

Winter camping teaches Scouts survival

By Lynn Taylor Rick, appearing in the Rapid City Journal on Thursday, February 14, 2008

Eighteen-year-old Eirik Kettering spent a recent weekend sleeping outside in an igloo ... on purpose. Kettering joined four other Boy Scouts and 10 Scout parents and leaders from Troops 72 and 320 for a winter camping excursion at Medicine Mountain Scout Ranch near Hill City. Steve Paulsen, a member of the Boy Scout Council Training Committee, said this year's trip was the first winter camping trip in many years, but he hopes it won't be the last. "My big push is always to make sure we had a year-around scouting program," he said.

Preparation for the winter camping trip involved classroom training, including a presentation by a man who survived two days stranded outdoors in a blizzard. Scouts were also trained in proper equipment, winter first aid, food preparation in extreme cold and shelter building.

Kettering, who earned his Eagle Scout rank in January, had winter-camped only once before. For his sleeping arrangement at Medicine Mountain, Kettering and his fellow campers cut snow blocks out of a frozen snow bank and built walls. He used old wood for the roof and hung burlap for the door. The temperature dipped to about 8 degrees one night, but Kettering swears he wasn't cold. "It was pretty warm. It was just uncomfortable because the ground was frozen and bumpy," he said. Kettering's father, Michael, used a parachute and poncho to make a tent. Another Scout slept in a snow cave. Paulsen and his wife, Pattie, slept in an all-weather tent.

Some members of the excursion opted for the cabins at Medicine Mountain. "There is always a fall-back because this is training," Paulsen said. "Not everybody is ready for it."

The campers learned how to cook in cold temperatures, whipping up a batch of chicken and rice soup. The Scouts also went snowshoeing and cross-country skiing. "They had a blast," Paulsen said.

Kettering said the hardest part of winter camping occurs in the morning. "The trickiest part is pretty much getting dressed every morning, because your clothes are cold," he said. "Once you're dressed, the rest is pretty easy, and it's warm the rest of the day."

He sees the winter camping and the cold as a challenge, something that can be overcome. "It's kind of just mind over matter. ... Even if it's cold, just live with it. You'll get used to it. Your body adjusts," Kettering said.

Paulsen hopes next year's trip will include even more Boy Scouts, but boys must be at least 11 or 12 years old and 100 pounds before they can join a winter camping trip. Paulsen said his hope is that more boys will put down their video games and realize that there are lots of things to do outside, even in winter. "What I want them to understand is that there is more than one season of camping, more than one season of outdoors," he said. He also wants them to be prepared if they find themselves in a winter emergency. "Just learning a little common sense toward dealing with the winter ... and some survival techniques," he said.

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