



SNOWSHOE MAGAZINE FEATURED ARTICLE:

Play Safe in the Woods



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You love it out there on the trails through the forest, but you're relatively new to snowshoeing or cross-country skiing. You may have read Matthew Timothy Bradley's excellent December piece "Planning for the Worst: The List, and thought "OMG I'm not going there. I never heard of a Swedish fire steel and I am NOT spending the night in a freaking cave anywhere!"

Cheer up. We were all novices at one time, and many of the super suggestions in Bradley's article came from experience, some gained the hard way. He did not start out axing his way up Everest and neither will you. But you have to begin somewhere, so man up, as they say. The suggestions below can help you get out there safely so you can gain the experience necessary to plan more serious outings, if you are so inclined.

LAYERING FOR SUCCESS

"Layering begins with the base layer, which can be synthetics such as polypropylene or polyester; silk; wool or other fabrics," advises Brent Vanni, Product Developer at L.L. Bean. Yes, wool, in the form of mid and light weight Cresta Wool Base Layer. It's naturally odor resistant and provides excellent warmth.

If you need an insulating layer on top of the base, and you probably will as you begin your outing, zoning techniques are popular. This means basically a thicker layer like fleece with different fabrics in specific places in the jacket, such as the core, under the arms and down the sleeves, allowing moisture to escape. Polartec offers a high-pile fleece that is unbeatable for warmth, and yet packs small.

Always take that third layer for wind protection. Gore-Tex is still a good bet, as it is both wind and waterproof and also breathes, often vented under the arms. The company has recently incorporated stretch into their Proshell fabrics.



THE FEET AND HANDS

If your feet are not happy, it's gonna be a long day and you don't want to get stuck out there with painful blisters. Whatever type of boot you choose needs to fit correctly. Toes should wiggle easily, but feet should not slide around, or be compressed from side to side. Fit the boot to the foot and then we can talk socks. Speaking of socks, always tuck an extra pair in your pack just in case you end up with wet and cold feet.

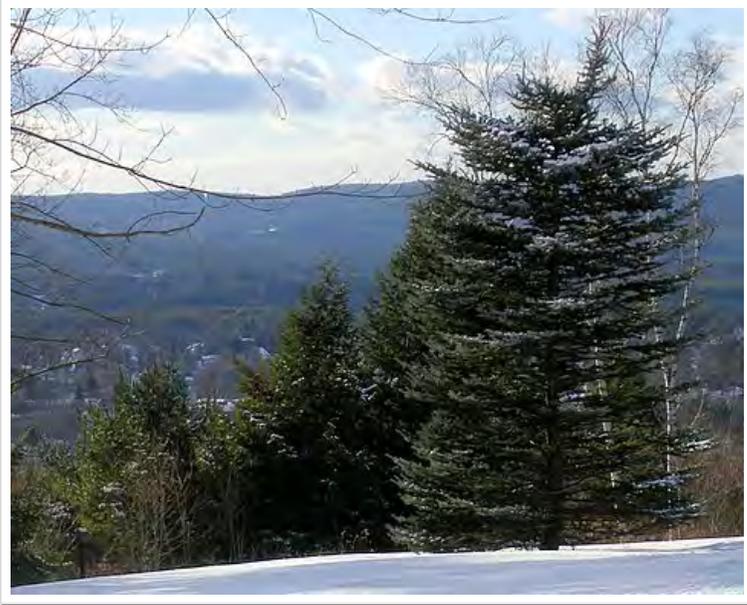
Don't pile on multiple pairs of socks like you did as a kid. New technology has led to the development of superior products that wick away moisture and keep the feet warm with one layer. Cresta Wool Hiking socks of merino wool or other socks that combine merino and Primaloft fibers are good choices, and Nike carries a sock called

Dry-Fit.

Got cold hands? Always carry extra gloves or mittens. And both hands and feet can really benefit from those shakable warmers that give off warmth for several hours. Some people get cold hands more easily than others, despite the conditions, especially if they have Reynaud's, where the fingers turn cold, white and stiff, rendering them somewhat useless. Always carry extras.

THE HYDRATION FACTOR

You may not be aware that the body cannot regulate hydration as well in cold weather. According to the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM), close to 95% of hypothermia cases result when people are not sufficiently hydrated before going out. You are working hard while snowshoeing and you could become dehydrated without realizing it. Fluid consumption is important, not only to replenish the fluid lost from perspiring, but also fluid lost from the air you exhale. Make sure you carry water along with your extra pair of socks.



THE SAFETY FACTOR

Fingers, toes, ears and face are especially vulnerable. The ACSM warns that if the temperature is below freezing, ice crystals can form on your skin or the tissue underneath. Hypothermia can sneak up on you. You can always take off a layer, so be sure to have all three layers with you. Watch for intense shivering, a warning sign that may be followed by a drop in your whole-body temperature, inability to perform complex tasks and slurred speech. You do not want to go there.

Bradley's article mentions duct tape, an excellent suggestion in case some part of your gear starts to come apart. A rip in your glove? You catch on a tree branch and hole your jacket? Something breaks on your snowshoe? Take the tape with you; you may never need it, but if you keep at the sport long enough you probably will.

A few basic first aid supplies can mean the difference between staying on your plan and running for home. A nasty cut when a limb slaps your face, or a finger cut from your equipment could continue to bleed. Take a few Band-aid strips. And remember those cool looking silver Mylar blankets from the space age? It weighs next to nothing and could mean the difference between life and death if something bad happens out there and you get lost.

Unless you are on a trail so easy, well-marked and short that even a blind man could not get lost, take a compass in case you need to navigate your way back. A trail map should be an essential anyway. As you venture farther afield you would be wise to bring along your GPS. And never go out alone without letting another person know where you are going and when to expect you back.

SOURCES:

- Vanni, Brent, L.L. Bean, Product Developer. Contact person is Mac MacKeever at emckeever@llbean.com.
- American College of Sports Medicine – www.ascm.org

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About Sherry Hanson

I live in Maine and enjoy the outdoors, running, biking and kayaking. I have published over 450 articles, taking on anything that interests me these days. Visit my website for more information and a selection of published articles, a few photos, a mention of my poetry.

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