

Rocky Mountain News

Prepare for winter camping

By Janet Reese, Special to the News
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Winter camping is not for everyone.

It's an activity that requires training, a lot of equipment and an adventuresome spirit. But if you're already a summer camper, backpacker, hiker, backcountry skier or snowshoer, you might enjoy the challenge.

Solitude, snow-covered mountain vistas, full-moon nights and pristine powder can be yours. And there are no crowds and no mosquitoes.

While winter camping is beautiful and serene, it requires planning and preparation. In the winter, the margin for mistakes is small. Hazards include hypothermia, frostbite and avalanches. Proper clothes, shelter, sleeping bag, food and gear are a must.

"A positive mental attitude is most important," said Chuck Barnes, winter camping instructor for the Colorado Mountain Club. "You must go into it with the attitude that nothing is insurmountable."

Experienced winter camper Frank Solten said, "I enjoy the winter scenery and the physical demands. After you learn the basics, winter camping becomes more routine and enjoyable. It's a different dimension of backpacking. You have to focus more on what you're doing because of the cold and early nightfall."

Staying warm

At an REI winter camping clinic, Tim Carpenter reviewed a checklist of essentials. Clothing is at the top of the list.

"Use a good layering arsenal: a base layer against your skin to wick away perspiration, insulating middle layers and a wind- and water-resistant outer shell," he said. "Make adjustments according to the weather."

Use wool or synthetic fabrics that wick away moisture. When wet, cotton loses its insulating ability and takes a long time to dry, hastening hypothermia. Wind-stopper fleece is a great fabric. Pit zips in the outer layer add more ventilation.

Gloves tend to be an oversight. "Buy a good pair," Carpenter said. "Make sure they are breathable and fit snugly to minimize cooling dead air space."

A head cover such as a balaclava and hat minimizes heat loss, he said. "Boots should be waterproof and breathable. Regular Gortex hiking boots will work. Powder pants and gaiters keep snow out of boots."

Staying warm at night is another factor.

"Always go with a down-filled sleeping bag for winter camping and keep it dry," he said. "Synthetic fill is cheaper but heavier and not as warm as down. Down is lighter and more compressible. Wear as little as you can inside the bag and wear a change of clothes from your day clothes."

Use down booties and a fleece sleeping bag liner.

Winter-specific gear

Much of your summer gear can be used in the winter, but the tent must be stronger to withstand wind and snowfall.

Said Carpenter: "A four-season dome tent with two extra poles for strength can hold up to a couple feet of snow without caving in, as well as withstand strong winds."

Activity-specific gear includes snowshoes or skis, a backpack with a waterproof cover, stove and fuel, snow shovel, three- or four-season tent and winter stakes. A cargo sled can transport a backpack and extra gear.

"One of the most important tools is a stove to heat food and, if needed, to melt snow for drinking water," said Gyorgy Kereszti, winter camping instructor for the CMC. "A propane or white gas stove is the most reliable."

Test your gear before going on a trip, he said. "Try out your stove, tent and sleeping bag in your backyard, an excellent way to figure out what's working. Check out your pad for insulation and your sleeping bag for warmth and fit."

Setting up a campsite

On a CMC winter camping class field trip near Eldora, Chuck Barnes explained how to set up a campsite.

"When picking a camping site, avoid ridgelines where it could be windy and cold, and low-lying areas where cold air settles," he said. "Avoid pitching your tent under trees loaded with snow. Orient the tent toward the south for morning sunlight. Situate the camp uphill."

He demonstrated by crafting a compacted snow platform for a tent. Wearing snowshoes and a backpack, he tramped down the snow and made a nine-foot radius around the center point.

"Determine how much space you need for the tent, for walking around and for your kitchen," he said. "Let the snow firm up a half-hour before pitching your tent."

Next, he made a kitchen trench, a protected area for the stove. He dug a rectangular hole in front of the tent opening. Then, he returned to setting up a tent on the platform.

"Pitch the tent on a tarp. Secure the guy lines with snow stakes buried five to six inches in snow. Summer tent stakes pull out of the snow."

Food and water

After finishing kitchen trenches, students experimented with their stoves to make a hot lunch. Each had chunky beef canned soup, macaroni and cheese, dehydrated potatoes mixed with hot water and bacon bits, Rice-A-Roni and hot spiced cider.

"One-pot, simple and tasty meals are popular," Kereszti said. "Cook and eat a meal from the pot, or use the pot only to boil water to heat a food pouch or to pour over dried food in an insulated cup."

Pack food that doesn't freeze - crackers, cheese and soft food bars, for example. Extra calories are needed for energy and body heat. Stay hydrated by drinking plenty of water. Instructors recommend carrying water because it requires a lot of snow and fuel to melt enough for drinking.

"When I was drinking hot chocolate from inside my warm, down sleeping bag, with a full moon reflecting on the snow in total quiet, I knew it was worth all the effort," Jo Bailey said.

Tips

- Go with experienced campers your first time out.
- Never camp at the bottom of an avalanche slope. This seems obvious, but it's worth underscoring because people are killed every year in avalanches. Seek training in winter safety, such as how to recognize and avoid avalanche conditions.
- Prevent water in bottles from freezing by burying them in a foot of snow. Turn the bottles upside down so if ice forms, it's at the bottom of the bottle, not at the opening.
- Use two pairs of long underwear - one for hiking, and a dry pair for sleeping.
- In addition to a sleeping pad, carry two small foam pads - one to stand on and one to sit on.

- Down sleeping bags lose their insulating qualities when wet, but usually this is not a problem in dry Colorado winters.
- Many trails used in the summer also are accessible in winter. The Colorado Mountain Club class camped in Grizzly Gulch, off Interstate 70, and near Second Creek, off Berthoud Pass.
- Most state parks provide camping during the winter season on a first-come, first-served basis. Colorado State Parks: www.parks.state.co.us
- At Rocky Mountain National Park, some areas are open for winter camping and some campgrounds are open throughout the year. View www.nps.gov

Sources: *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, *Www.Ehow.Com*. *Where To Go*

Winter camping classes

- Colorado Mountain Club, Golden, www.cmc.org.
- AlpenQuest, Colorado Springs, www.alpenquest.com
- Outward Bound Wilderness, www.outwardboundwilderness.org

Resources

- *Winter Camping, 2nd Edition*, by Stephen Gorman
- *Okpik: Cold-Weather Camping*, Boy Scouts of America
- Snow camping primer, www.scoutscan.com
- Gear checklist, www.rei.com. Click on "expert advice," then "camping & hiking." Scroll to "gear checklist" for snow camping.

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