

prepare for winter



Expert advice on the skills you'll need in the hills – courtesy of the instructors at Glenmore Lodge, Scotland's National Outdoor Training Centre

IN winter, the daylight hours are short, the weather visits an extreme end of the scale and ground conditions can change in a footfall. So it is the wise walker that prepares well: you need to be equipped not only in a material sense but physically, psychologically, technically and tactically. Use this article as a personal checklist for winter... it has already arrived.

The tools of the trade

Boots: We recommend that B2-rated boots will give the best winter performance for all-round walking. The semi rigid sole allows steps to be kicked with ease and provides great stability in compatible crampons. They should be a good fit. Add gaiters to your boots to prevent snow wetting and cooling your feet.

Crampons: 10 or 12 point articulated or flexible step-in crampons will give you the grip you need on hard snow or ice. When shopping around, it is always best to have the boots to hand as some bindings fit better than others. Trim any long straps to reduce trip hazards and check you can put on the crampons while wearing gloves. Protect your crampons and kit with a crampon bag and remember to fit the crampons with buckles to the outside of your foot, maintaining a clean instep.

Ice axe: There is a vast array of axes to choose from. Length has long been a discussion point but what feels right for you will depend largely on your height. An axe between 50cm and 75cm long should meet requirements.

Clothing: Head to toe coverage is often essential. The concept of layering has been around for many years now and with modern base and mid-layer synthetics designed to wick moisture away from the skin there is little excuse to be cold in winter. A waterproof, windproof outer shell is an essential

component, while a warm hat covers the greatest area of heat loss, and good waterproof gloves or mittens protect the hands (Dachstein-style wool gloves and mittens offer great alternatives to modern synthetics and maintain warmth when wet).

Add more layers when you stop and remove some

when you move. Carrying a synthetic duvet jacket – with or without a hood – as a spare layer can really add to comfort.

Goggles: These complete the protection needed for operating in winter. There are many choices out there but the key is that they are a good fit to your face, with clear double lenses (check you can operate your map and compass effectively with them on). It is worth spending a little more for good quality. Dry your face before putting them on and once they're on, leave them on.

Movement technique

Balanced, controlled, technically correct, appropriate, efficient, secure... good movement over snow, ice and snowed or iced-up rocks should fit all these descriptions. But can you use these words to describe your own movement? One way to become skilled in moving through winter conditions is to look at the tools available and the techniques for using them.

Boots: The boot may be used to kick steps in various ways. Walk on a variety of snow conditions early in the winter to refresh your techniques. The inside and outside edges of your boots may be used like a saw to create a horizontal step across the slope. When ascending or traversing, the swing comes from the knee. When descending, use plunge steps with commitment to the heel of the boot.

Crampons: These require a very different technique: where previously the aim was to use the edge of the boot, the focus now becomes that of a flat foot with all the downward points in contact with the snow or ice. At times the front points are employed and at others a hybrid combination of flat footing and front pointing may be used. Take positive, methodical and metronomic steps.

Axe: Always approach an unknown slope with your axe in hand; crampons alone are not enough. Keep your gloves on and carry the axe in your uphill hand with the pick facing backwards. In harder snow or windy conditions develop a rhythm to your movement: axe, step, step, axe, step, step...

Step-cutting may save time when used in context. Steps may be cut diagonally up, straight up, across and down slopes, but make sure the steps themselves form horizontal platforms on which to place your feet.

Navigating in winter

Snowfall and wind can lead to significantly reduced visibility and in winter there are numerous traps for the poor navigator, including steep ground and cornices. The winter navigator must therefore be ADEPT: accurate, decisive, efficient, practised and thorough.

Whatever navigation system you use, it needs to be prepared well. The map should be protected from the elements in a decent map case and you should check you can accurately take a



Get ready for winter

Finally, make sure your winter checklist covers the following facets.

Psychological: Watch out for saying "I can't be bothered to get dry gloves on." In winter you want to be bothered. If you are thinking "should I put my crampons on?" it generally means you should. If you are feeling cold, eat, drink, put another layer on or move quicker. Put trust in your compass bearing.

Physical: Are you fit? Winter requires you to carry extra weight, walking in deep snow saps energy, the cold requires the body to burn more calories to keep warm, and consecutive days of hard winter walking can leave you depleted of energy. Hydrate and feed well the day before and continue to fuel up during the day. On longer trips, plan a rest or easier day midweek.

Tactical: Plan your route(s) and be prepared to adopt plan B, C, D or E. Take into consideration weather and avalanche conditions. Keep track of your location, plan ahead and put equipment on as conditions dictate.

Technical: Revisit the winter skills you possess, especially, boot, crampon and axe work. Practise your navigation, particularly walking on bearings, contour interpretation and measurement of distances.

Material: Make sure you have well-fitting boots and crampons, an axe, a clothing system including a hat, gloves (including spares), gaiters, food, drink, map, compass, goggles, whistle, survival bag, mobile phone – fully charged, head torch, and a 40-litre sack to put it all in.

Enjoy the elemental experience this winter.
Giles Trussell, Glenmore Lodge



bearing with gloves and goggles on. Your compass too needs to be manageable with gloves or mitts on and kept somewhere accessible. Check your pacing over 100 metres and remember to adjust it for the relevant conditions underfoot. Snow bridges may have a lot of running water underneath so take special care on days of fresh falls of snow or conversely days of thaw. Also be on your guard for ferocious and unpredictable gusts of wind, particularly on large open slopes and at the tops of slopes. Winter days are short, so plan well and always carry a good headtorch.

Avalanches

Before you venture into snowy terrain, consider four aspects of potential avalanche conditions: the snow pack, the terrain, the weather and yourself.

Snow pack: What is the underlying snow pack like? Are there likely to be any identifiable weaknesses in the layers?

Terrain: Are you passing by or through any terrain traps? What is above you? You don't have to be on a slope to be avalanched. What is the slope angle and shape? What underlies the snow: gig boulders, slabby rock, grass or ice?

Weather: Past, present and future, including type of precipitation and temperature

You: Do you have a sixth sense that things don't feel right? How many are in your group? One on a slope may be safe enough but six may tip the scales of safety.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Recommended reading list:

- Winter Skills: Essential Walking and Climbing Techniques by Andy Cunningham and Allen Fyffe, UKMTB (2007)
- The Mountain Skills Training Handbook by Pete Hill & Stuart Johnston, David & Charles PLC (2004)
- A Chance in a Million? by Bob Barton and Blyth Wright, Scottish Mountaineering Trust, 2nd Rev Edition (2000)
- Scotland's Winter Mountains by Martin Moran, David & Charles PLC, 2nd Rev Edition (1998)
- Mountain Navigation by Peter Cliff, Menasha Ridge Press, 4th Rev Edition (1991)

Winter Courses: www.glenmorelodge.org.uk, www.ami.org.uk
Avalanche Info: www.sais.gov.uk

Next month: how to evaluate the terrain, snowpack and weather conditions to draw sensible, educated conclusions regarding avalanche hazard.

