

Choosing a Winter Campsite: Factors to Keep in Mind

- Camping regulations
- Other campers
- *Wind:* avoid ridge tops and open areas where wind can blow down tents or create drifts.
- *"Widow Makers:"* look for dead branches hanging in the trees overhead.
- *Low-Lying Areas:* the coldest air will settle there.
- *Avalanche Danger:* select sites that do not pose any risk from avalanches.
- *Exposure:* south-facing areas will give longer days and more direct sunlight.
- *Water Availability* from lakes or streams will save you from having to melt snow for all your water.
- *Level Ground* makes for a more comfortable night.

Setting up Camp

When you first get into camp, use your snowshoes or skis to tramp down areas for tents and your kitchen. If possible, let the snow "set up" for 30 minutes or so. This will help the snow harden and allow you to take off your snowshoes or skis. Set up your tents with the openings at a 90 degree angle to the prevailing winds. Stake out the tents. On a cold night you can build snow walls on the windward side of the tent. Mound the sides of the tent with snow (have someone inside pushing out on the tent to keep it from collapsing). When the snow sets up you will have a hybrid tent-snow shelter, which will have better insulation than the sides of the tent alone. Dig out a pit in front of your tent for a porch. This makes taking your boots off much easier. Put your foam pads (two are better than one) in the tent and un-stuff your sleeping bag and place it in the tent so it can "expand" from its stuffed size.

If the snow is deep, you may want to carve out a pit for your kitchen. Dig a pit at least two yards in diameter (for 4-6 people). You can mark out the circle using a ski or a rope. Dig down about one yard and pile the excavated snow around the perimeter. Pack the snow at the perimeter of the hole with your shovel. This will give you a two yard deep area, protected from the wind. You can carve out seats and benches, put your skis or snowshoes behind the pile as backrests, carve places for stoves, etc.

Tips for Your Next Winter Camping Trip

Health & Safety

- Use the buddy system for winter camping. Buddies can check each other for frostbite, make sure no one becomes lost, and boost the morale of the entire group.
- Always test the thickness of ice before venturing any distance from the shore. Ice should be at least 3 inches thick for a small group; 4 inches of ice is safe for a crowd.
- Since ice thickness can vary considerably, it is best to stay near the shoreline of large lakes.

Gear & Clothing

- Encourage everyone in your group to wear brightly colored outer clothing so that each person will be more visible, especially during severe weather.
- Use alkaline batteries in flashlights. Standard batteries deteriorate quickly in cold weather. Tape the switch of your flashlight in the "off" position until you are ready to use

it. This will prevent it from being turned on accidentally while in your pack or on your sled.

Punch a hole in the top of your ice chisel and string a stout cord through it. Before trying to chisel a hole in ice, anchor the cord to something large or too heavy to be pulled through the hole so you will not lose your chisel in freezing water when the ice is penetrated.

Snow is the greatest thief in winter, swallowing up small dropped items. Tie or tape a piece of brightly colored cord to small items so they can be seen in snow. Some items, such as mittens, can be tied to larger items, such as a parka, to prevent them from being dropped and lost.

Always use a funnel to refuel a stove so you won't frostbite your fingers by accidentally pouring fuel on them. Fuel evaporates at a high rate of speed and quickly removes heat from anything it touches.

Place a stove or fire on a platform of logs or rocks so it will not melt through the snow.

An inexpensive platform can be made from a small piece of thin plywood before you go camping.

Never light or use a stove inside a tent or snow shelter. A tent may catch fire, and a snow shelter may help lead to carbon monoxide poisoning. Neither of these potential mishaps is worth the risk.

A windscreen is essential for using a stove in the winter. Even a slight breeze will direct the heat away from its intended mark.

Travel & Navigation

Plan to cover no more than 5 miles per day on a winter camping trek on snowshoes. An experienced group can cover 10 to 12 miles on cross-country skis.

Fatigue encourages accidents. Rest occasionally when building a snow shelter; taking part in cross-country skiing or snow shoeing; or participating in other active winter sports. Periodic rests also help avoid overheating.

Food & Water

Melting snow in a pot to get water may cause the pot to burn through or may scorch the snow, giving the water a disagreeable taste. Prevent this by adding a cup or two of water in the bottom of the pot before putting in the snow to melt.

Small liquid-fuel stoves are much better for cooking in winter than fires, which are difficult to build with wet wood. Gathering wood that is frozen to the ground also can be difficult, if not impossible. A pressure/pump-type gas stove is essential in winter.

Sleep & Shelter

Always allow ample time to make camp in winter, especially if you plan to build snow shelters.

Pulling a load over the snow on a sled or toboggan is generally easier than carrying it in a backpack.

Snow is a terrific insulator. Snow shelters are much warmer than tents for winter camping because they retain heat and keep out the cold wind. If you have adequate time for building snow shelters, you will spend a much more comfortable night sleeping in them than in a tent.

Activities & Recreation

Include some of these fun activities for a memorable, fun-filled winter camping weekend!

