

Cold weather camping equipment

The most important thing that anyone brings with them on a winter camp out, or any camp out, can't be bought in any store or made at home. It is a positive mental attitude. It's easy to go on a camp out and be cold and miserable. A positive attitude is a must, and anyone that doesn't have it, should stay home. All the equipment in the world can't make you have a rewarding camping experience without it.

Personal Equipment

Clothing

Cold weather conditions make the proper choice and use of clothing more vital than at other times of the year. As you prepare your cold weather clothing, keep warm by following the guidelines that spell the word COLD.

C - Clean

Since insulation is effective when heat is trapped by dead air spaces, keep your insulating layers clean and fluffy. Dirt, grime, and perspiration can mat down those air spaces and reduce the warmth of a garment.

O - Overheating

Avoid overheating by adjusting your layers of clothing to meet the outside temperature and exertions of your activities. Excessive sweating can dampen your clothing and cause chilling later on.

L - Loose Layers

A steady flow of warm blood is essential to keep all parts of your body heated. Wear several loosely fitting layers of clothing and footwear that will allow maximum insulation without impeding your circulation.

D - Dry

Damp clothing and skin can cause your body to cool quickly, possibly leading to frostbite or hypothermia. Keep dry by avoiding cotton clothing that absorbs moisture, brushing snow from your clothes before it melts, and loosening the clothing around your neck and chest. Since body heat can drive perspiration through many layers of breathable cloth and force it out into the air, don't wear waterproof clothes.

Wool clothing is ideal in cold weather because it is durable and water resistant, and even when soaked it can keep you warm. Wool makes excellent blankets, socks, hats, mittens, sweaters, and even pants. Army surplus stores have good wool clothing for winter camping. If wool irritates your skin, you may be able to wear wool blends or wear it over clothing made of other fabrics. Many synthetics are also good in winter for use as windbreakers and insulation. Remember that winter camping is not a fashion show. Whatever combination of clothing it takes to keep you warm should be worn, regardless of how it looks.

The best method of wearing clothing in the winter is to use the layering system. Choose loose fitting clothing in as many layers as you can. The layers can be taken off or put on, depending on your activity level, temperature, wind, and precipitation. Versatility in your clothing is the key to a successful layering system. Several shirts, a sweater, and a jacket will allow you to adjust your system in many more ways than will a single heavy coat.

Footwear is important in winter camping as your feet are subject to more exposure to moisture especially if it's not too cold out and snow is melting. At least two pair of socks are recommended as long as they aren't too tight. Wool or a wool blend is best. One method that can be used in wet conditions is to put plastic bags on your feet, either between the two layers of socks or directly on your feet. **NEVER** wear cotton socks under plastic bags as they will get wet from your perspiration and your feet will feel cold. Thin synthetic socks under the plastic bags with heavy wool socks over them is best. Whatever winter boots you have should be adequate plus an extra pair of boots, good sneakers or mukluks should be brought.

Mittens that allow your fingers to be in direct contact with one another can keep your hands warmer than gloves that isolate each finger. A good pair of gloves is a must however for many tasks around camp that would be too cumbersome with mittens. Extra gloves and/or mittens are a must as gloves and mittens tend to get very wet.

Stocking hats are great for wear outdoors and at night in your sleeping bag. Even better is a stocking hat long enough to cover your head and neck, and all of your face except your eyes. A coat with a hood is also helpful, as is a scarf around your neck that can be used to cover your face if needed.

The best way to pack clothing for a winter camp out is not to just follow a list of clothing, but to actually put on what you will wear to be sure your layering system fits and is functional. To see if your system will keep you warm, go outside and sit in the yard or go to the park and sit for a couple hours (You may even be able to do some requirements for one of the nature related merit badges while you wait). Sitting still is the best way to test your system as this is when your body does not produce much of its own heat. If you can stay warm sitting around, then you will have no problem staying warm moving around at camp. To be sure you have enough extra clothes, try to pack at least another complete system just in case your system gets too wet to be used. This includes long underwear and plenty of extra socks.

Sleeping System

I use the word system again when talking about what you use to keep warm and comfortable at night because like your layering system you use for clothing, your sleeping system is similar. The difference is that at night it is generally colder, you are totally inactive, and you are laying down on the cold ground.

Your first line of defense is a shelter like a tent, lean-to, or snow shelter. A tent will be used most of the time because it is easier to put up and there may not be enough snow to make a snow shelter. Keep in mind however that a tent is not made to keep you warm. It is a defense against wind and precipitation. Unless you have some kind of heater, you can't expect your body heat to warm a tent. With this in mind, it is important that you keep your tent's venting system open at night so that the vapor your body gives off at night can escape, avoiding a shower in your tent. To help stop melting snow from soaking through the tent floor, put plastic under the tent and inside the tent. This also helps protect the tent floor. Always check with your Patrol leader first though for sleeping arrangements.

The next thing you want to do is insulate your body from the cold ground. Even the best sleeping bag you can buy does not insulate very well on the bottom because your body weight compresses the insulation and makes it useless. Many good bags even have less insulation at the bottom to keep their weight down. The best way to combat this is to use a foam pad. The closed cell pads (exercise pads) work the best as they don't absorb water, making them useful in wet conditions. More than one pad can be used. If you want to spend a lot of money, the open cell pads enclosed in a waterproof, inflating shell (Thermarest) are even better.

