

Winter Hiking

As the weather this week clearly shows, we're not done with cold-weather hiking to waterfalls. This article, written by Brenda Wiley, treasurer for Waterfall Keepers, provides helpful info for staying safe and comfortable when the temperatures dip.

North Carolina experienced several weeks of extreme cold in January. Did you get out to any waterfalls during that time? Most folks respond one of ways to this question: "No way" or "Of course."

I definitely fall into the latter category. I love wintertime hiking, even when the temps dip in the single digits, like we had a few weeks ago. I tell folks there's three big reasons for this: no bugs, no snakes, and no people! I went to Looking Glass Falls during the deep freeze, getting there about midday, and my hiking partner and I were the only ones there. Normally, on a midday visit to this waterfall, you'll have a hard time finding a parking place. And the fact that in winter I don't have to worry about watching out for yellow jacket nests, ticks, or snakes, is delightful.

Another advantage to wintertime hiking is that one has much better long-range views. With the leaves off the trees, even forested trails give you much better views than you'd have during spring and summer. Distant hillsides have more definition, and you get to see rock formations, gullies, and ridges that otherwise would be obscured into an even layer of green during warmer months. The photo heading this article shows a distant ridgeline and the beginnings of a sunset that would be completely obscured in summer. Even views from overlooks are often better in winter because cold air tends to be drier, leading to clearer skies with less atmospheric haze, allowing for greater visibility over long distances.

So, are you ready to throw on a jacket and gloves and go? Great! But, if you normally limit your hikes to days with moderate temperatures, there are a few things you should keep in mind to stay safe and avoid hypothermia and frostbite.

HOW TO DRESS

This is the most crucial consideration, increasing in importance the longer the hike and the colder the temps. A cotton T-shirt and a big puffy jacket is *not* the way to go. You've heard it before: dress in layers! Four to five thin layers of the right material will be much warmer than one layer and a big jacket, because each of those layers will trap air warmed by body heat, providing more insulation.

Another advantage to dressing in layers is that it allows you to keep your core temperature constant. As you're hiking uphill, you will start to work up a sweat and you can unzip or remove a layer or two. When you cool back down, you can re-zip or put that layer back on.

Additionally, the choice of fabrics is crucial. Cotton is absolutely to be avoided since once it gets wet, it continues to pull heat away from your body. Getting wet from sweat or melting snow or spray from a waterfall would be a very dangerous situation in cotton clothing during cold temps. Wool is the gold standard for winter clothing, since it stays warm even when wet. (Trivia for the day: wool is also an ideal summer clothing choice as well, as it also cools you when it's hot outside.) Silk and bamboo are other great winter clothing choices, especially for base layers. Additionally, there are a plethora of manmade fabrics designed for winter hiking. Look for labels that talk about "wicking" and the temperatures the item is designed for.

On a recent hike to frozen waterfalls when temps were in the teens for the entire day, my planned hike was around six miles. I wore a long-sleeved, hooded base layer made of bamboo, topped with a wool T-shirt, topped with a heated vest, topped with a hooded jacket made of manmade materials designed for winter, topped with a final layer. For days in the thirties, I'll wear the two base layers topped with a jacket designed for days above freezing and maybe add in a lightweight wind breaker.

I really like hooded items, since that's another layer for my head and neck that I can pull up when I'm cold and slip off as I warm up. I also wear a neck gaiter and a cap that fits over all the layers.

Don't forget your hands and feet. Heavier boots or hiking shoes, along with thicker socks made of wool or synthetic materials are needed. Hands are trickier. Mittens are warmer than gloves, but you lose so much dexterity for things like grasping hiking poles, using a camera, etc. I tend to default to gloves with chemical hand warmer packs, but fingers still get chilly that way. Sometimes I'll try gloves inside of mittens. That way I can take off the mittens but still have my hands and fingers covered for when I need to snap a photo or eat a snack.

Today, it seems that *any* clothing item is available in a heated version, from socks and gloves to vests and shirts. They are designed with small lithium batteries which supply the heat. This winter I started using a heated vest for the first time and now I'm totally sold!

CARRY EXTRA CLOTHING

During warmer months, hikes to waterfalls often involve intentionally getting wet, but in the winter, staying dry is a safety issue. Part of your "just in case" emergency kit needs to include some replacement clothing. At the very least, a dry pair of thick, warm socks and a second pair of gloves or mittens. Additionally, I always have an extra top and wind breaker in my pack.

HYDRATION/CALORIES/ELECTROLYTES

Most folks know to take water with them on a hot summer's day hike, but you might not think about it in winter. You may actually need *more* water on a winter hike! You hike just as hard in winter and sweat just as much (maybe more, if you overdress), but generally you don't notice the need for drinking the way you do on a 90° day. Drier air evaporates sweat almost right away, and breathing in that drier air requires more moisture replacement. And while many folks add electrolytes to their water in the summer, I've found I need those in winter as well.

Calories too, are needed and are an important safety issue. Your "just in case" kit should always include high- calorie foods in case you find yourself out longer than planned, or in a worst-case scenario, need to spend the night outside. I carry several high-calorie energy bars that are just for those potential scenarios.

OTHER EMERGENCY ITEMS TO INCLUDE

Along with the items mentioned above, you should carry two more things in case you find yourself having to spend the night in the woods or you become injured. During summer, something as minor as a twisted ankle would be merely an inconvenience, whereas in winter, it could be life threatening if you have no way to stay warm while you wait for help.

I carry an emergency blanket, the ones that look like aluminum foil, at all times, summer as well as winter. They really work! I was never too sure about that until one hike, about halfway to our destination, I started feeling very sick. I told my hiking partner to continue to our planned destination and I'd wait for him. During the wait, I started getting very chilled and pulled out the emergency blanket. I got so warm that I actually had to unwrap a bit to let some heat out!

Additionally, in the winter, I carry two or three chemical heat packs that you stick directly onto your skin. ThermaCare is a well-known brand, and the only one I recommend. I tried some lower priced generic ones and they didn't get near as warm, and they only lasted an hour or so. The ThermaCare brand really gets warm and lasts about eight hours. The version designed to apply to the base of the neck is a good size to get, and with two or three, you could apply them to your abdomen, wrap up in your dry clothing, and then wrap up in your emergency blanket and you *will* stay warm!

So, head on out there and enjoy the waterfalls in *all* kinds of weather!