

WEEKEND WARRIOR; Camping in the Cold: A Game of Survival

By JOE GLICKMAN in [the NY Times Published: March 13, 1998](#)

Everyone who has camped in the winter has a story to tell. Here's mine: 10 years ago, my brother and I drove from Brooklyn to the Adirondacks to watch a sled-dog race in Saranac Lake, N.Y. The call of the wild (and the scarcity of cheap motels) inspired us to spend the night in a lean-to in the very snowy woods.

Around midnight, I stuffed my shivering Welsh corgi, Quincy, deep into my woefully inadequate sleeping bag. We didn't lose fingers, toes or the dog, but having violated virtually every known cold-weather camping edict, we probably should have.

Ed Palen, the lean, bearded owner of a rock- and ice-climbing guide service in Keene, N.Y., called Adirondack Rock and River, would know. "On one level, winter camping is simple," he said. "Your goal is to survive the elements and make things as comfortable as you can."

But he was quick to add that for campers who don't know what they're doing, a cold-weather trek in the back country can be fatal. "Inexperienced people shouldn't go where they can't retreat to a safe place if something goes wrong," he said.

Mr. Palen, 41, a New Jersey native, has spent weeks at a time over the last 20 years on snowy mountains from Alaska to the Himalayas. On his first winter camping foray in the Adirondacks, he hung his sweaty cloth gloves out to dry. The temperature was 20 degrees below zero, and they froze solid. "Simple things like not knowing your gear can be costly," he said.

As I sat around a smoky fire on a snowy Saturday night in late February in the High Peaks region of the Adirondacks with three experienced mountaineering friends -- Nels Akerlund, Joe Weight and Bill Koeplinger -- we warmed to one another's winter camping stories.

Our tales of winter woe fell into three categories. Inexperience or improvidence: taking denim instead of the waterproof Gore-Tex; cotton underwear instead of the synthetic Capilene; a bulky canvas tent that could house a circus instead of a sleek four-season model. Pure stupidity: forgetting a compass or matches; worse, storing food in the tent in grizzly country, as Mr. Weight did on a six-week solo trek across Glacier National Park, or using a sleeping bag suited for nothing colder than 35 degrees in Montana, in April, as I did on a 77-day kayak trip. And the unavoidable: being tentbound on Mount McKinley for four days during a blizzard.

Such occupational hazards beg the inevitable question posed by a friend who wears a down coat in my living room when the temperature dips below 68 degrees. When I told her my plan to camp for three days and two nights in the Adirondacks, she could only shake her head, repeating, "Why, Joe, why?"

Winter camping is not for the fainthearted. It can be hard, tedious or at times simply unpleasant. The days are short, the nights cold and long. Crawling out of a cozy sleeping bag on a freezing morning to melt snow for coffee is not most people's idea of a dream vacation. But inhabiting a world wrapped in white offers someone willing to meet winter on its own terms the heady

rewards of exquisite scenery, profound silence and very often a memorable wilderness experience, with no bugs. Mr. Palen, who has spent as long as six weeks outdoors in the cold, says that after a while the lack of creature comforts doesn't bother him. "You learn to enjoy the process: making water, trying to stay warm, putting fuel into your body," he said. "The simplest tasks take time, thought and effort. You strip away everything except the bare necessities. Life is about what's happening now. It's a cathartic feeling you can't explain but don't get anywhere else.'

Earlier that weekend, on Friday afternoon, Mr. Akerlund, a photographer from Rockford, Ill., and I parked near the Adirondack Mountain Club Lodge off Route 73 at the end of the Adirondack Loj Road (about 30 minutes from Lake Placid, N.Y.). Shouldering our cumbersome 50-pound packs, we trudged three miles up the trampled trail toward a lean-to near Avalanche Lake where we had arranged to meet Mr. Weight and Mr. Koeplinger.

Our itinerary was simple but fairly ambitious: On Saturday, hike Mount Marcy, the highest point in New York State; on Sunday, climb the northwest face of Mount Colden, which is one of the premier mountaineering routes in the Adirondacks.

Besides our high-tech clothes and three-day supply of low-tech food (instant oatmeal, chicken soup, dried fruit, cheese and crackers), we carried a Mountain Hardware tent and sleeping bags, propane stove, extra fuel, cooking utensils, ice axes, ski poles, head lamps and a first-aid kit. No snow had fallen in three weeks, so we didn't need snowshoes, but we carried them anyway. We considered taking cross-country skis as well but decided against it because of the fast, icy conditions.

