

Learning From Mistakes - Minimalist Winter Backpacking

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I thought I'd dig up an old trip of mine for this week's post. Several years back I was feeling pretty stir crazy in October, it had been over 40 days since I'd spent a night outside and that particular year I seemed to have the camping itch even worse than usual. So early one Saturday in late October I tossed a handful of things into a backpack and drove up to the snowy Rockies.



I'd been camping in winter before. Back in college I spent many cold nights in the back-country but at the time I had a very nice down sleeping bag, a fairly robust tent, good winter mountaineering boots, crampons, an ice axe some good telescoping poles. I had picked up most of it because one person or another had told me "Hey you really need this." When I used them

then it didn't register very well how important all this specialized equipment was, however after college I sold most of that heavy mountaineering gear and switch to ultralight weight camping gear since most of my excursions occurred during the spring and summer.

With me on this trip I had a light weight backpack that had a simple 3 season tent with a partial fly and mostly mesh and super light nylon walls. I had dumped the old mountaineering boots for some simple US Army boots which are fairly light for full leather boots and come with a great sole. I had no ice axe, crampons, or other means of arresting my self in a slide and I had nothing to really protect me from the snow. I had some light weight gloves, a thin bicycling beanie, a fleece and a shell jacket. All I had on my legs was a pair of yoga/hiking pants. I had a simple non stick pot and a simple stove along with some dehydrated cheese soup in a ziploc bag and a pair of trekking poles.

The dirt road to the trail head was fairly dry and I left the car and started up the path. I made it about 400 yards before I came around a corner and found the trail covered in packed snow. I broke out the trekking poles which helped me maintain my balance and continued onward.

Since the trail was close to Denver there was a fair bit of foot traffic on it, from people running in snow shoes, to a group of outward bound students headed up to a pair of lakes. My goal was to hike up to King lake, reach the continental divide and hopefully cross it and travel about half a mile on the west side of the divide before swinging back over it and finishing the loop the following day.



Despite having a fairly light pack it was hard work constantly trying to get good purchase on the packed slick snow. My boots had been treated with mink oil so for a while they were repelling water but after 4 hours of being rubbed against snow the waterproofing was failing. The leather was no longer repelling water but absorbing it. I wasn't concerned about it though, I had a spare set of socks and it was a warm day so I was feeling good. The sky was clear and cloudless, and it made the snow look stunning. Marching into the sun caused the snow around me to look as bright as

a white hot welding torch. It was dizzying but at the same time immensely enjoyable. The world was different and new and it was hard not to feel like a seven year old on a snow day.

After I'd been making slow progress for 5 hours the trail was becoming much steeper. I ran into a woman who was coming down, she was well dressed in gaiters, mountaineering boots, and carried an ice axe and a pair of tekking poles. When she came across me and saw my pack she looked very worried. "Are you planning to stay the night?" she asked, "Yeah I was planning to get up to the divide and setup camp then cross over and loop back tomorrow." "Where are your snowshoes? You don't even have gaiters, I don't think you'll make it." she told me, I was having a good day so I just smiled at her and said "ok" and continued on my way. I'd been up in the mountains enough that I felt I could simply push through any limits that my gear or lack there of would impose on me.

I kept climbing and the path got steeper and steeper, after I broke through treeline I found a much bigger problem. The packed snow trail that I had been marching up ended and there was smooth unbroken snow in front of me. No one had been up here recently, and in order to get to the divide I had at least a mile of this snow in front of me. I tried slowly weighting each foot hoping to build up a little bit of snow pack under each boot but more often than not I'd punch through the icy crust on top of the snow and sink in to my waist. At this point my boots were soaked through and my pants were dripping from the knee down. I summoned up some reserves and slogged through the snow for about 3000 feet leaving a trail of post holes every 3 feet behind me.



I reached King Lake and it was beautiful, a large hanging lake at the base of a large granite wall. I could also see how I would ascend to reach the continental divide but after slogging through the snow I was beat. I shrugged off the packed and kicked aside enough snow to reach the grass under neath. The more I looked at the ridge line that was the continental divide the further away it looked. The wind was blowing hard up there and kicking up a plume of snow.

The longer I looked at the ridge the more comfortable the lakeside appeared. My legs were exhausted and despite it being in the mid 20s I was sweating heavily from the hike up.

I setup the tent and stripped down and quickly passed out. I awoke cold, the sun had dipped below the face of granite that King Lake laid next to. As soon as I was out of the radiant heat of the sun the temperature plummeted. I got to work making food and the activity brought some heat back into my limbs. The wind had died down and the lake was blissfully quiet. I whipped up a large pot of steaming cheese and potato soup and watched the moon rise while walking along the lake side.



I expect in summer this wouldn't be one of my favorite places to visit. The ground was soft and if the temperature had been higher it would have been extremely marshy. I expect when the ground is wet the bugs must love this area, feasting on anything foolish enough to hang around the lake for long. Now though, the cold had transformed the place and I found it enchanting.

The lake was below freezing and had a thick skin of ice particles on its surface. The water was still fluid though but when I dragged my fingers through it it felt more like syrup than water. As the sun went down the moon came up and the entire area was covered in bluish light. There wasn't any sound other than my own breathing and despite the cold (my boots were still squishing wet) it was hard to feel anything other than peace. I stood for a long time by the lake side and watched Orion cross the sky.



When I finally did turn in the lack of proper gear made itself clear again. My body temperature had dropped while I had been by the lake and I was shivering good by the time I made it back to the tent. I kicked off my boots and wore all of my clothing while in my sleeping bag but it did me no good. Temps went well down to single digits and the 15 degree rating on the sleeping bag was hopelessly optimistic. The whole night I got less than an hour of sleep and I laid as still as I could in the cold begging the sun to come up

again.

When it became light enough for me to see again the inside of the tent was covered in frost. It still took another couple of hours of waiting in the cold for the sun to finally get over the little slope I had pitched my tent beside. Finally when I dragged myself out of the bag and into the

chill morning air I found my boots. They were still in the original shape they had been when I pulled my feet out of them but the water in the leather had fully frozen. The ice had built up enough that I couldn't pry them apart with my hands. I ended up getting a rock and smashing them enough to break the ice. When I summoned up the courage to shove my feet into those leather igloos the experience wasn't all that pleasant.

The hike out was pretty easy and after a mile of following my post hole tracks back to the trail my feet warmed up enough that I could feel them again.

While I look back on the trip fondly there are some things I could have done which would have made the night much more pleasant. The worst part of the trip was trying to get some sleep in a tent that freely let the cold air in and my body heat out. My boots which were great for summer and spring camping really needed some gaiters to keep snow out of the top and either some goretex or a recoating of mink oil half way through the trip. Ideally I would have brought snow shoes which would have given me perfect grip and would have kept my boots dry. A winter tent would have made it feel 10 degrees warmer in the tent since they can be sealed to keep body heat in and the wind out, even better an igloo or quingee would have been great. Snow shelters like those keep the internal temperature in the structure 32 degrees no matter what. While it would have been 15 degrees in the tent, in the snow cave it would have been a toasty 32, twice as warm as the tent.

While I'll happily shed weight and extras for summer camping I pack more for winter camping and feel much more reluctant to give up the extras that make staying in the cold much more comfortable.