

Winter Hiking 101

For many experienced hikers, winter is the best season of all. There are fewer people on the trails, no bugs, and with the leaves down, views are more spectacular. Getting started on a winter day hike in Harriman does not have to involve the purchase of a lot of expensive clothing and gear, but some experimenting with different layering techniques may be necessary.

What type of clothing do I need to stay warm?

As you will soon find out, cold is usually not the issue as long as you are moving. But when you stop, you will quickly cool down, and if you're wearing too much clothing, you'll quickly overheat. Layering is the key to being comfortable. And keep in mind that it's easier to stay warm than it is to get warm once you feel chilled.

Most guides will advise you to start out with three layers. The base layer (closest to the skin) is usually some sort of moisture-wicking long underwear. A wicking turtleneck with a zipper at the neck makes a good base layer. Winter hikers find that long underwear on the legs is not necessary unless the temperature falls below 30 degrees, or if it's very windy. You may feel otherwise. Silk and cotton should be avoided because they are not moisture-wicking fabrics and will not dry when they get wet from perspiration. The waffle type of long underwear you wore as a kid was probably cotton and should be avoided.

The second layer is for keeping you warm. On top, this can be either a wool sweater (an excellent insulator even when wet) or a fleece jacket. On most days, this layer will be taken off once you get warmed up. On your legs, wear either water-resistant hiking pants or nylon wind blocking pants. If you invest in this type of pant, look for ones with side zippers the full length of the leg that you can open and close in order to regulate your body temperature. The long zippers also allow you to get your pants on over your boots easily. Many people wear running tights, with a pair of shorts over the top so they can have pockets. A pair of wind- or waterproof pants can easily be donned over tights when the temperature drops. Running tights come in different thicknesses, allowing you to wear what is most appropriate for the temperature.

For the top layer, you need some sort of water- and wind-resistant jacket. The wind/rain jacket you wear during the warmer months should suffice as long as you also bring a down or a Gore-Tex jacket to keep warm during lunch and to wear on the way home. A down jacket is not essential, but this extra layer would be useful should an emergency come up on the trail. On windy days, a base layer and the wind jacket may be all that is needed. If you don't have a Gore-Tex jacket, you will need some sort of water- and wind-resistant coated nylon jacket. If you decide to invest in Gore-Tex, let the salesperson know what activities you are planning to do. Jackets made for skiing and snowboarding have too many insulating layers for hiking.

If it is very cold (below 30 degrees), it's a good idea to carry extra layers, and always bring an extra pair of hiking socks. Always put your warm layers on as soon as you stop for lunch or any other extended break longer than a minute or two because it's easier to stay warm than it is to get warm once you feel chilled.

How do I keep from hands and feet from freezing?

Hands and feet are the most vulnerable to cold. Winter hikers like to wear glove liners on their hands at all times because they keep you warm while allowing enough movement to adjust snowshoes or crampons. If it is very cold, add waterproof mittens or fleece gloves. If you wear glove liners, bring several pairs because they do get wet. For socks, most people wear a sock liner and a wool or performance type of sock. Men's nylon dress socks work well as sock liners. Most of our members wear leather hiking boots in winter, which need to be waterproofed with something like Nikwax or SnoSeal. Stream crossings can be high in winter and sometimes stepping on an underwater rock is far safer than stepping on an icy exposed rock. If you easily get cold feet, you may want to consider buying a waterproof boot such as these:



Cayenne

If you don't have a pair of water resistant, knee length gaiters, like the one shown below, they should be at the top of your list of new purchases. Gaiters are not worn to keep your legs warm, although they help. You must have these for winter hiking to keep the snow from getting into your boots at the ankle. Many hike leaders will turn back someone who does not have gaiters when there is snow on the ground.



Gaiter

A comment about hats

It goes without saying that a hat is necessary. Again wool and fleece work the best. Some people prefer a headband instead of a hat. Hikers are constantly putting hats on and taking them off to keep from overheating. If you prefer wool hats and are prone to sweating, you can try wearing a fleece headband under your hat to keep the hat from getting wet. A balaclava is lightweight and goes along way in an emergency to keep your entire face and neck warm.



Balaclava

Is there anything else I need to bring?

Some items that are optional in the summer become more critical in winter. For example:

- Sunglasses may be absolutely necessary when glare levels are high.
- Hiking poles, or a walking stick, are necessary. Although very surefooted hikers can get away without poles, you will often encounter water crossings that can only be navigated with a pole.
- Don't forget your bandana. Your nose will get drippy on a cold day and tissues shred too easy.
- You need some sort of insulating pad to sit on at lunch time. A warm fanny on a cold rock always results in a cold fanny! A closed foam pad will keep you warm. You can purchase a pad made for this use, or you can keep an eye out for a discarded piece of closed cell foam packing material.

