

# Winter Hiking

*The cold season presents hikers with unique advantages—and special challenges.*

By Seth Levy

**C**RISP AIR, bright sun, and frosted evergreen boughs—the unique pleasures of winter hiking often lead me to wonder why I don't see more hikers on the trail during the winter months, despite the distinct advantages of a winter hike. Since most deciduous trees are denuded, views open up where they weren't present before. Most insects are either dead or dormant, and cooler weather makes for a brisk, refreshing experience. In desert areas, winter paradoxically offers some of the most visible flora because of the availability of more moisture. So where are all the hikers?

Inadequate preparation and equipment can lead to a cold, wet winter hiking experience, even in the arid Southwest, but a small investment in time and equipment can ensure great hiking throughout the winter months.

Since the sun's rays strike the Earth

at a lower angle during the winter, they spread out further, so days are shorter and colder. This difference creates environmental, logistical, and practical challenges to consider when planning a winter hike.

To address environmental challenges, layering and proper outerwear are important. Experienced winter hikers know to start with a thin, breathable base layer, and, depending on the temperature, add an intermediate insulating layer (synthetic fleece, wool or down) and top it off with a wind- and water-resistant, breathable shell. By adjusting the thickness of the intermediate insulation, hikers can adjust their body temperature to stay warm and dry.

Layering is important for the extremities, too. For the hands, a light pair of synthetic gloves may be fine in the sun, but you might have to top them off with a heavy pair of woolen mittens in the shade. Since the skull is so richly vascular, we can lose up to 60

percent of our body's heat if we don't cover up with a warm hat. An overly thick hat can cause overheating, and then overcooling when excess sweat evaporates—so packing a thin hat and a thick hat will provide maximum comfort. Oddly enough, most cases of hypothermia occur in moderate temperatures, when hikers are least prepared to dress warmly. With a system of synthetic, wool, or down layers (never cotton) your winter hike will be pleasant and safe.

Dehydration and sunburn are environmental challenges that receive too little attention from winter hikers. Sunscreen and water are still very important on a winter trail. Snow reflects sunlight, leading to serious burns. Cold, dry air can dehydrate more quickly than hot, humid weather. A pleasant way to rehydrate in the winter is a thermos filled with a hot beverage that doesn't contain caffeine.

In addition to environmental challenges, winter can pose logistical challenges to the unprepared hiker. Shorter days mean that a source of lighting and a back-up set of batteries (new lithium cells are especially impervious to the cold) are important. Snow can drift over trail markers and signs, or fallen leaves can obscure a well-worn trail. Even simple changes in vegetation and light can make a familiar hiking trail look different enough to require greater attention to your map and compass.

Practical challenges to winter travel occur most often in the northern latitudes. Ice and snow can make walking difficult and necessitate

*See WINTER, page 23*



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**With proper preparation and equipment, winter adventures can be rewarding.**

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### WINTER, from page 19

different footwear. For light to moderate snow, hikers can get by with a pair of standard waterproof hiking shoes, warm wool or synthetic socks and a tall pair of waterproof gaiters. For moderate to heavy snow, insulated winter boots are often called for. Another practical alternative is a pair of snowshoes. Modern snowshoes are light, compact, and offer surprising “float” and grip for their size. Modern snowshoes are sized according to the total weight of the hiker and their equipment—with greater weights requiring bigger shoes to “float” a hiker. Trekking poles are a great help to the snowshoer, aiding in balance, reducing falls, and speeding travel.

With a little additional preparation and equipment, most hikers can address the environmental, logistical, and practical challenges of winter hiking, enabling them to take advantage of the unique pleasures of a winter hike.

### Winter Trails® Day

This January 6 and February 17, join SnowSports Industries America, American Hiking Society, and the Cross Country Ski Areas Association in celebrating Winter Trails Day. Created 12 years ago to raise awareness of the unique recreational opportunities available on winter trails, Winter Trails Day hosts clinics throughout the country to educate hikers about winter hiking and related snow sports. For more information about the winter counterpart of National Trails Day and to locate a Winter Trails Day event near you, visit [www.wintertrails.org](http://www.wintertrails.org).



### VACATIONS, from page 16

most extensive cave system known in the world.

- ❖ Big South Fork National River in Tennessee.

American Hiking is also pleased to announce a new partnership with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and looks forward to offering more projects on wildlife refuges in 2007 and beyond, such as the one at Moosehorn National Wildlife Refuge in Maine this past September.

The printed version of the 2007 schedule will be available in December. More projects will be added to our web site as the season progresses, so check back often.

To register for your next (or first!) exciting Volunteer Vacation, visit our web site at [www.AmericanHiking.org](http://www.AmericanHiking.org). For more information, contact Shirley Hearn, volunteer programs manager, at (800) 972-8608, ext. 206, or [Volunteer@AmericanHiking.org](mailto:Volunteer@AmericanHiking.org).