

6 Wilderness Skills for Winter Survival

by Jeremy Knauff

Winter can present a unique challenge to the outdoor enthusiast. With frigid temperatures and unpredictable weather disasters — from blizzards to avalanches — it's best to be prepared for anything.

As winter weather moves in, you don't have to be relegated to indoor activities for the next several months. Incorporate these wilderness survival tips into your usual habits to have a safe and fun outdoor winter excursion.

Use the Buddy System

There's safety in numbers. Avoid the common, foolhardy mistake of venturing out on your own in extreme conditions. If you don't have an equally committed friend to take with you, be sure to leave a detailed trip itinerary, including a map, with a friend or family member. In the event of an emergency this information will help rescuers find you.

Stay Connected

Although you've probably ventured into the wilderness to take a short break from the incessant connectedness we all experience, extreme conditions call for additional precautions. Prepare for the worst-case scenario by keeping a satellite phone handy to use if or when other survival techniques fail. This is another great way to let friends and family know you're safe and sound throughout your trip, or call for help if you find yourself in a dangerous situation.

Make a Shelter

The ability to make a shelter, from nothing but branches and a tarp, is a crucial wilderness skill in any season. It's particularly important during winter months because, without an appropriate shelter, starting a fire may prove impossible. This is especially true if you happen to get caught in a storm and have to spend several days in one location. Your handmade shelter will not only keep you safe, it will also keep firewood and kindling dryer than when left in the elements.

Survive Without Fire

In the event that you're unable to build a fire, whether it's a lack of dry tinder or your specific location, you still need a way to keep yourself warm. In preparation for your trip, you should pack plenty of wind-blocking, cold-weather attire. Keep your clothing — from head to toe — dry with waterproof gear. But if you're staying overnight, avoid

overexerting yourself and perspiring while building and foraging by pacing yourself because sweat can freeze.

Learn How to Trap

If you're planning an extended trip into the wild, learn or hone your trapping skills. Foraging for food can be time-consuming and quickly exhaust your energy stores. Making and setting traps takes far less time and allows you to cover more ground while hunting, so you can devote your time to other necessary tasks around camp.

Be a Cautious Packer

Hiking, backpacking and camping in winter require many of the same preparations as other, warmer times of the year. However, it is an environment all it's own, so exercise extra caution.

Pack multiple fire starters and types of tinder to keep a toasty fire blazing for warmth. Water can be obtained from ice or snow, but melting it takes a long time to produce enough to keep you hydrated, so be sure to pack plenty and take care to keep it from freezing. Be sure to pack your best snowshoes, axes and an emergency kit.

By following these basic survival tips, you can stave off cabin fever this winter and still enjoy your favorite outdoor refuges.

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