- A headlamp with extra batteries is also essential due to the short days. Be sure to turn your batteries to the opposite poles to keep your lamp from accidentally turning on in your pack. Extra batteries should be carried close to the body and kept warm on cold days or they will deplete.

What should I bring for food and drink on the trail?

Keeping hydrated in winter can be quite a challenge. Although you may not feel thirsty, you will be losing fluids just as fast as you do in the summer. On very cold days, boil your water before setting out. It will cool down by the time you drink it. In freezing weather, water bottles need to be insulated. An old wool sock works well for this purpose. Turn the bottle upside down to prevent the water from freezing at the neck. Often times you will need to force yourself to drink, but a dehydrated hiker will feel chilled faster, and faces the same risks that occur in the warmer months. Some people also bring a thermos with a hot drink for comfort.

Consuming enough calories is also a challenge on cold days. Any hiker that does not eat enough will get chilled and run out of energy very quickly. Keep some kind of food handy in your pocket. This is not the time to worry about your diet – you will burn plenty of calories on the trail. Gorp with plenty of chocolate is a favorite. Food carried in your backpack will freeze at temperatures below ADD INFO. If you plan to be out in extreme weather, put your lunch in an insulated bag. Don't expect a lunch break to last longer than about 15 minutes. On days below 30 degrees, it could be even shorter.

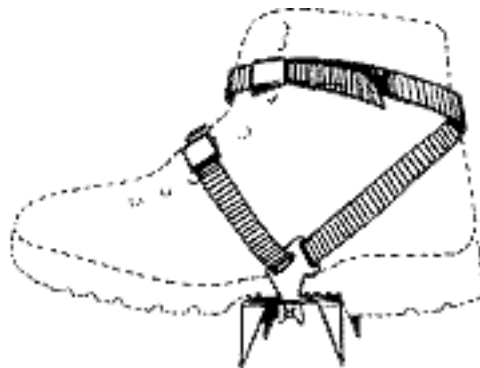
Just what are Stabilicers, crampons and snowshoes?

Many leaders require that you bring equipment such as Stabilicers, crampons, and snowshoes.



Stabilicer

These will keep you from slipping on hard-packed, icy trails. Some leaders like to find less-used trails to avoid ice, but this is not always possible, especially when a snowfall is followed by a warm spell that causes melting. Other leaders may require instep crampons which are more secure than Stabilicers, but harder to walk on when there are bare patches or rocks.



4 Point Crampon



6 Point Crampon

If you decide to hike regularly throughout the winter, you might prefer 6 point instep crampons rather than 4 point because they stay in position better and provide more stability. Ten-point crampons are needed on solid ice pack, such as you find in the spring at the upper elevations in the Catskills. Always carry your crampons in winter because trail conditions are not always predictable. In all cases, crampons need to be pre-adjusted to fit your boot at home. You should also practice putting them on and off with glove liners on.

The New York-North Jersey Chapter also sponsors snowshoe hikes. If the leader requires snowshoes, don't show up without them because he or she might decide to spend the entire day off-trail in deep snow – without the required gear you would be turned back. Before purchasing a pair of snowshoes, ask around for advice. Find a snowshoe with a binding that is easily operated. You also want to buy the smallest snowshoe that suits the snow conditions. The length is dependent on your body weight plus your pack weight and how deep the snow is. In Harriman, a small woman can get away with a 21 inch snowshoe and some men can get away with 25 inch snow shoes. Talk with other hikers and salespeople. Whatever you purchase needs to have crampons on the bottom to allow you to grip into the snow or ice while going up and down hill. Be very careful not to choose snowshoes made for walking on flat golf courses or fields because they do not function for hiking up and down hills. You can sometimes find good deals on websites such as Ebay and Campmor. Keep in mind that is very difficult to walk in snowshoes without poles. You should also practice putting on and taking off your snowshoes at home.

A final word of advice

Although all this sounds like a lot of information – and gear – winter hiking is really pretty easy. The only way to find out what works best for you is to go out and try a hike. For your first outing in the snow, you could even go to your local park for a quick, energetic hike. Hikes in areas such as Fahnestock and Breakneck Ridge may require more clothing and equipment than what is needed in Harriman as these areas are higher, can be windier, and get more snow. If you are not sure what to wear, bring lots of thin layers. Talk with your leader and other hikers. Ask to see their gear. On some hikes, the main topic of conversation is gear. Once you learn what works for you, winter may become your favorite hiking season.