



PHOTOS BY KARI BODNARCHUK

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In the blissful silence of a snowy landscape, faint sounds become amplified: the patter of snowflakes landing on the tent's roof, the scratching of bird's feet on a branch, and the trickle of water in a mountain stream that sounds like a cascading waterfall the longer we listen.

"It's so loud, I can't sleep," my 9-year-old son says as the stream rushes by our tent in Washington's Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest. Then he quickly drifts off for 10 hours of uninterrupted sleep with nature's soothing symphony playing in the background.

I've spent years winter camping and backpacking in the White Mountains and, since we moved west, in Washington's North Cascades. I promised to take my kids snow camping this spring because nothing beats a night sleeping in a powdery paradise — even with the car a short walk away. I wanted them to experience this familiar activity with an added twist: learning how to pitch a tent on the snow, appreciate the peacefulness of a wintry forest, and make water out of snow without burning the pot. Added benefits: few people, no bugs, plenty of animal tracks to discover, and one of the best night's sleep ever.

It's a great time to get outside and embrace the magic of snow camping. You don't need fancy gear or an elaborate plan to enjoy a night in a wintry landscape, and you don't need to go far off the beaten path. Try car camping first so you can bring a few comfort items, such as a fire pit and comfy bedding (or even a teddy bear), and so you can retreat if something puts a wrinkle in your plans. Then graduate to a backpacking trip or a journey to one of New England's wilderness huts or shelters. Whatever route you choose, let someone know your plans before you go and keep a close eye on the weather.

Here are some general tips on gear and how to make your snow-camping experience a fun one.

SNOWY ABODE

Unless you plan to camp above tree-line (where it can be windy) or in dumping snow (which can cause a lighter tent to collapse), you don't need a four-season or expedition-style tent. Ideally, bring a two-walled tent (one with a separate rainfly) that has minimal mesh — some mesh is OK for helping prevent condensation, but too much can prove mighty cold in wintry conditions. (Tip: Put an emergency blanket — also known as a "space blanket" — over the tent's mesh ceiling to prevent heat loss.)

Protect your tent from falling snow by hanging a tarp up over it using available trees, and at an angle so it deflects snow. Alternatively, consider renting a tent from a local outfitter if you don't have a suitable option and don't want to invest in a winter-worthy dome. (Rent a tent and other gear from REI, International Mountain Equipment in North Conway, N.H., or AMC's Highland Center in Crawford Notch.)

Campsite choice proves critical in wintry conditions. Find a spot that's protected from the wind and away from dead trees or branches. Before pitching your tent, pack the snow down to create a platform and let it sit for at least 30 minutes so the snow can "set up" or harden — that way, the area will maintain stability once you start pitching your tent and arranging beds. Then set up your tent on that platform and create snow walls around it — much like a snow fort — to help block the wind and insulate the tent.

Reflecting on a winter of snow camping and its many peaceful pleasures



"Snowshoes are an excellent tool for stomping down snow underneath your tent and using as a shovel to move snow to build up snow walls," says Clare Arentzen, a wilderness guide with the Appalachian Mountain Club who leads trips in the White Mountains. "When I'm winter camping, I never leave my snowshoes behind."

While not essential, snow stakes can help keep your tent in place. They tend to be wider than traditional tent stakes and have holes down the middle, which fill with snow and help anchor the stake (you can also tie a rope in one of the holes and tie the other end to a tree to help secure the tent).

BEDDING

Any sleeping pad will protect you from the cold lumpy ground, but a warmer one can make for a much better night's sleep. The insulating quality of a sleeping pad is based on its R-Value (how well it "resists" the loss of heat). Sleeping pad manufacturers typically use the same rating system, and the higher the number, the more insulation. For snow camping, shoot for a pad with an R-value of 4 or higher. If you have space, bring a closed-cell pad (such as a foam mattress) to put on the ground first and then put your self-inflating mattress on top (to figure out the R-value of this setup, just add the R-value numbers of both pads together).

Your regular three-season sleeping bag — something in the 20- to 30-degree range — may work fine if you add a sleeping bag liner, which can boost warmth by 10 to 15 degrees.

"I don't personally own a negative-degree bag," says Arentzen, who spends more than 20 nights sleeping outside each winter. "I have a 10-degree bag and a 40-degree bag and I combine the two in the winter. If it's super cold, I'll put a

The author's son, Sam Wright, 9, explores a wintry landscape (top) while hiking in Washington's Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest, in February. Campsite choice (above) is critical in wintry conditions. Find a spot that's protected from the wind and away from dead trees or branches.

liner inside and I also have an emergency bivy sack — one of those \$20 ones — that I'll put around my sleeping bag, which has worked great for conditions down to negative [degrees]."

It might seem soothing and logical to curl inside your sleeping bag and breathe warm air into it to stay warm but resist the urge to do this. Moisture from your breath can dampen your sleeping bag and then freeze, causing you to be colder. Use a bag with a draft collar and a drawstring hood to help keep you warmer. If your sleeping bag feels too spacious, stuff extra clothes inside it to take up space and reduce the amount of area your body has to heat.

"To keep warm at night, you can put hot water in bottles and use those as handwarmers inside your sleeping bag," says Kitty Calhoun, a legendary mountain climber and guide who started exploring the mountains while a student at the University of Vermont.

CAMPSITE AND COOKING TIPS

Pack a lightweight, portable camp chair or a piece of foam to sit on (even a strip of yoga mat will do) or use your empty backpack as a seat. Sitting on snow will quickly draw warmth from your body.

