

Preparing for Winter Outings

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The day is gorgeous with startling blue skies, brilliant white snow, and nothing but time. Temps are in the high 20s, projected to be in the mid-30s by noon and you want to get out and do something! There is lacy frost on the trees, and light winds and frozen ground are making the trails firm and fast. You get a few miles out and as the sun rises, the ground thaws, and the trails begin to turn to mud. A breeze picks up and clouds begin skidding over the sky, blocking the sun and the temperature rapidly plunges. You get disoriented and it begins to snow lightly. It happens. You are riding or hiking along, happily and with complete confidence, and then bam! Suddenly the weather changes and you are miles from home and in trouble. How can you prepare yourself to be safe while out enjoying our winter wonderland? Whether you bike, hike, ski, snowshoe, hunt, or just want to go drive around, there are considerations to take when planning outdoor activities in the White Mountains.

Be prepared. What can you do to help mitigate the dangers of winter outdoor activity? The primary mantra is to be prepared. Be prepared to be able to communicate with friends or loved ones in case of an emergency. Be prepared to stay outside much longer than predicted. Be prepared for rapid changes in weather conditions. Be prepared in case of an accident. Be prepared to keep yourself warm in various scenarios. Nobody can be prepared for everything, but here are some suggestions to help you be more prepared for your next winter adventure.

Communication- Besides dressing appropriately, communication is of utmost importance. We live in a world where technology is sometimes overwhelming and there is a desire to “turn it off” and go out into nature without distractions, but you need to at least carry a fully charged cell phone to be able to call for help. Double-check that you will have coverage in the area you plan to adventure in. Using an app such as Strava to track your progress and send location data to friends/family is a must. A tracking app like Strava is useful because while it tracks your exact path, it also shows the surrounding area on both satellite and topo

maps so that rescuers can plot the fastest route to your location. The Garmin “In Reach” units use satellite technology to provide emergency 911 contact if you are in areas with little phone coverage. Most Garmin tracking units have crash locator beacons that will call loved ones with your precise coordinates and there are several cycling helmets that do the same thing. Be able to be in contact with somebody when you go out. Always carry an emergency whistle to be able to signal searchers-if you break a rib, yelling out may not be the most comfortable option! There is no shame in a crash or fall. Call for help as soon as you feel compromised, and your friends will do what is needed to get you out. Don’t wait to call for help if needed. With variable temperatures and short days, hesitation to call for help can have deadly consequences for both you and your would-be rescuers. The White Mountain outdoors community is awesome, has members from every occupation, and is more than able and willing to pull together to help when needed.

Consider your planned activity. Dressing for variable winter conditions is highly individual. Figuring out what works for you, your activity level, and if your sport takes thought and some trial and error. Begin with short excursions to see what works for you and learn how fast you will heat up/cool down while doing your chosen activity. Riding a horse is different than mountain biking or hiking, and gravel biking is much different than mountain biking when you consider windchill. Riding a snowmobile or ATV involves high windchill and lower body heat creation. Hunting involves active hiking, which increases body temperature, and then stationary sitting, during which time your body cools rapidly. For most activities, you will need to dress in layers and carry a spare jacket in case you need to be immobile for a while (maybe it’s not you who needs help and you need to stop and give aid to someone else). Winter is the time to always carry a pack or waist pack to carry removed layers in or carry extra layers for use later.

Dress in layers. The most important concept to remember for winter dressing is layers. Often you feel that you will be plenty warm enough with just a base layer and a light jacket since you are exerting yourself physically, but what happens if you or a partner have an accident and can’t move, are injured, and are in shock, or have an incident just prior to nightfall? Carry an extra layer, wear a base layer to absorb sweat and keep you dry, (T-shirts absorb sweat and hold it next to your

body- cooling you down rapidly), wear a thermal layer, and have a wind-proof shell to reduce any windchill. Unless it will be wet out, skip the rain jacket as it can trap moisture and cause you to chill quickly. Unless you will be sitting stationary, exposed to windchill in an ATV or on horseback, skip the thick padded jacket. You will find it to be too warm quickly and then will be an encumbrance. Winter tights or leg warmers reduce exposed skin surface area, keep your legs warm and reduce heat loss. The large muscle mass of your legs can create a tremendous amount of heat and warm circulating blood, therefore it is important to be able to monitor and adjust their coverage. Removable leg and arm warmers are great options for layering, as you can gradually modify coverage depending on need and these small pieces are easy to pack when removed.

Protect your extremities. Hands, feet and ears have limited circulation, are especially vulnerable to cold and their comfort can make or break an outdoor experience. Good quality insulated and wind/water-proof gloves are a must, especially when cycling, as hands are usually relatively stationary on the bars and are exposed to additional windchill as you ride. Again, layers help. Wear a thin wool base layer glove inside the thicker waterproof gloves for the best results. Pogies (bar mitts) are great because you can wear thinner gloves for easier bike control while completely blocking the wind chill. Wear insulated, waterproof boots and layered warm socks including a base layer and outer sock. Wool is best and will keep feet warm even when wet. Carry or wear a scarf, skull cap, or headband under your helmet to keep your head and ears warm. If you crash, and cannot keep on moving, put on your extra layers and keep your helmet on to conserve heat.

Plan for the unexpected: Even if you plan to be back by dark, on these short winter days a light (and a backup light) is a must both for being able to make your way back if possible and for signaling rescuers coming for you. If you have an accident or get completely disoriented and cannot/should not keep going, find a protected area near the trail to wait. It's advisable to carry an emergency blanket in your pack to both keep your body heat in and to direct warmth if you need to build a fire. Speaking of fire, it is a great idea to carry a small fire-starting kit including wind-proof matches and some dry tinder. Carry some spare high-energy food at all times, and of course water. Remember that exposed water bottles and

hoses can freeze quickly so insulated bottles, bladder hose insulation, and wearing your water pack under an exterior jacket can help.

Pack it in/out: Even if you don't normally ride or hike with a pack, winter is the time to get one and keep it stocked for the "just-in-case." Here's a short list of things to carry in your pack: High energy food like sport nutrition bars and gus, high-fat foods like nuts and cheese, an emergency blanket, fire starter, lights, spare winter gloves if you are starting out with regular cycling gloves, hat or skull cap, cell phone charger, chemical heat packs, small first aid kit including blood stopper and wrap, spare softshell jacket, emergency whistle, knife, and your normal cycling tools and flat-kit. Carry a compass and rough map of the area in case there isn't cell coverage and the skies become overcast, causing you to become disoriented.

Have fun! Winter riding, hiking, and adventuring are fun and invigorating activities but do carry additional risks. Be prepared, watch the weather reports and expected temperatures, venture with others if possible, and get out there and back safely!