

Mining Gold from the Cold: Brilliant Suggestions to Stay Warm While Camping in the Cold

On October 27th, TATC held an educational symposium on how to stay warm while camping in the winter. It started with two videos on cold weather camping, but participants spend the bulk of the time (more than 60 minutes) exchanging ideas and experiences about camping in the cold. If you would like to listen to the entire session, the link is: https://zoom.us/rec/share/uoVWd4RXdBelp3q4qKXse37TT2e_pLWRdZ3_fhX2nLoICzMkbGu8ljLtF6jbewu7.VAgu0eQIY9mmtLAI

So many bright and original recommendations came out of the session that we thought we would summarize them in the TATC Newsletter for those members who couldn't participate.

A special shoutout to Mal Higgins, Bruce Davidson, Ned Kuhns, Tim and Lisa Hall, Jim Newman, Tom Miano, Pete Burch, Ed Martin, and especially our guest speaker Plinio Beres, a Forest Service Ranger, who kicked off the session by recounting their experiences and making the suggestions for those who were thinking of camping in the cold for the first time.

The comments and suggestions are presented in their order in the Zoom video so if one them is of interest, you can find it in the Zoom video.

American Couple (The Outdoor Gear Review)

Expect to carry a larger pack to accommodate bulky winter gear.

Use a sleeping bag rated 10 degrees lower than the low temperature you expect to encounter.

Consider a sleeping bag liner if your sleeping bag is older with less loft.

Consider bringing two pads for under your sleeping bag.

Bring the pad with the highest R-value you can find--and carry.

Four season tents are not needed unless you are headed into snow or wind or exceptionally cold conditions i.e. well below freezing.

Condensation inside a tent causes frost on the tent, can lower the temperature inside the tent, and can wet your sleeping bag reducing its thermal value.

Bring tent stakes and cord to secure your tent as winter winds can be strong.

Daylight end early in the winter. Set up your tent early so you are not trying to do it in the dark when the temperature drops.

Cold will reduce battery life. This affects headlamps, flashlights, and you phone.

Sweating is a major threat. It can reduce your temperature leading to hypothermia.

Body temperature can be regulated by wearing clothing layers--base (next to the skin, an insulating layer, and an outer layer to protect your body from wind and rain/snow.

Wear wool or synthetics which absorb and shed body moisture. Cotton absorbs and retains moisture. Cotton kills.

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Take a pair of light gloves that are flexible and will permit you to cut wood, set up a tent, etc. Carry a waterproof, well insulated pair of gloves or mittens for times when you are not active.

Footwear depends on conditions. If you expect snow or heavy rain, you should consider waterproof footwear. However, there is a downside. Body moisture will be trapped inside the boot wetting you socks and chilling you. If you wear waterproof boots, bring extra socks. Consider trail shoes or boots that are breathable. However, you will need heavy socks to stay warm if you wear breathable shoes/boots.

Consider gators if you will be moving through heavy snow.

You should bring food that is rich in carbohydrates and fat to help you body deal with the cold.

Keeping your water from freezing may be a challenge. If you expect it to freeze, turn it upside down so it freezes at the bottom not at the opening.

Collect any garbage or trash you generate. Animals are still about.

Tempting though it may be, do not bring alcohol. It inhibits your body's ability to stay warm--even though it doesn't seem so initially.

Bring something to sit on around camp so your clothes will not get wet and so that you won't get cold.

Bring extra fuel. It will take more fuel to heat water in the cold.

Thoroughly check your gear before leaving for a trip. Set up the tent. Check zippers. Check cooking stoves. A gear failure on a summer campout might be simply annoying. In winter, it could be life threatening.

Always develop a plan based on expected conditions.

Be realistic about what you can accomplish in cold weather. Everything will take longer, and you will go slower.

Swedish couple (Fällräven)

You are the heater for your tent, your sleeping bag, and your clothing. You must stay insulated from the cold.

Venting the tent is key to managing the moisture. Open tent vents to permit moisture to escape.

Recommend a foam mat underneath the inflatable mat under the sleeping bag.

Consider using a sleeping bag line. It will keep the warm air next to your body and extend the life of your sleeping bag.

Wear socks, your base layer, and a beanie (knit cap) when you go to bed.

