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Cold Call

Winter hiking represents a unique and exhilarating opportunity to enjoy a true wilderness experience—after all, everyone else is inside in front of the fire! It comes with its own special set of demands however—a guide to getting started.

Winter hiking is 15 pounds of equipment jammed in a knapsack, repeated changes of clothes conducted at the most inopportune times, condensation dripping from the tent, plus repeated episodes of lost footing.

And snow.

Did we mention snow in all its many incarnations? Wet snow, hard-packed snow, balls of it stuck to snowshoes, vast expanses of snow coated with ice, snow deep enough to swallow a person whole.

Winter hiking is also notable for its serenity, beauty, the clarity of its skies, and the many opportunities it affords for self-discovery.

In brief, it's a multi-dimensional activity with as many rewards as pitfalls. What it's not is a walk in the park.

"The elements can be quite difficult whether it's snow, wind or rain," says Gordon DuBois, a U.S. hiker of distinction, who has successfully scaled every peak of the New Hampshire White Mountain range. "In winter the snow is constantly changing. Many times the trail markers are buried under four or five feet of snow, forcing you to use a map and compass."

Before setting foot in a forest or on a mountain trail, DuBois recommends making an equipment list to guard against the unexpected.

This inventory should consist of clothing, food and survival gear. Leather boots and two pairs of wool socks suffice for a day trip. Dress in layers, the inner layer consisting of some polypropylene material, and underwear that transfers moisture away from your skin.



Wool or synthetic fabrics such as Polarfleece should be used for the insulating layers, and waterproof Gore-Tex for outerwear.

Never wear cotton, a material with no insulating properties that retains moisture.

It's wise to pack an extra set of clothing in the event your garments become wet or circumstances force an overnight stay.

"Layering is the key to successful winter hiking," comments DuBois. "You don't want to dress too warmly because you'll sweat and get wet and consume more calories. It's better to add layers as the temperature drops, rather than having to strip clothes off early on."

Equipment needs are extensive, but fortunately it's all lightweight in design and shouldn't exceed 15 pounds when packed. These indispensable items include a compass, whistle, rope, maps, flashlight, first aid kit, cook stove, tent, sleeping bag and two sets of crampons, one for packed snow and the other for icy surfaces.

"Always bring enough clothes and equipment to survive through the night," advises DuBois.

"There's a real temptation to travel light, and it often lands people in a great deal of trouble. Always be prepared for the unexpected. If I'm going out for a day I bring food for two."

Dubois routinely packs small quantities of dried meats and fruits, some whole grain bread, a few candy bars, sticks of cheese and various freeze-dried foods. He never carries less than two quarts of water, and includes a fortified drink.

To overcome the many physical obstacles that arise along the trail it's necessary to bring tracking poles, (which are used for leverage and balance), an ice axe, plus snowshoes, considered by DuBois as the most indispensable item of all: "Not only do they keep you up, but they also provide traction. Without snowshoes it would be hard to get anywhere. During the hike you may change from snowshoes to crampons and then back again. It's important that you have both because if you don't it can be a difficult, hard and perhaps even dangerous trip."

DuBois, like most experienced hikers, keeps to the trails, another practice newcomers should follow. If he's forced to bushwhack (the term for off-trail movement), then it's always with map and compass in hand.

He is also in the habit of leaving an itinerary behind, with specific details as to his whereabouts and estimated duration of his journey.

"There's a big learning curve with winter hiking. There's a lot to it, just in regards to clothing and equipment alone. You need to learn how to use equipment properly, and proceed in a safe manner. I've been hiking for 15 years and understand the challenges that arise when facing the elements. I also appreciate the beauty, peace and quiet to be found on the trails. That's what lures me back year after year."

Black and White

An overnight stay on the snowy trails brings a whole new set of challenges, calling for a host of extra gear. Among the items DuBois recommends you take for a safe and warm night under the stars:

- Bivy sack
- Four-season tent
- Winter sleeping bag

- Two sleeping mats, placed one atop the other
- Venting system to protect against moisture buildup

"You might wake up in the middle of the night and find rain coming down on you," cautions DuBois. "It's caused by your breath rising and hitting the cold sides of the tent and then dripping down on top of you."



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