Always have several methods for starting a fire or stove — stormproof matches (stored in a waterproof holder) and a lighter — just in case one method fails. Also bring a wind shield or even tinfoil to

place around your stove, which helps keep the fire burning and direct heat to your pot, therefore requiring less fuel.

Some campers find propane stoves easier to use, but liquid fuel stoves maintain pressure better and prove way more efficient as the temperatures drop (you'll appreciate this when you're making your morning coffee) — and they don't leave behind non-reusable canisters. If you have a camping stove that uses liquid fuel, check out Foothill Fuels, a Maine-based company that now makes a low-carbon renewable Bio-White Gas that works in virtually all liquid fuel-compatible stoves.

FOOD AND DRINK

Whether you're taking on a big backcountry trip or hiking in the hills near home, you need to consume significantly more water and food in colder months — and the right kind of calories at the right time.

According to Arentzen, the National Outdoor Leadership School "did a study that showed you use over a thousand calories more on a winter hike because your body spends a lot more energy trying to stay warm," she says. "When I pack for winter camping, I try to double my regular calorie intake. I carry a lot more 'nibble-able' snacks that I grab quickly, so when I stop for water, I can have a couple of peanut M&Ms or a handful of trail mix."

Stick with dehydrated food or food that has a low moisture content — otherwise, it will freeze when temps dip. Also pack food that is high in fat, such as nuts, nut butters, and cheese, which will provide a good slow-burning fuel source that will keep you warm longer.

"I save my fats for night — like butter and parmesan cheese in my dinner — because those calories burn slower and longer during the night," says Calhoun,

who has led climbs in Peru, Bolivia, and Argentina, and was the first woman to summit Makalu in Nepal, the world's fifth-highest mountain. Also, "it's important to have something nearby that you can snack on at night. If you're sleeping for 8 hours and you're not getting any calories in, you're going to get hungry."

Even a candy bar will do. Calhoun became nearly hypothermic on her first-ever mountaineering adventure: A non-stop winter traverse of New Hampshire's Presidential Range. She and her partner fell asleep huddled by a building on Mount Washington's summit.

"I woke up freezing and couldn't warm up," she recalls. "I did jumping jacks and that didn't help. Then I ate a Snickers bar and instantly warmed up. Sometimes you need a quick source of calories."

Looking for new menu ideas? Arentzen recommends Ramen noodles with peanut butter (for added fat) and dehydrated veggies, which makes a great backcountry Pad Thai meal. Or try couscous with tuna fish and dehydrated vegetables (or try Lipton's vegetable dip mix, which has salt, spices, and veggies), and add cheddar cheese.

You may not feel thirsty when you're outside in cold weather, but it's essential to keep taking in fluids — being well hydrated helps your body stay warm, says Arentzen. Leave your hydration bladders — even those with insulated hoses — at home. Instead, bring wide-mouth plastic or stainless-steel water bottles and keep them in an insulated pouch (a wool sock will do) to help prevent your water from freezing.

Skip the traditional water filter, since water can freeze inside and cause it to break. Instead, use chemical water treatments such as Aquamira or a SteriPen, which is a small device that uses ultraviolet light to kill contaminants. You can melt snow for water but plan to bring extra fuel for this process. Also, don't just throw the snow in the pot on its own — you need to add a bit of water first — or it will cause the pot to burn.

CLOTHES

Dressing in layers proves critical when playing and camping in snowy weather. Strip off and add layers throughout the day or night to ensure you never get too hot or cold. If you overheat and get sweaty, it can be challenging if not impossible to warm up again — and then you have wet layers that need to dry out before they freeze. (Tip: Put any damp clothes in the bottom of your sleeping bag at night and your body heat will help dry them overnight.)

Don't overpack for a snowy adventure. Bring thermals, a mid-layer, a puffy (down or synthetic) jacket for warmth, and a waterproof outer layer that includes a jacket and pants (none of which should be cotton). If I'm car camping, I bring another set of thermals to change into for bedtime; extra socks and gloves also prove invaluable on any cold- and wet-weather adventure.

DEVICES

Cold temperatures can quickly drain the batteries of your devices, so keep anything important — cellphone, GPS, camera, and headlamp — inside your jacket and close to your body.

I never go off the grid — whether on a hiking, camping, or driving adventure — without bringing a satellite communicator that lets me text home from anywhere in the world. I like Garmin's no-frills and palm-size inReach Mini, which tucks in a bike jersey or backpack and lets me easily text home — using an app on my phone or through the device itself — and receive texts back as well (I like its LED screen, which not all devices have). Spot, Somewear, and Bivy make similar easy-to-use devices for wilderness communication.

Nothing beats having an expert guide with you on your first snowy adventures. The AMC runs day-hiking programs out of its Highland Center Lodge in New Hampshire that teach you the foundational skills needed to camp overnight in the snow, while Northeast Mountaineering (just outside North Conway) runs winter camping courses in the White Mountains into April.

If you'd like to car camp on your own — in the snow — at an established site, check out these two spots in White Mountain National Forest: Hancock Campground on the Kancamagus Highway and Barns Field Campground just south of Gorham, both of which have water and restrooms or pit toilets and are open off-season for a small fee.

In a non-pandemic year, three AMC huts remain open throughout the winter, including Carter Notch, Zealand Falls, and Lonesome Lake.

"That's a good getting-your-feet-wet experience," says Arentzen. After hiking up to one of these low-elevation huts, "you can cook a meal in a kitchen, dry things out by the wood stove, and get a feel for a winter extended trip without carrying a tent and the camp kitchen supplies."

Whether you strike out for the wilds of your backyard, a local park, or a forested spot in the mountains, tune into nature's chorus and enjoy a peaceful night sleep.

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