and use the other side as a table top.

Put on dry socks as soon as camp is set up. Socks that are wet from hiking will not keep your feet warm for long.

To make putting frozen boots on easier the next morning, open them as wide as possible when you take them off at night. That will keep them from freezing in a closed position.

Insulated booties with closed cell foam insoles will keep your feet warmer around camp than wearing your hiking boots.

Carry a closed cell foam pad to sit on in camp. Frozen ground or a shelter floor will quickly pull body heat out through your rear end. You can also use your sleeping pad to sit on.

An insulated coffee mug will keep hot drinks hot much longer than regular cups. Large insulated mugs can also be used for soups, etc at mealtime.

Keep plenty of hot drinks available as you sit around camp in the evening. The extra fluids are helpful and the heat is welcome. Limit alcohol intake as alcohol thins your blood and inhibits the body's ability to warm itself.

Avoid caffeinated drinks before going to bed. They may keep you awake and will tend to send you to the bathroom in the middle of the night.

Snack before you go to bed so that your body will have enough fuel to generate heat during the long winter night.

Exercise for a few minutes before getting in your sleeping bag. This will warm up your body and make it easier to warm up a cold sleeping bag.

AT NIGHT

Increase the comfort range of your sleeping bag by putting it inside of a bivy sack. Other options include cloth liners, vapor barrier liners or space blanket bags, and doubling up bags. Vapor barrier liners should only be used in temperatures well below freezing. Doubling up bags should only be done if you still have enough room to be comfortable in the bag.

Always use a pad under your sleeping bag in the winter. Many people suggest two pads. Insulating yourself from the ground is more important than insulating yourself from the cold air.

Sleep with a stocking cap or toboggan or balaclava on your head to help hold in your body heat. Cinching up your mummy bag so that only your eyes, nose, and mouth are exposed is another way to hold in heat.

Don't breathe inside your sleeping bag at night. Breathe through a stocking cap or bandana instead. Moisture from your breath will wet your sleeping bag and reduce its insulating ability.

Putting a bottle of warm water in the foot of your sleeping bag will help keep your feet warm during the night. Don't forget to seal it well.

Putting a bottle of warm water in your boots will help keep them from freezing overnight. It helps if the boots are then put in a stuff sack instead of being left out in the open.

To keep your boots from freezing at night, put them in a stuff sack (you can use your sleeping bag stuff sack) and put them inside your sleeping bag at the foot of the bag. A long sleeping bag is helpful if you do this. You can also put the boots in a sack and place them between your sleeping bag and the pad underneath.

Do not attempt to dry large articles of clothing such as pants or a sweater in your sleeping bag overnight. Too much moisture in your sleeping bag will wet the bag insulation and make you cold.

Vent your tent as much as possible at night to reduce condensation on the inside of the tent walls. The few degrees of warmth trapped by a sealed up tent are not worth the trouble of wet clothes, sleeping bag, etc that result from the condensation.

Put sealed water bottles in your sleeping bag to keep them from freezing at night. You can also put them beside your sleeping bag, away from the tent wall, to keep them from freezing.

IN THE MORNING

Stay warm longer in the morning by staying in the sleeping bag as long as possible while cooking breakfast, packing, etc. (Don't use a stove in a tent.)

Warm up socks, clothes, etc before putting them on in the morning by pulling them into your sleeping bag a few minutes before you get out of the bag.

To prevent your feet from getting cold when you put on cold boots in the morning, remove the insoles and warm them up in your sleeping bag or inside your coat before putting your boots on.

Remove part of your insulation layer before starting to hike so that you don't overheat. Hiking will produce heat that you don't have while standing in camp, so you may feel cold after removing the insulation layer and before you start hiking. But as soon as you start hiking you will warm up.

MISCELLANEOUS

Arrange items in your pack, etc where they can be easily found. Items such as snack foods, water, extra gloves, or a headlamp / flashlight should be easy to get out when needed.

Stay organized. Know where each item of your gear is stored in your pack. This will enable you find the items you need quickly and prevent you from unpacking everything to find one small item.

If your water bottles don't have loops on the caps, tie a loop of cord around the bottle neck to make carrying them back from a spring or creek easier and warmer.

Tie loops of cord to all of the zipper pulls on your pack and jacket so that you can operate them with gloves or mittens or cold fingers.

Chemical heat packs can be used to warm feet and hands if necessary. Most types usually last several hours.

Walking sticks or a ski pole is another way to help you keep your balance on icy or snowy trails.

If you do slip while hiking with a full pack, try to land on your back so the pack will take the brunt of the fall instead of your rear end.