



WINTER HIKING

Appropriate clothing and gear, accurate route information and awareness of specific hazards and pitfalls will help you enjoy winter climbing. Browse some of the abundant literature on this growing pastime and, if possible, talk to experienced winter hikers about what to expect and how to prepare. The Adirondack Mountain Club does offer a Winter Climbing School and they also publish a book, "Winterwise: A Backpacker's Guide" by John M. Dunn. To get you started, here are some pointers that will make for a more enjoyable winter experience.

Be safe

Before attempting a climb of one of the 46 peaks, familiarize yourself with winter hiking on less demanding outings. This will allow you to validate your choice of clothing and gear, test your stamina and appreciate the differences between hiking in winter compared to other seasons.

Climbing the High Peaks alone is never recommended, especially in winter. If you don't know any experienced winter climbers, group hikes are an alternative. Knowledge of avalanche safety is useful and hypothermia is an ever-present danger in the mountains.

Obtain a LOCAL forecast for the high peak region, know who to contact in the event of an emergency, leave details of your planned route and stick to your plan! Cell phones now work in SOME locations in the High Peaks. When reporting emergencies, reporting party should contact the **Forest Ranger Emergency Line @ 518-891-0235**. You will then be speaking with someone familiar with the area and knowledgeable of the rescue resources available. Following the advice you are given can expedite the rescue process for all involved. Remember that it can often take most of a day to assemble a rescue party and get them to the injury location. During the climb keep your phone off and the batteries warm if you want to increase the chance of the device working.

Establish a "turn around time" reflecting the season. Winter days are short and temperatures are known to dip precipitously after sunset. Beware that the last half-mile to the summit may take forever, especially in adverse conditions. Remember that it's a long way back to the trailhead if you are tired and more challenging in darkness. In other words, head back sooner than you would in other seasons. Don't let "summit fever" overcome sound judgment. The mountains will always be there another day!

Clothing and gear

There is much literature on how to dress. A good resource is the staff at most outdoor equipment stores. They can explain about layering (wear wool or polypropylene, absolutely no cotton) and the latest equipment innovations. Having proper head gear (including a balaclava), mittens, fleece, windbreaker, etc. and back-ups (including a pair of the warmest mitts available) in your pack is critical. The technique of adjusting your temperature to maintain warmth and avoid sweating is critical.

In winter, your biggest enemy is moisture, whether from perspiration on the inside or melting precipitation on the outside. In tight going, snow on the trees falls down your back and soaks through the most expensive Gore-tex parka. The temperature of your extremities, both hands and feet, will indicate if more layers or a change of clothing is necessary. On very cold days, beware when you remove your backpack. If you've been sweating or if the back of your pack is wet from melting snow, it can freeze within minutes and feel like an icepack when worn again.

A good headlight is a must. Two are even better so you can avoid the frustration of replacing tiny batteries with cold fingers in the dark. Or have a spare at the ready in case of malfunction. Lithium batteries are well worth the investment because they last much longer and hold up well in the cold.

The most critical piece of equipment is your choice of boots and socks. Know the temperature rating of your boots and if the binding straps will consistently stay attached. They must be warm, comfortable, stay dry over time, and allow bindings to be properly attached without cutting off circulation. Make sure they also allow for a warm pair of socks over a liner while leaving some wiggle room for your toes. Knee high gaiters will greatly help to keep boots, feet and ankles warm and dry. If you are prone to blisters, prevention is recommended over having to apply a cure in the cold! Snowshoes/skis are mandatory by regulation once the trails have 8" of snow, and some form of crampon can be critical on steep or icy trails.

Route information

A topographical map and compass and knowing how to use them is critical. A GPS can help too – provided you are experienced in its use and can keep the unit from freezing. A sudden cloud, snow gale or fog cover may render the compass an absolute necessity to find the route down and out if visibility is drastically reduced.

Reading a map with half-frozen fingers while the wind is howling is a challenge! Jot down on a piece of paper in advance the “back bearing” from the summit to the timber line. In a whiteout above tree line, you always know which way is up but can have no idea of which way to return when your tracks have blown away.

Food and drink

Your body is your furnace. It provides the energy to maintain warmth and make your muscles function. Eating should be an ongoing process during the course of the day. More food and drink are needed in winter than in summer. A winter hike is no time to diet! Remember everything freezes during the course of the day. Keep things deep in your pack.

Dehydration is as much of a concern in winter. On a strenuous, 12-hour day you may want as much as three quarts of liquid. Water freezes! To avoid ice formation, heat your water before starting out, use water bottle parkas to preserve the warmth and, even better, keep the containers inside your pack. Pumping water in winter is not a viable alternative. Bear in mind that you may need to break through thick ice to get to it, the water may be too cold to drink and your water filter may freeze! The hose from your Camelback may freeze during use even if secured under your jacket.

Hazards and pitfalls

“Spruce Traps”: these form when snow drifts over pockets of air in branches. They collapse when unsuspecting climbers walk on the weakened areas – even when wearing snowshoes. Removing oneself can be a soaking and exhausting proposition. You may even require assistance to climb out!

Trees and shrubs may be covered with snow and markers or herdpaths nowhere to be seen! Your return journey may be more difficult than expected if strong winds or snow erase your tracks. It may even be necessary to break trail again! Occasionally, and even during extremely cold weather, brooks and rivers may be fast flowing or the ice not strong enough to support your weight.

Matches and a first aid kit are important. Over time you will add to your personal list of “essential items” to bring: an emergency food kit in case of an accidental bivouac, extra batteries, etc. It is highly recommended that you bring enough gear to survive a night in the woods.

Some winter climbers have gotten into serious trouble by leaving their backpacks or snowshoes at lower elevations before the final steep summit climb. This is never recommended because the contents may be needed most in the exposed conditions above tree line. No one wants to face an emergency on the summit when their gear is back in the col. By stopping at tree line to snack and add layers you can replenish your energy and better ready yourself to face the exposed conditions. Have your gloves and wind gear in your parka pockets for easy access when needed. As mentioned earlier, your tracks can disappear during wind blown conditions above treeline making your safe retreat a challenge.

On a typical day, temperatures rise until mid-afternoon before dipping precipitously after sunset. On the trail, it feels much colder in many of the little dips/valleys along the way, even on a very cold day! Above tree line, wind is usually a factor, sometimes reaching extreme velocity even if you experience calm at lower elevations. The term “wind chill factor” can take on a whole new meaning! On the other hand, on clear and calm days temperatures may be warmest above tree line and you will enjoy the warm glow of sunshine.

Finally, please note that the 46-Rs official winter season runs from December 21 to March 21. As Grace would have said *“Good Climbing..”*



The information provided above is not intended to be a complete guide to winter hiking only to supplement, not replace or contradict, guidebooks published concerning the subject and available to climbers.