If you get cold in your sleeping bag, put your insulated jacket on top.

Consider putting your rain/snow shell jacket over end of your sleeping bag to further protect your feet.

A watertight bottle containing warm water will keep your feet warm almost all night. [Lee's note: tried this recently with a Nalgene bottle. Works very well and lead to a comfy night. The boiling water distorted the bottle, but did not leak.]

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Overheating is a possibility. If you begin to sweat, open zippers, take off clothing, etc. to keep yourself from sweating which will leave you with a wet sleeping bag and base layer.

In the morning, shake out your sleeping bag and open it up to dry.

Mal Higgins

The videos were right. You must vent your tent, or the inside will be covered in frost.

Try to take of bathroom functions before settling down for the night especially if you have several people in the tent with you.

When going down a steep, snow or ice covered slope, you might consider glacading. This is a fancy term for sliding down a hill on your bottom.

Jim Newman

Don't overspend on equipment. Jim said he spent nearly twice as much for equipment and clothing as he later learned was necessary.

Jim bought a top of the line Hilleberg cold weather tent for \$600. With experience, he found that his three season tent would have been satisfactory.

Buy snowshoes that you are maneuver and walk in safely. Some are just too large. You can trip over your own feet.

Jim bought and used a Wisperlite stove with white gas bottles. He's now apprehensive about carrying gasoline in his pack. He's is trying to find a way to use standard propane bottles.

Jim noted that the wind pants he bought (Arc'teryx) were expensive (\$200) and proved to be unnecessary for the trips he made.

Jim had a 20 degree bag. He didn't buy a more expensive minus 10 degree bag. Instead, he took a second sleeping bag along and stuffed one inside the other. Worked just fine.

Jim is ambivalent about using a sled to transport gear. He said he had trouble getting it around trees and other obstructions on several occasions.

Ned Kuhns

Ned prefers cooking stoves powered by white gasoline for winter camping.

Don't underestimate fuel requirements in the winter. You will go through fuel quickly especially if you are trying to heat snow for water.

Even at Sherando, you may find that the power from your batteries degrades in cold weather. Bring extra batteries and keep them in the bag with you.

Ned shared a technique learned from a Navy Seal on keeping food from freezing. Put it in a plastic bag and hang it around your neck. Otherwise, you may be biting into a frozen cookie,

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Tim and Lisa Hall

Lisa noted that couples can zip sleeping bags together for added warmth.

Tim suggested practicing the zipper connection at home. Don't do it the first time when it's cold.

Tim stressed that it is particularly important in cold weather to plan your hike/camping and to let people know your itinerary. He recommended Hiking Upward (<https://www.hikingupward.com/>) as a good source of information for Virginia hikes.

Lisa mentioned that you shouldn't leave home without knowing the weather forecast for the areas you will be in.

Tim reiterated the need to dress in layers of synthetic or wool clothes.

Lisa mentioned that they wear orange during hunting season.

Tim seconded that recommendation noting that one year they came across a group of bear hunters while they were dressed in black raingear.

Lisa strongly recommended multiple hand and foot warmers for multiple locations on the body.

Tim noted that a sleeping bag liner will keep you much warmer and will keep your sleeping bag cleaner as well.

Tim urged people to have a reliable method to start a fire such as cotton balls daubed with petroleum jelly. He noted that scraping the bark off of kindling helps it to start better.

Lisa mentioned that they have hung their rain fly on the outside of a shelter to stop the wind.

Tim noted that they keep their water filter next to their bodies to keep it from freezing and becoming useless.

They said they make a special effort to stay hydrated noting that it does seem important in the winter, but it is. They recommended bring electrolytes along.

Lisa noted that they carry extra fuel even though they don't hike in severe cold weather.

Tim noted that in his military days they stressed COLD. C=keep gear clean especially the sleeping bag. O=overheating which will lead to sweating and moisture in clothing or sleeping bags. L=layers using them to regulate body temperature. D=dry meaning make sure you have dry clothing to change into if you get wet.

Tom Miano

Just get out there and do it. If you are in the Shenandoah, you won't freeze if you have a descent sleeping bag and some peanut butter.

If car camping, remember you can always go back to the car if you forgot something.

Camping in high heat and in the cold are similar in one way. You need to be prepared.

