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10 Mistakes People Make When Hiking in the Winter, According to Outdoor Pros Who Really Like... Hiking in the Winter

If there's one misconception I've long held about hiking in the winter, it's that, well, you shouldn't do it. To me, hiking has always been a fair-weather thing—something for a balmy spring day, or a brisk fall one, or even a breezy summer one (provided it's not sweltering). But winter? To me, the blustery conditions and cold temperatures simply presented too large of an obstacle to enjoying the substantial time in nature and aerobic activity that hiking entails. So you can imagine my intrigue when The Ranch—a Malibu, California-based wellness retreat famous for its *lengthy daily hike*—invited me to experience a preview of its soon-to-launch program in New York's Hudson Valley... in November.

To back up a bit: The initial decision to launch a new Ranch location within driving distance of New York City *hinged* on the area being hike-able year-round, in order for guests to be able to partake in the same daily hike as their counterparts have always done at the sunny Malibu location. The idea was to demonstrate that with the right gear and clothing, you actually could reap all the physical and mental health benefits of hiking during the winter, contrary to common misconceptions.

“In a lot of places, people just haven't been exposed to the cold for that long, and they don't know if they can handle a winter hike,” says personal trainer Caroline Juster, CPT, CFSC. She admits that dealing with substantial snow and ice on a hike requires “a more advanced skill set,” she notes that there are also plenty of places where you can hike in the winter and *not* encounter these kinds of elements.

Such was the case for my hike with a few other journalists at The Ranch Hudson Valley on that November day. It was 45°F, and there was no snow or ice on the ground. But while it still wasn't a day that I'd normally opt to, well, work out outside, I was surprised to find my two hours of cold-weather hiking were... pleasant? I had fretted about the cold only to find that my puffer was too *hot* to wear throughout the hike (mistake #1) and assumed I'd be too uncomfortable to really enjoy it (mistake #2).

—**“Part of the beauty of hiking in the cold is that you can work up your internal body temperature and get moving, and still stay cool.” —Jessie Krebs, wilderness survival expert**

“I want to encourage people to get out there in the winter because it really can be so rewarding,” says wilderness survival expert [Jessie Krebs](#), former Air Force SERE (Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape) specialist and owner and head instructor at [O.W.L.S. Skills \(Outdoorsy Women Learning Survival Skills\)](#). And if you take the appropriate precautions to avoid common winter hiking mistakes, the chillier temps can even work in your favor: “Part of the beauty of hiking in the cold is that you can work up your internal body temperature and get moving, and still stay cool,” says Krebs.

Below, you'll find the 10 most common mistakes people make when hiking in the winter (along with the misconceptions that lead to them), so you can feel prepared the next time you're debating a winter hike—which you should definitely take.

10 common winter hiking mistakes and misconceptions to avoid (and what to do instead)

1. Mistake: Wearing *too* heavy of a jacket

You want to make absolutely sure you're warm enough on your hike so you decide to throw on your heaviest puffer... which leads you to the illusion that you probably don't need many layers beneath it. The thing is, as you start moving around and heating up, you'll also quickly start sweating, says Juster. And that's not ideal, given that sweat will evaporate when you take your puffer off, leaving you *freezing*.

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Instead, you want to dress in lots of layers so you can add and subtract easily when you get cold or hot, and regulate your temperature without sweating, says [John Bottino](#), general manager at The Ranch Hudson Valley. And take note of the fabrics you choose, too: "Anything that's touching your body should be a synthetic technical fabric or a non-cotton natural material," he says, "because cotton is absorbent and will hold onto moisture if you start sweating."

Your outermost layer *can* be a hefty puffer, but it's best to find one that folds easily and pack it in your bag, rather than wearing it from the outset. "There's a saying in the hiking community, 'Be bold, start cold,'" says Juster. That means you should wear a lighter outer layer to start, like a fleece, to wick more moisture as you're getting moving, she explains. "But then as soon as you stop hiking to have a drink or eat, you want to take off the fleece, and put on your puffer."

