

# A Snow Camping Primer by Nancy Kim

**W**inter camping can be tons of fun or a sufferfest, depending on your equipment, knowledge and attitude. The following tips are neither exhaustive, nor absolute, but merely a bit of advice collected over the years to help those with less experience mount the learning curve more quickly. Also included is information specific to Mount Rainier National Park where the March trip will take place. I'm assuming everyone knows the basics of layering, so I'll forgo details on dressing and which layers to pack.

1. Ditch the Camelbak or any other tube hydration system. The drinking tube always freezes, even when you blow the excess liquid back into the bladder. Take Nalgene bottles. Turning the bottle upside down in your pack helps to keep the top layer from icing over and the threads from freezing shut. Stainless steel bottles are a nuisance because they freeze quickly.
2. Long-handled shovels with a metal blade are very useful around camp. I coveted the extra length on my buddy's Life Link shovel. My Voile with the 18" handle seemed pathetically stubby by comparison. I have already ordered the longer handle.
3. Down booties for après-ski are really nice. If you're on the market, look for booties with a thick sole for maximum insulation between your foot and the snow-covered ground. For those not down with down, good luck finding a synthetic model. Sources tell me duck- and goose-friendly alternatives are tough to find. Try Sierra Trading Post online.
4. Two closed-cell foam pads are better than one. Your warmth at night depends not only on the sleeping bag rating, but also on the amount of air space between you and the ground. Crank up the R-value of your bed with an extra pad.
5. Take a warm winter bag. My down bag is rated to 0 F. A bivy sack comes in handy to keep it dry if



your bag lacks a water-resistant shell. On my first winter camping trip, I took a summer bag and used a liner, a really poor idea. I shivered all night.

6. If you can stand it, don a balaclava or other face mask and sleep with your head outside the bag to prevent exhalation condensation from dampening your bag.
7. For those plagued by easily chilled digits, pack lots of chemical toe and hand warmers. Toe warmers stuffed into your booties help the dogs stay warm at camp when you're not moving around as much. I don't use them, but I like to keep some in my emergency kit.
8. A large garbage bag comes in very handy for keeping dry clothing dry. You can also use it for placing items inside your sleeping bag (climbing skins, inner ski boots) without fear of soaking the inside of your bag.
9. For cooking and melting snow for water, a white-gas fueled stove such as the MSR Whisperlite is necessary. White gas burns hotter than mixed-fuel used by canister stoves. The MSR stove baseplate keeps the stove securely anchored on the snow and is essential in winter. On my last trip, each party of two used 11 oz. of fuel per day.
10. Glue hates cold and duct tape is no exception. I hear Gorilla brand duct tape outperforms garden-variety duct tape when the mercury drops.



## The skinny on Bear Canisters

More parks and backcountry areas have regulations requiring critter-resistant containers for food storage. Unprotected food caches are bad for campers and wildlife. Wildlife quickly grow accustomed to foraging from anthropogenic sources and can lose their ability to fend for themselves.

If you're thinking about buying a bear canister, the main factors to consider are volume-to-weight ratio, price and park approval status. If money is no object, the choice is clear: the Bearikade Weekender. At 650 cubic inches and 1 lb. 13 oz., this carbon fiber can holds up to a week's worth of food. Cost: \$225. Approved

everywhere. The middle-of-the-road choice is the BearVault BV500, nearly a pound heavier than the Bearikade but slightly larger at 700 cubic inches. Cost: \$80. Approved everywhere. The lightweight Ursack is the only soft, collapsible brand. There are two models, a \$64 design for bear country (650 cubic inch capacity, 8 oz.) and a \$50 bag (650 cubic inch capacity, 2.7 oz.) where smaller critters are the main concern. I think Ursacks are great, but the problem is their approval status: a few parks (including Yosemite) in the Sierra Nevada range don't allow them. My suspicion is the fault lies primarily with the user, not the design of the Ursack. Learn how to cinch and tie it properly.

11. Take snowstakes, preferably fluke-style anchors, for anchoring your tent. Fluke stakes work best of all designs in all winter conditions including powdery, uncompacted snow. Deadman-style snowstakes work well in compacted snow but poorly in loose snow. In desperation, you can use stuff sacks filled with snow to anchor your shelter. When winds pick up, they can easily send the improperly staked tent aloft. We've witnessed it.



12. The Whiz-Freedom, She-Pee or other similar device, in addition to a pee bottle (well-labeled) will keep you from having to exit your tent at night. I highly suggest practicing at home with these FUDs (feminine urine directors) before using them in the field.

13. Bear canisters are required for camping in MRNP. Cascade foxes, not bears, are the primary concern. Corvids such as Gray Jays, Clark's Nutcrackers, Ravens and Steller's Jays are also be problematic. Rangers at Longmire Museum will loan campers BearVault canisters for free though availability cannot be guaranteed. Collapsible Ursacks are approved, at least on a trial basis, though they should be buried or hung.



14. Blue bags are required for packing out solid human waste, but the NPS budget is thin, so thin that Mt. Rainier National Park rangers chided us for not buying an ample supply for our party of four in advance. Avoid shame and help the park service by bringing your own. WCN will supply them for this trip.

15. Creature comforts such as a small sit-pad and a thermos are nice for the lunch break, though I tend to sit on my day pack.

16. Multiple days in ski boots can wreak havoc on feet. Clip your toenails and pack your favorite footcare products.

17. Extra Nalgene bottles come in handy for holding surplus hot water from cooking. To conserve fuel, you want to hold onto all the water you've made from melted snow, and it's easy to find yourself short on containers. A hot water bottle makes a fine little radiator in the sleeping bag at night.