

HARRIMAN HIKERS

EST.1974 MAHWAH, NJ

Harriman Hikers Guide to Winter & Cold Weather Hiking

The Harriman Hikers have been hiking weekly, year-round, in every type of weather imaginable for over 30 years. That said, we feel like we have a good deal of collective experience and knowledge to share regarding winter hiking and making the experience comfortable.

Nature has given each season its own unique beauty for each of us to enjoy but many people miss out in cold weather because they fear they will feel uncomfortable or that hiking in such weather is unsafe.

The areas we hike experience sub-freezing temperatures regularly in the winter (i.e. average winter temperature for Suffern, NY is about 18deg F) but we don't generally get the frigid, consistently sub-zero lows associated with Canada or New England so where we hike is considered somewhat "temperate" in the big scheme of things!

The fact is that if you dress appropriately and follow some simple guidelines you can hike in just about any weather.

Ironically, half the battle of being comfortable while hiking in cold weather is staying *cool and dry*. The other half is staying *warm and dry* when you aren't moving around a lot.

Here are a few clothing and equipment items that are essential for winter hiking and some tips for staying comfortable:

Waterproof Boots- Comfortable, broken-in, calf-height (minimum), waterproof boots are indispensable for cold weather hiking. These could be insulated or not (you can build insulation layers with socks and sock liners); the most important quality your boots should have is that they keep your feet *dry*. You don't want melting snow or moisture from wet leaves and brush soaking thru your boots. Inevitably there will be a low area that is mushy or you misstep crossing a running brook. When you find yourself ankle-deep in cold muddy water you want to be wearing waterproof footwear.

Nor do you want perspiration from your body making your feet wet which brings us to:

Wear layers of Wick-Away light clothing, underwear and sock liners- "Wick-Away" is a common term for many brands and names of athletic clothing made with the same purpose in mind: *This type of clothing draws the moisture (perspiration you create while exerting yourself) away from your body.* A big part of staying warm and comfortable in cold weather is *staying dry*. "Wick-Away" type clothing is generally made of specifically designed synthetic nylon and/or polyester fabric blends.

The most important items of clothing in terms of keeping you dry are the items closest to your skin: long underwear bottoms and tops (when it's cold enough to warrant wearing them) or your bottom shirt and sock liners. On top of this layer wool is often a good choice

especially for socks- it helps draw moisture away from your body and it breathes; at the same it is a good insulator meaning it helps keep body heat in and cold out. If it is a secondary layer (as in a sweater) and you start feeling warm from exertion you can always remove it until you stop and begin to feel chilled.

Synthetic sock liners can also help those who suffer allergies or itchiness from wool enjoy its benefits while keeping it off their skin.

In general, *stay away from cotton* for cold weather hiking, it absorbs moisture and holds it like a sponge; therefore it is generally a poor choice for cold weather hiking clothing (particularly clothing close to your body where you don't want that moisture cooling you down)

Think of perspiration as a low-tech air-conditioner. When perspiration cools and wind passes over it on your body it has a cooling effect. You need cooling when you are active or if the temperature is warm but perspiration can make you very uncomfortable very quickly after you stop and your heart rate goes back down. Extreme cases of this effect are called *hypothermia* and can in fact be very dangerous which is why it is important to wear proper clothing.

For some reason a chill seems to set in after you've stopped, had lunch and your body begins the digestion process. *Be prepared for this.* Put your layers of clothes back on and you will warm up again. (p.s. we most often hike to a shelter and build a fire in cold weather)

You will be much more comfortable if you dress in *many layers of light clothing* instead of one bulky layer (i.e. heavy winter coat) You will be much more adaptable to keep yourself comfortable as your body temperature changes as you alternately become more active or stop or if the atmospheric temperature or wind changes if you have a number of light layers you can add or remove as needed. Lighter layers also tend to be more form-fitting, making it easier for you to move about and are easier to store economically when not being worn.

Start the day wearing lots of light layers and devise a carrying system for yourself that allows you to stow the extra layers conveniently while you are moving and quickly accessible when you start cooling down.

A Back Pack roomy enough for your extra layers of clothing in addition to your beverages, lunch etc. or has extra stowage straps is recommended. Some prefer fanny packs but these are generally smaller and more suited to warm weather hiking when there is less to wear (and carry). Suit yourself, but please be organized- don't let constantly needing to fidget and adjust your load distract you from keeping your footing and watching where you are going or detain your fellow hikers.