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2. Mistake: Wearing leggings or other tight clothing

Stretchy, form-fitting clothes might seem like a good choice for an athletic activity, and maybe you think they'll look cutest in the photos (just me?)... but that's a no-go for cold-weather hiking. "People have the misconception that it's the clothes on their body that keep them warm, but it's actually the dead airspace that the clothing is holding *near you* that gets warm," says Krebs. With things like leggings, you're creating very little of that airspace, meaning it's easier to get cold more quickly. Instead, Krebs recommends wearing loose-fitting hiking gear.

This way, you'll have more dead airspace between your clothes and your body. If you wind up having to stay out longer than you'd planned and are getting cold, you can even stuff that airspace with things like grasses or punk wood, says Krebs. And if not? Well, at least you were prepared for the worst. "I'd rather be a live, shapeless lump than a cute corpse," she says.

3. Mistake: Assuming you won't get *that* thirsty in the cold

If you're like me, you associate dehydration with overheating and sweating and summer—but your body needs just as much water on a winter hike as it would on a summer one. "Every time that we use energy to heat ourselves up, to hike, to move, we're also using water to convert that energy," explains Krebs. Not to mention, dehydration in the winter can thicken your blood, making it tougher for it to circulate to all your key organs as well as your extremities—which increases your risk for developing hypothermia or frostbite, respectively.

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It's the reason why all of us journalists on the winter hike at The Ranch were required to take two liters of water with us (in the form of a [Camelbak Fusion Reservoir](#), or "bladder," in a special backpack). For the record, I initially thought a simple water bottle would've been fine, but it *was* nice to have constant access to water via the drinking tube rather than having to reach into a bag.

One thing to note, according to Juster: Depending on how cold it is, it's possible for the water in one of these bladders to freeze in the hose, so it's a good idea to add a little salt to your water to lower the freezing point, or consider bringing a wide-neck water bottle, too. You can also plan to use a filter (like the [Sawyer Mini Water Filtration System](#)) to treat water to drink if you know you'll encounter a stream or lake on your hike—but again, there's the risk that the water you come upon is frozen, so it's a good idea to have a backup plan in that case.

4. Mistake: Thinking it's "just a day hike" and not bringing any gear

A surprising truth: Day hikes are the most dangerous, from a survival perspective, according to Krebs. "That's because people think they're just going to go out for two or three or four hours, and so they don't take the basic gear they'd need to survive overnight," she says. But then, maybe you get injured and can't make your way back before dark, or it starts to snow, and that makes it so you can't find the trail back—and now, you suddenly wind up needing to spend the night outside.

In this scenario, Juster says you ideally want to have one of each of the [10 core hiking essentials](#), in addition to any critical medications: some form of navigation like a compass or a GPS device, a headlamp, sun protection, a first-aid kit, a knife, some way to make fire, a small emergency bivy (aka sleeping bag), some food, some water, and an extra layer of clothing.

But if you're just choosing two for what you expect to be a short hike in clear conditions, the most important are the navigation or signaling device—so you can get out of there in an emergency—and the water, says Krebs.

5. Mistake: Overestimating your ability to use your phone

Even if you think you'll have phone service (which you very well might not), it's not a great idea to rely on your cell phone as your primary source of communication, signaling, or direction when hiking in the winter. What if you drop it into snow? Or it just runs out of battery? (During my experience at The Ranch, we were all provided with battery-operated walkie-talkies in case we needed to contact one of the guides in an emergency.)

While Juster recommends downloading an offline map on Google Maps or the AllTrails app for scenarios where your phone is still functional but just not getting service, she also suggests having a paper map of the trail and a compass. If you know you'll be hiking often in areas without service, she says it may also be worth splurging on a satellite communication device like a [Garmin InReach](#) (or seeing if there's a nearby outdoor gear store where you could rent one).