Saturday, Marcy Day, dawned warm, 30 degrees, and overcast. In the summer, Mount Marcy is a popular hike, a long and gradual ascent by High Peak standards. But in the winter, deep snow and capricious weather make it more challenging, and much more beautiful.

The first recorded ascent of the 5,344-foot peak, in 1837, was led by Ebenezer Emmons, a geologist who named it after the New York governor who had appointed him a surveyor in that region. In 1901, Vice President Theodore Roosevelt was headed up Mount Marcy when he learned that his boss had been shot by an anarchist. And the true source of the Hudson, the melodically named Lake Tear of the Clouds, sits high on Mount Marcy's flank.

The narrow Indian Falls trail we followed wound through stunted pines bowing under the thick layers of snow like a wedding cake frosted by a tipsy baker. The higher we walked, the smaller the trees became, until a trailside sign announced we were in a fragile environment of Arctic Alpine pines.

Three snow-encrusted parties who had retreated short of the summit told us that visibility was nil, and that winds of 50 to 70 miles an hour had knocked them down. But Mr. Koeplinger, an experienced hand at Mount Marcy, felt that while going on entailed some risk, it wasn't dangerous.

As soon as we left the shelter of the trees, our pristine winter wonderland turned hostile. We

cleared snow off boulders to mark the way, took compass readings in case we got lost and stumbled single file in the knee-deep snow. Only when we bumped into a plaque that read "Tahawus," the Indian name for Cloud Splitter, did we realize that we were standing on top of New York.

Mr. Weight, who lived on a 24-foot sailboat for years and loves the extremes of all types of weather, huddled beside me behind an outcropping of boulders, his bushy brown beard completely white. Unable to be heard over the wind, and with no view to admire, the four of us were left with our own thoughts. "Man is nothing here, his very shouts die on his lips," the Rev. Joel T. Headley wrote after climbing Mount Marcy in the 1840's. We lingered for 20 minutes in the storm. From tent to top and back took us seven hours.

Back in camp, I donned a few extra layers of clothing and topped everything off with a thick goose-down parka. After a 10-mile hike in the snow, the impulse is to recline and order room service; but with daylight dwindling, we got busy gathering dead wood and fetching water from a nearby stream. Mr. Akerlund built a campfire while Mr. Weight and I cooked on our propane stoves.

The best you could say about our meal was that it was edible, and we were hungry. Mr. Weight and Mr. Koeplinger went with the freeze-dried Swedish meatballs and chicken teriyaki with boil-in-a-bag peas. Mr. Akerlund and I cooked up ramen noodles and opened a frosty tin of smoked kippers. Before long, we were deep in a discussion about a restaurant in nearby Keene that serves draft beer and spicy chicken wings. After dinner, we sat in our lean-to, puffing on 15-cent cigars and sipping lemonade, watching the fire smolder under a light snowfall. I was cold but not uncomfortable in my wool hat, down coat and Gore-Tex gloves. When we had discussed all there was to talk about, it was time for bed. Unfortunately, it was only 7:45.

On Sunday we hiked across Avalanche Lake to the base of an unusual geological feature on Mount Colden called the Trap Dike, a chasm caused by erosion. What is a waterfall in the summer is climbable ice in the winter, and we hacked our way up along its surface to a steep slab of rock known as a slide. From there we trudged to the summit. The day was sunny and still, a stark contrast to the murk of the previous day.

The view from the top was stunning. Beneath our feet, a sea of snowy mountains vanished in all directions. As we basked on our perfect perch, Mr. Koeplinger, who has climbed all 46 of the 4,000-foot peaks in the Adirondack Park, named mountain after mountain. I was impressed, and said so.

"It's no big deal," he said. "I've just spent a lot of time here."

Getting Started

Winter in the Adirondacks lasts well into April. The key to success in the back country is having the proper gear and experience and the right attitude.

A complete list of dos and don'ts for winter camping is available from the Adirondack Mountain Club, 814 Goggins Road, Lake George, N.Y. 12845-4117. Information about the winter-spring

workshops and field programs in the High Peaks is available by writing the Adirondack Mountain Club, P.O. Box 867, Lake Placid, N.Y. 12946, or by calling the Adirondack Loj, (518) 523-3441, from 9 A.M. to 7 P.M.

The High Peaks Information Center at the end of Adirondack Loj Road rents snowshoes and skis.

If you want to climb Mount Colden via the Trap Dike, or make another technical winter climb, there is the Adirondack Rock and River Guide Service, Alstead Hill Road (Box 219), Keene, N.Y. 12942. Its Web site is www.rockandriver.com. E-mail: ed@rockandriver.com. Guiding rates range from \$100 to \$140 a person a day, depending on group size.