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Bruce Davidson

Don't trust local weather reports when you are going to hike/camp on the A.T. The predicted low temperature can be as much as 20 degrees lower than forecast.

Bruce said he encounter temperatures in the Shenandoah of 20 below zero.

Bruce suggests shopping military surplus stores for wool clothing.

Microspikes are very handy in the winter as they are easy to strap onto your foot and reduce the risk of slipping if it is icy.

Bruce recommends visiting the White Grass (<https://whitegrass.com/>) website if you want to winter hike/camp in West Virginia.

Plinio Beres (U.S. Forest Ranger)

The Forest Service advocates preparing/planning. Know what you are getting into.

Over prepare and if you can bear the weight carry more than you think you will need.

Make sure people know where you are going and when you will return.

Cell phones work in more places than you think, but you may consider buying a satellite communications device if you are going into remote areas. They are pricey, but several people might consider a joint purchase and share the device.

You don't have to be fashionable. Buy what will keep you warm at a reasonable cost.

Shop where you are going to camp. Thrift stores often carry gear donated by hikers who have left the area.

Consider buying winter gear, second hand, in the spring.

Tyvek is a great wind and water barrier while weighing very little. It is also useful in the summer to separate you from the ticks. You can wrap yourself in it like a human burrito to keep warm.

If you get wet in cold weather, just change into dry clothing as soon as possible--regardless of the outside temperature.

Ed Martin

Recommends a wool knit cap for sleeping at night. Ed notes that a substantial amount of body heat is lost through your head.

When buying or renting snowshoes, get the type with automatic bindings. They make it much easier to get back into your snowshoes if you fall.

Remember that you may have to use the privy, if there is one, at night and potentially in the snow. Have a plan.

Consider bringing a 50 foot extension cord to provide heat to you tent--if you have access to power.

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Pete Burch

If you intend to sleep in a vehicle, remember that condensation is a problem there, too.

East Coast winter hiking/camping is much different from other areas where you know to expect cold weather. On the East Coast, a 45 degree day can quickly devolve to a 20 degree temperature night with sideways snow or rain. If you get caught outdoors without the necessary gear, you can quickly die.

Staying dry is absolutely paramount in the winter.

Pete strongly recommends a hoodie (yes, he knows it is cotton) to provide the maximum insulation for your head and neck especially when in your sleeping bag.

Open Q and A:

Ned: What foods do cold weather campers like?

Mal: Avoid instant oatmeal. He like to take a bread product like bagels.Dabn:

Dan: Anyone have experience with Meals-Ready-to-Eat

Lee: Meal, ready to eat, are not as bad as you might image, even cold, and they are nutritious.

Bruce: Check foods you are considering by putting them in the freezer beforehand, If it freezes, Bruce doesn't take them along unless they are be put in a jacket while hiking. Water bottle will freeze. Cheese, generally, will not freeze. Peanut butter is worthless unless you put it on a sandwich and then the bread is terrible. Freeze dried food works in cold weather and is nourishing.

Nalin Ratnayake: What is the easiest thing to forget? What is the thing you always bring but never needed?

Mal: You better bring toilet paper!

Bruce: Bring IMODIUM. Diarrhea is horrible in the cold.

Steve Fesko (TSAR): Tidewater Search and Rescue doesn't normally camp out but may have to stay in the woods overnight to find a lost person. This session has been very helpful.

Ned: Balaclavas work very well especially in your bag at night. Felt shoe inserts will lessen the shock of cold shoes in the morning.

Ned: What do people do about making a fire?

Bruce/Mal: We don't do fires anymore.

Agnes Evans: I like Jello right out of the package into hot water as a cold weather drink. The gelatin has protein in it.

Lee: Try a summer sausage (Landjaeger, Genoa sausage, etc.) as they don't need to be refrigerated and contain lots of fat and protein. Supplement with M&Ms if you need sugar. Makes a great lunch or a part of diner.

Bruce: I had a SPOT satellite phone, but now use an Inreach from Garmin. I can text from anywhere even if there is no phone reception. The yearly subscription is \$10. Especially valuable if hiking with anyone likely to become ill suddenly.

Ned: I tried to use the SPOT device in Scotland and couldn't get it to work. Make sure you thoroughly understand how to operate your emergency communication equipment before you go.