6. Mistake: Mistiming your hike so it ends after sunset

Consider this your reminder that the sun sets early in winter—so, a perfectly suitable hike for a July day could run you straight past sunset in December. And if you're planning a day hike in cold temperatures, you probably don't want to be out trekking still after dark.

In the same realm, Juster says it's also worth noting that because of the low angle of the sun in the winter, "it can get pretty dark in a forest or wooded area even an hour or two before the sun sets, so your visibility is going to be decreased." Insert here the importance of that headlamp noted above, as a means of lighting the trail back at dusk.

7. Mistake: Trying to just keep hiking if you start feeling very cold

Old hiking wisdom might've suggested just continuing to charge ahead if you started to feel extremely cold or shiver uncontrollably—but that's actually very dangerous, says Krebs. "You're much more likely to get injured if you're on the move, especially if you're tired at night." Plus, you're using up a lot of water and burning a lot of calories by continuing with the cardio, and perhaps worst of all, you're not holding onto the heat you're creating, she adds.

When you walk or make other big full-body movements, you're essentially fluffing your clothing in different directions, which causes you to "expel all that nice warm air you just created and pull in the cold air," says Krebs. Not good.

Instead, she suggests “using macro muscles to do micro movements” in this scenario. Find something to sit on (ideally, a sleeping bag or foam pad, but branches or brush can work), curl into the fetal position and then clench your arms to your side, your hands into fists, and your legs together very tight; then, hold for five seconds before releasing and repeating. “This will start to generate a lot of heat, which you’re keeping by your body because you’re not moving around and giving it all away to the environment,” says Krebs.

This is an especially important exercise to do if you notice that you’re starting to have what Krebs calls the “-umbles:” Stumbling, mumbling, and fumbling are all signs of impending hypothermia (a condition where your core body temperature decreases)—which, it’s worth noting, can totally happen in temperatures as high as the 50s, she says, particularly if you’re not dressed in enough layers, have been out for a long time, or have gotten wet with rain or snow.

8. Mistake: Failing to account for extra muscle fatigue

Just as the extra heat can make a hike feel tougher in the dead of summer, the extra cold can have a similar effect in the winter. After all, your body has to work overtime to keep you warm in the winter, which expends energy, and the air is less dense in the winter, so you’re inhaling more air with less oxygen, says Bottino. Meaning, “you could feel more winded during a winter hike, just because your body isn’t used to these circumstances,” he says.

If you’re also walking through snow, Bottino says you’re in for quicker muscle fatigue (the extra resistance is similar to walking on sand), and same goes if you’re walking on patches of ice and testing your balance. Which is all to say, don’t make the mistake of choosing a trail that already challenges you in mild weather to tackle in frigid temperatures or icy or snowy conditions.

9. Mistake: Just choosing the wrong footwear

Speaking of ice... you're definitely going to want a pair of traction spikes (like these [Kahtoola Microspikes](#)) if there's any chance you'll be walking on ice or packed snow, says Juster. These are attachments you can add onto any shoe or boot that have small spikes along the bottom to give you better grip on slippery surfaces—so you don't go belly up.

And don't forget to choose a *waterproof* hiking boot if there's any chance you'll be trekking over snow, getting rained on, crossing streams, or otherwise getting into wet conditions, says Krebs. Better yet if it's a boot with an insert you can pull out and wring out if it gets wet, she adds, to avoid the painful winter hiking mistake of being stuck with wet feet in the cold.

10. Mistake: Thinking your hike won't be as scenic in the winter

Sure, you're not going to get fall foliage or dazzling greenery in the winter, but a wooded trail dusted in snow can be its own kind of multi-sensory experience, says Bottino: "If you're lucky, you'll get the visual beauty of snowflakes, the muffled sound of feet on snow, maybe even the smell of a fire burning in the distance." Plus, there's the added peace and quiet of taking a trek when fewer people are likely to be around, he says, and you can really, truly disconnect.