

It's not just cool, it's COLD! Winter camping is a great way to experience the outdoors with a little planning

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Rick Rydgren of Malone monitors the campfire built during a winter camping training class at Boyhaven campground in Rock City Falls.

Photographer:
[Ana Zangroniz](#)

Winter camping aficionado Ted Brown, 92, of Schenectady, says camping out in temperatures of 30 degrees below zero is “a piece of cake.” He would know, as he has been trekking out into the snow to set up camp for decades with the Boy Scouts.

Like the Boy Scout motto goes, to “be prepared” is the key to safe and pleasant winter camping. Ryan Doyle, outdoor leadership coordinator for the Adirondack Mountain Club, said that the national, nonprofit organization Leave No Trace, which is dedicated to responsible stewardship of the outdoors, has seven guiding principles. The first is “plan ahead and be prepared.” “Everything else can relate to that in some way,” Doyle said.

The biggest mistake that people make is not planning well, Doyle said. “Once you’re out there, there are a million little mistakes you can make,” he said.

In the summertime, not having enough food or extra clothes is not such a big issue, but in the winter, there is less margin for error.

In planning a trip, it is crucial to keep in mind that winter camping is very different from camping any other time of year. “You’re hauling more equipment, you’re bringing in more food, and you can’t move as fast,” Doyle said. “It’s common for newcomers to bite off more than they can chew.”

Careful planning and packing of clothing and equipment is key. Longtime Boy Scout Brace Kelly of Charlton, who has camped out in temperatures down to 13 below zero, views the gear as 80 percent of winter camping success.

Managing moisture

Being comfortable is about being warm enough. This starts with what a person wears on his body. The typical jeans of a summer camping wardrobe are taboo for winter because they don’t insulate the body, and, when they get wet, they don’t dry out. George Miller, assistant manager of Eastern Mountain Sports in Saratoga Springs, said that the idea behind dressing for winter camping is insulating the body, which starts with keeping the skin dry.

This starts with a base layer of a shirt and long underwear made from a fabric that will wick any moisture away from the body. “Any sweat you create gets pulled away from your skin, and [these layers] are designed to move it away from your skin and dry rapidly as well,” he said. EMS’ signature brand is “Techwick,” which is a polyester material. On top of that there are more layers, such as a thicker layer of wicking material. On top of that are more layers, such as a fleece jacket and a soft or hard shell jacket to block the wind.

Socks and shoes can be tricky, as Miller points out that there is no one sock or shoe that is right for everyone. The idea with foot gear is moisture management aimed at keeping the foot dry. For example, a heavier weight wool sock might be good for someone who normally has cold feet. Boots should be those that are designed for winter wear and have insulation against the cold.

On hands, mittens are warmer than gloves, because the fingers are right next to each other. “A lightweight liner glove and then into a mitten is the best way to keep your hands warm,” Miller said. A hat, of course, is common sense.

It is always important to put a new set of clothing on for bedtime, as you don’t want to be sleeping in clothes that you have been sweating in all day. Winter campers hit the hay early, when dark comes. The right kind of sleeping bag is essential for staying warm and comfortable at night. Sleeping bags are rated for different temperatures. Kelly uses a bag that is good down to 20 below zero. Underneath the sleeping bag, it is necessary to have a closed-cell foam pad as insulation.

You can supplement the sleeping bags with wool blankets for extra warmth, said Jim Burgess of Niskayuna, the camping chairman for Twin Rivers Council of Boy Scouts of America. When Brown endured the “deep freeze of 1979,” when temperatures dropped to 30 below, the group knew it was coming. So they borrowed extra sleeping bags so that everyone would have two to use. Underneath the pad, campers should have a waterproof ground cloth.

The placement of the tent is key, too. Tents designed for winter camping are sturdier so they can withstand possible snow load. The tent should be positioned in a clear area, not underneath branches that could drop snow on the tent, and the tent should be positioned so that the wind doesn’t blow into it.

Food for thought

Food is especially important in winter camping, because eating will help boost metabolism and keep the body warmer. Snacking frequently on high-carb, high calorie foods helps. Meals should be as simple as possible during the winter, as building a fire in freezing temperatures can be quite a challenge. Miller recommends using a white gas stove because that kind of fuel burns well at cold temperatures. Propane does not work well below 30 degrees.

Meals aren’t leisurely affairs enjoyed around the campfire in winter, because campers need to keep their bodies moving in cold temperatures, not sit still eating a meal. The best bet for meals are one-pot dishes that can be cooked quickly, such as warming up a can of stew. Kelly suggests cooking foods ahead of time and vacuum-sealing them in bags. “After you build a fire, which is a feat in itself, you can heat up the water and throw the bags in. It’s actually pretty cool,” he said.

Being versed on hypothermia

Knowing and being able to recognize the signs of hypothermia, as well as how to treat the condition, is knowledge that winter campers must have. Taking a first-aid course that addresses those issues is a good idea. The first stages of hypothermia begin with intense shivering, poor coordination and fumbling hands. As the body temperature drops, shivering becomes violent. A person will have difficulty thinking, may stumble and feel numb, and may start to experience amnesia.

“In the later stages, you start to become irrational, and your decision-making starts to fade away,” Doyle said. “If other people in your party start to feel the same way, it can go downhill pretty fast,” he said. As the body’s temperature continues to drop, there are much more serious

symptoms. Campers need to have a plan for obtaining emergency medical treatment as soon as they observe any signs of hypothermia in any members of their group.

Brainstorming about possible problems and challenges and how to overcome them can help winter campers avoid them. “The devil’s in the details,” Doyle said.

First-time winter campers should take training beforehand and go out with experienced people. The Adirondack Club offers a class called Winter Camping 101, in which experienced leaders take small groups out for a weekend. They travel by snowshoe to their camping spot, where campers learn how to set up camp, cook, stay warm and dry and be prepared for the unexpected condition of winter camping. The next class takes place on Jan. 19 to 21, and details are available at the club’s Web site, www.adk.org.

Enjoying a good challenge

One might ask the question why people would want to endure such harsh, demanding conditions at all, but there are some benefits — no bugs and less people, for example. And there are plenty of activities — snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, sledding and the like to be enjoyed only in the snow.

For Kelly, it’s a combination of things. One is the pure challenge of it. “Can I get out there and survive?” he asks. “It’s me against the weather. Do I have enough smarts, enough clothing, to keep myself warm even though nature’s trying to suck all the heat out of me?”

Brown also would tell you it’s about the challenge. He also points out that it gives scouts an opportunity to learn how to make sound decisions and take care of themselves, a skill that translates to other areas of their lives.

Beyond the challenge, there is the peace of nature at that time of year. “It is so peaceful. It is so beautiful. If it snows during the night, you get up and everything is covered with fresh snow,” Kelly said.