

Getting the kinks out-Winter camping requires practice By Tim Jones

Appeared in the Concord Monitor February 22, 2008

<http://www.cmonitor.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20080222/SPORTS/802220305&SearchID=73309856200680> and at http://www.berkshireagle.com/outdoors/ci_8332039

I think it's probably safe to say that most active outdoors enthusiasts never even consider sleeping out in a tent in the winter. That's too bad, because winter camping opens up a whole new world of sunlight, starlight and silence. There's nothing else quite like it.

I'll admit that even I don't do much camping in the cold, dark days of December and January. There's simply not enough available daylight to make it enticing. But the rapidly lengthening days of late February and March mean more time to play outside and shorter nights in your tent.

The weather, too, tends to moderate at this time of year. You still have plenty of snow, which makes things fun, but you are less likely to face severe cold (below zero), which can make winter camping a challenge. Now until the snow melts in April is ideal camping time.

In winter, you don't have to get deep into the backcountry to find privacy. In fact, away from the major hiking trails (which are frequently as busy in the winter as they are in summer) and snowmobile routes, you aren't likely to see anyone else at all.

Comfortable winter camping isn't that much more difficult than three-season camping. If you've never tried winter camping, there are two basic approaches. You can sign up for a class: The AMC (outdoors.org) has lots, and, I believe, the Green Mountain Club (greenmountainclub.org) has some. Major retailers like EMS, LL Bean, IME and REI sometimes offer winter camping seminars as well.

Or, you can easily learn on your own by taking it in tiny increments. If you are an experienced summer or three-season camper, the absolute best way to learn winter camping is to start, literally, in your backyard or within a few feet of your car in one of the many state and national forest campgrounds that stay open all winter. That way, you've got backup resources and an immediate escape plan if something doesn't work.

Start by setting up your tent outside in the cold at home. The winter wilderness is no place to find a missing or broken tent pole or to discover that you can't set up your tent with gloves on.

At the same time, fire up your camp stove (which you left outside all night, didn't you?) to make sure it starts easily in the cold and works properly.

Even though you're going to camp close to an escape hatch, make your first excursion as realistic as possible. This is real practice.

For example, make sure you can get everything into your pack, including food, just as you would if you were going miles away. Then, put on your pack and your snowshoes or cross-country skis and trek a ways - just to see how that works.

Choose a campsite that's protected from the wind - which can vibrate a tent like a bass drum and make sleeping impossible. Stomp a flat spot in the snow with your skis or snowshoes to set up your tent. The more compacted the snow, the more comfortable your camp. If your tent isn't free-standing, you may have to improvise stakes that hold in the snow.

Whether it's in your backyard or at a roadside campsite, close-in winter camping lets you learn in increments without suffering for your mistakes. Any winter camping earns you automatic bragging rights. Only the chosen few ever break the bounds of four walls and central heat to get out and really taste the wonders of winter.

Take it simple steps, do it safe, but do it! Life isn't a spectator sport. Get out and enjoy!

Some essential gear

Yes, I also have a winter camping checklist, and, yes, I'll share it with anyone who would like a copy. Just e-mail me at the address below. For now, some of the basics:

- Tent - Almost any free-standing tent will work in winter. A good choice is a dome design with four poles for extra stability and an extended fly that creates a sheltered space for cooking and gear storage. In winter, a little extra space is always nice.
- Sleeping system - You want a closed-cell foam pad (or two!), not an air mattress, between you and the snow for insulation. Mummy-style sleeping bags provides more warmth for less weight and bulk. If you don't have a warm-enough sleeping bag, try one sleeping bag inside another, and pack extra-thick long underwear and fleece tops and bottoms, heavy socks and a warm hat to wear inside your bag. Anyone who believes it's warmer to sleep naked inside a sleeping bag should be forced to do it - once.
- Winter sleeping bags are always a trade off. Down-filled bags are all the rage right now, but a good synthetic-filled bag is cheaper and safer, though heavier and bulkier. (Down loses its insulation if it gets wet - and a tent is a very humid environment).
- Stove - A stove is absolutely essential -you can't rely on a fire for cooking and water. The best winter stoves burn white gas or kerosene rather than propane or butane. Make absolutely sure your stove runs flawlessly before you head out. Carry a big pot for melting ice or compacted snow for water.
- Light - Winter nights are long, and one of the new battery-thrifty LED headlamps is nearly indispensable for cooking, camp chores, nighttime calls of nature, and reading in bed.
- Camp footwear - Trust me, you don't want to wear boots inside your tent or put them on each time you have to go outside. Camp booties add comfort and convenience in a winter camp

Be safe, be sensible

Since I wrote about the deadly white winter in New Hampshire's White Mountains, three more lost or overdue hikers have had to be plucked from summits by helicopter. C'mon folks, be sensible. If there's heavy rain or snow and high winds in the forecast, stay lower and closer to the road so you can ease yourself out of trouble rather than having to be rescued. Remember, if you are in peril, so are the folks who are going out to try to save you . . .

Tim Jones writes about outdoor sports and travel. He can be reached at timjones@easternslopes.com.