Your sleeping bag is the next defense. A sleeping bag's function is to trap body heat in a small area, while letting body moisture out, to keep you warm. Obviously, the better the sleeping bag, the easier this can be done. However, the same method of layering can be used for sleeping as for your daytime clothing. Whoever suggested that you should sleep in your underwear (or less), probably never went winter camping. As long as your clothes are not wet, you can wear anything in your sleeping bag as you normally would outside. Plus you can add a blanket or two inside the bag if you have room. Remember wool is the best. Just remember not to make it too tight in your bag which defeats the purpose of the layers.

Heat loss from your head can cause you to be very cold at night. If you don't have a mummy bag with a hood, then wear a stocking hat. Never put your head into your bag and breathe inside it. The moisture your breath gives off will soak your bag.

Your sleeping bag can act as protection from freezing for things like cameras, water bottle, and your boots. They can be put into plastic bags and placed under the foot of your bag or inside your bag at your feet if there is room. There is nothing more chilling than trying to put on frozen boots in the morning. (Tips: Brush all the snow off your boots before putting them in your bag. Put hot water in your water bottle just before you go to bed. This will help warm your bag. Your jacket can be rolled up and used as a pillow and insulation for your head.)

Cooking Gear and Food

As the purpose of this handout is to help the individual scout prepare for a winter campout, we will not discuss group cooking gear, or food here. These topics will be discussed at troop meetings prior to each campout. As cooking time in the winter is greatly increased and fuel consumption is also increased, along with other difficulties, scouts will be eating a vast majority of their food as a group.

The only cooking gear that a scout should normally have to bring is his personal mess kit. The minimum would be a cup, spoon, fork, and deep dish plate or bowl. The patrols should discuss this at the troop meetings prior to the campout. One item that each scout should always bring to every campout, winter or summer, is an insulated mug with a top. Depending if there is a water source at the campout or not will determine if each scout should bring water or not. For the winter it is advisable to bring a one quart plastic water bottle with a large screw on top. A canteen tends to freeze at the small opening and is also hard to fill with hot water, to put in your sleeping bag at night (see Sleeping System).

Individual food such as snacks and things may be brought to winter campouts, however like all camp outs, they should be stored in the patrol box or trailer. Scouts should not bring food in their packs or into their tents.

One note about food: As a winter campout burns more fat and calories to keep you warm than a summer campout, attention should be given to a scout's last meal before the campout. Foods high in fat, complex carbohydrates and protein release their energy slowly, keeping you warmer. Sugar and starch burn too quickly to keep you warm hour after hour. Good foods to eat would be Beef, poultry, fish, eggs, corn, beans, whole-wheat bread, peanut butter, macaroni and cheese, vegetables and fruits, butter, nuts, cheese, salami, and bacon. Some of these would make excellent snacks for the campout. Avoid sweets.

One important note is that water is very important during a winter campout. Dehydration makes you cold and could lead to hypothermia. Because the air is so dry in the winter, your body loses water a lot faster.

Other Gear

Even though your clothing, sleeping system, and food are very important, you will have to take care that you bring the other things necessary for a fun, safe, winter campout.

- The old familiar pocket knife is still a useful tool for camping. Sheath knives should not be brought to any scout camp out.
- Matches and other fire starters should be brought. These should also be included in the patrol's kitchen.
- A flashlight is very important in the winter because of the shorter daylight hours. You may want to put your flashlight in your sleeping bag to prevent the batteries from freezing. Don't forget the extra batteries.

- A watch is recommended for all campouts so scouts can keep track of the day's schedule.
- A compass is a must as we do a lot of compass work in the troop.
- A repair kit should be considered including thread, needles, rubber bands, safety pins, tape, wire, and a couple of buttons, along with any spare parts needed for specialized equipment you may bring. Remember to Be Prepared.
- A few short lengths of cord may come in handy when you pitch your tent, replace a shoelace, hang out wet clothing, or lash together a broken pack frame.
- A personal first aid kit should be brought to all campouts.
- A whistle should be carried for emergency signaling.
- Sunglasses are very useful for winter campouts to protect your eyes from the glare of the sun on the snow.
- Lip balm should be carried and used to protect your lips from the dry cold wind.
- Don't forget your toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, and towel.
- Need a temporary raincoat? A waterproof cover for your gear? A place to stow your trash? Heavy duty garbage bags can serve a multitude of purposes.

Other nonessential gear for campouts may be a camera, binoculars, fishing gear, books and guides, or any other special gear you may want or need for a particular campout.

Last but not least is a way to carry all your stuff. A backpack is necessary if you plan on doing any hiking to get to your campsite, as you will want your hands free while walking. If you will be camping near the cars, then a duffel bag may be all you need, although packing your backpack is good practice for when you really need to take it.

One last word on gear: When you drop something in the snow, like a pocketknife or any other small item, you can easily lose it. It's a good idea to tie brightly colored cords or something to all the gear you bring so it will be easier to find if dropped. You may even want to tie some things to your clothing or to each other.

Closing

I hope this Winter Camping handout will help you get ready for all your winter campouts. Your Boy Scout Handbook can be a good source for more ideas for all types of camping.

Have a safe and fun adventure on all your campouts and scouting experiences.

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