A Hat that can cover your ears. A large percentage of body heat is expelled thru the head. If your hat or cap has ear flaps or can be rolled up and down, it can do a surprisingly good job of helping you regulate your temperature before adding or removing clothing layers. Some people also fancy a scarf or ascot for their neck but a good outdoor shell jacket will be have likely have been engineered to cover your neck.

A lightweight Nylon Shell. Your outermost layer should be a light, synthetic shell with a hood. This item of clothing might also be called a wind breaker and is appropriately named as it deflects the wind off you. Should be as windproof and waterproof as possible but should also “breathe” (or allow moisture to escape)

Gloves or Mittens are obvious accessories you should have when hiking in cold weather. Waterproof gloves with separate cloth liners inside are a plus. Some people like hand warmers of which several types are made that can be found at a well-stocked outdoors store.

A pair of Gaiters. These are waterproof “leggings” that fit around your legs and cover the tops of your feet and boots. Their foremost function is to keep snow or water from getting into your boots over the tops. They also keep your pants legs dry if you find yourself encountering snow or ice-laden underbrush. If you are wearing knee-high gaiters, they serve extra duty in that they provide an extra layer of insulation to keep your body heat in and your lower legs warm.

Ice Cleats (Crampons) Get the kind with short cleats- the ones with really long tines are overkill and inappropriate for this part of the country 99% of the time. The ones with really long tines are for mountaineering in extreme ice conditions and people who live in areas that experience really deep snow combined with ice for extended periods. Even during snowy times we inevitably end up on bare ground and rocks at some point and sometimes hike along cleared paved roads. In addition to making walking awkward, heavy-duty ice cleats tend to start falling apart pretty quickly.

Some lighter duty ice cleats have become available recently that are made so they fit around and over your boot toes and heels using Velcro straps or are similar to galoshes, made of neoprene. These generally have the short cleats on the bottoms (similar to short-spiked golf shoes) and have served our hikers well. Another design using small chrome chains in lieu of spikes has been seen. Yet another design employing lengths of steel spring for traction along the bottoms was tried by a few people but they fell apart after one or two hikes.

Some people have found a walking stick or hiking poles to be helpful for steadying themselves climbing or staying upright in slippery conditions. A bonus of using a pair of hiking poles is that you can use them to add an upper-body and increased respiratory workout to your hike similar to the exercise benefits you receive cross-country skiing or using a Nordic-Trak exercise machine.

You can usually find a wooden walking stick of sorts somewhere along the trail courtesy of a dying tree; sometimes other hikers will be good Samaritans and leave a walking stick they have been using at a trail head after they have finished hiking.

Hiking poles can be found at many outdoors stores and are most often of a collapsible, telescoping design that makes them easier to stow when not being used. An old pair of ski poles might suit you but if you ski regularly it's not recommended to use your best (or only) pair for hiking as continually stabbing them into potentially frozen, bare ground or rocks is not the purpose for which they were designed and the tips will likely become damaged or broken.

A thermos of a hot beverage such as coffee, cocoa or soup is a genuine treat that you can carry in your backpack to enjoy during breaks but you should still carry enough plain drinking water to quench your thirst during the day. Even though the weather is cold, you can still generate a great deal of body heat and lose a lot of water via perspiration while hiking. Don't forget- you can get dehydrated well before you feel thirsty.

If you ski you may have a pair of ski goggles. On a particularly cold, windy or snowy day these could help keep the elements off your face and out of your eyes but these are pretty rare circumstances. A cloth ski mask is something many people find might find hanging around a closet or can be purchased cheaply.

There are many outdoors stores in our area (Campmor or Ramsey Outdoor in Paramus, NJ to name a few...) and there are many websites to shop online for the items you will need for winter hiking. You may already have some of these items if you ski.

You needn't spend a fortune to equip yourself for winter hiking but generally speaking (especially where boots are concerned) you are probably better off spending just a little more for better quality items- look at it as investing in your health and fitness: if you are comfortable you are more apt to be motivated to get out more often; the more you get out the better shape you will be in physically.

Do you have any winter hiking tips or recommendations of your own to add? Questions about anything discussed here? Need recco's about places/ brands to shop for winter hiking gear? If so, please email us harrimanhikers@gmail.com. We'll hook you up. We appreciate your input!

Don't be a lump this winter- Take a hike!

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*** This document can also be viewed or downloaded for Acrobat Reader as a .pdf file:
http://harrimanhikers.org/Harriman_Hikers_Guide_to_Winter_Hiking.pdf

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A North New Jersey Singles Hiking Club
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