

## WINTER CAMPING A LIBERATING EXPERIENCE FOR THOSE WILLING TO BRAVE ELEMENTS



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The cold weather is here, prompting some people to think not of Caribbean vacations but of winter camping. We think that winter camping has advantages over summer camping: You can reach areas that are too wet or overgrown during other seasons, and the clear and open view is unparalleled. Winter camping provides solitude and a feeling of exploration; even heavily traveled trails seem like virgin territory when covered by a fresh blanket of snow. Camping in the winter inspires a feeling of independence and gives people confidence in their survival skills. Plus, there are no mosquitoes or bears. A group of local campers began winter camping in earnest nine years ago. We have done a wide range of trips, from simple hikes to lean-tos while pulling a plastic sled to backpacking trips and multi-day dog sledding adventures. We range in age from 20 to 50. Most of us are men, though there have been women on the dog sledding trip, and there is an active husband/wife team.

### Preparation is key

Before the trip, you need to plan what clothing to bring, your mode of transportation, type of shelter, food and gear. You need a wider range of clothing for winter camping than for a day hike during the winter. While snowshoeing with a backpack, you rarely need more than a light shirt, and windbreaker. But when sitting around the fire at night with temperatures plunging, you need to bundle up in multiple layers. Make sure you pack a second base layer (shirt, long underwear and socks) to change into when reaching your destination, replacing the damp clothes of the day. Warm hats, mittens and gloves are a must. Keep your torso warm with a down or synthetic jacket or vest, or a jacket worn in combination with fleece. Nylon or waterproof pants over fleece do the same for your legs.

### Traveling and shelter

The best way to travel while carrying a backpack is on snowshoes. Backpacking with cross-country skis through the woods and over uneven terrain is too difficult. Sometimes we tow plastic sleds, but they require relatively wide, smooth and even trails for easy sliding. Shelter options include Adirondack lean-tos, bivy bags, snow caves and tents with or without stoves. Lean-tos offer the advantage of holding up to six campers and giving them a place to stand and change clothes. They also give a convenient place to sit at night in front of a fire. Snow shelters are warm, but require sufficient snow and are time-consuming to build and constrictive for sleeping. Tenting offers the greatest flexibility in choosing a destination, and some tents come equipped to hold a small wood stove and stove pipe.

### Trail mix

Food and water for fuel is important when over-nighting in the winter. Trail mix, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, energy bars and chocolate snacks consumed at regular intervals go a long way in keeping you warm. Most winter camping meals are simple, no-fuss affairs. One-pot stews or soups and other foods that can easily be cooked in a pan or over a fire are preferred. Washing dishes is definitely something to avoid while winter camping. Additional gear includes a flashlight or headlamp for hands-free operation, fire starter, water bottles, a sleeping pad and sleeping bag. One alternative to purchasing an expensive winter sleeping bag is to use two sleeping bags, one inside the other, hopefully with zippers aligned. While it is difficult to learn to winter camp safely from a book or Web site, there are helpful resources available to those interested in this pursuit.

The Outdoor Action Program of Princeton University has an excellent introductory winter camping manual available online at [www.princeton.edu/~oa/winter/wintcamp.shtml](http://www.princeton.edu/~oa/winter/wintcamp.shtml). Or learn about our local group at our Web site [www.wintercampers.com](http://www.wintercampers.com).

*Jim Muller, who has been backpacking since the 1960s, lives in Holland Patent. He tries to camp in the winter at least once a month. During the other three seasons, Muller canoes and camps with his wife and friends.*