

There Is Nothing Like Camping In The Winter

by Deb Acord

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The good things about winter camping: The solitude. Draped with snow and devoid of the hordes of summer hikers, the woods are silent cathedrals in winter.

The drama. Nothing is a better artist's canvas than a stretch of newly fallen snow. See how you can follow the action - a coyote's tracks, blurred from the speed with which he traveled, just behind the rabbit that was his prey; a mountain lion's round print, preserved perfectly in a patch of snow.

The challenge. You've learned how to layer your clothes, recognize an avalanche, telemark ski. And now you can put your skills to work.

The bad thing about winter camping: It's winter. Generally cold, generally snowy, it's a time of year when it not only snows on your tent, but sometimes even on (or in) your sleeping bag.

Most folks wouldn't dream of camping in the winter, but some folks dream only of it. Here are a few.

Greg Wiggins

``There's not much room for error in the winter. It places a greater demand on your skill. There's so much more you need to know, especially in the Rockies. Everything becomes more of a challenge." - Greg Wiggins

Give Wiggins a good snow drift and a shovel, and he's a happy camper. Wiggins is director of Quest Adventures Inc., a professional outfitting company that teaches outdoor skills. He fills his winter months with outdoor adventures: a 10-day camping trip from the base of Monarch Pass up Chalk Creek to Mount Elbert, moving from campsite to campsite on mountaineering skis; a snow-cave class near Hoosier Pass; a midwinter hike up the snow-covered flanks of Mounts Lincoln, Democrat and Bross; and camping trips in the Mosquito Range just to get away.

Wiggins has camped when the temperature has dipped to around minus 30 degrees, and still he has never been cold. He's perfectly suited for his winter outdoor adventures - he's fit, he's properly outfitted, and he's comfortable on backcountry skis or snowshoes, necessary tools for accessing the snowy reaches of Colorado in the winter.

Wiggins usually camps in a four-season tent, but if he stays in an area more than one night, he might build a snow cave. His ideal snow cave, he says, is ``pretty basic. I call it the Norwegian mushroom. It's not the old tunnel kind of snow cave. Instead, you build it in benches on both sides, and an archway over the entrance. The entryway is lower than the sleeping area so the cold air can settle."

Aaron McHugh

“There's more chance for solitude in the winter. You can even be as little as a mile from your car and still see nobody for a week.” - Aaron McHugh

At first, McHugh didn't embrace winter camping as a way to get out in the winter. It was simply a way to do what he loved to do, year-round. “I decided I wasn't going to lie low in the winter months,” he says. So McHugh headed outdoors, learning along the way. For years, he has climbed, backpacked, and winter camped, and he includes an attempt at Washington's Mount Ranier among his adventures. He works part time at Grand West Outfitters, which helps fuel (and pay for) his growing passion for the outdoors. McHugh believes his winter camping skills have served him well, and he tells a story he heard once about a climber on Mount McKinley who said it wasn't so much his efficiency as a climber that made him a success as much as his efficiency in winter camping skills.

“I think you have to think ahead for camping and learn from your mistakes,” he says, recalling a camping trip when he left his stove in his tent vestibule overnight. It filled with snow and wouldn't light. His favorite place for winter camping in Colorado is Rocky Mountain National Park because of the consistent big snows it receives.

Joe Coughlin

“Winter camping is great because of the beauty of it. Everything looks so clean, and because the snow dampens the sound, the woods are quiet.” - Joe Coughlin

Coughlin thought he knew about weather extremes - after all, he lived in Colorado where it can snow 3 feet one day and melt away the next. Then, last April, he went to Cho Oyu, at 26,905-feet the sixth-highest mountain in the world. “It would be 100 degrees in the afternoon with the sun reflecting off the snow, and then in a matter of minutes would drop to minus 20.”

An atmospheric physicist at GRC International, Inc., Coughlin learned the best way to cope with extremes was to be ready for them. He learned that the gear you bring should serve you well no matter what the weather gods throw your way. When he's not hanging out in the Himalayas, Coughlin often heads to the Collegiate Peaks area for cross-country skiing or snowshoeing, or maybe just to camp.