

16: Winter hiking,

What could be more enjoyable than a day of hiking one of the many trails Sturbridge has to offer? How about hiking one of them on a sun-streamed, snowy day in winter? Most of us think of the summer and fall as ideal hiking seasons, but winter affords some of the prettiest, most serene trail adventures you can ever hope to have. Preparing to hike in the winter does require an amount of packing and preparation, not to mention the inherent dangers of hiking in winter with unpredictable weather conditions, the cold, and how the word “hypothermia” gets tossed around a little too often among the hiking crowd. But taking the time to be prepared affords you the luxury to relax and really absorb your surroundings as you hike, enjoying the intricate details Mother Nature puts into her winterscapes. Our town offers trails to suit just about every kind of hiker at every ability level. For information and inspiration, visit the Sturbridge Trails web site at <http://www.sturbridgetrails.org/>

What are some of the risks of hiking in the winter? There are slippery, icy conditions. Many hikers get injured slipping and falling. You should always bring ice traction crampons or microspikes, which are popular today. There is also the risk of hypothermia. One rule of thumb for winter hikers: cotton kills. You sweat and your shirt gets very wet and then you can get cold, so only use synthetics or wool. In winter pack a couple of extra large heavy-duty trash bags just in case and they don’t take up much space. Navy Seals are quoted as saying a trash bag can save your life. Lesser-used trails, especially right after a snowstorm, can be difficult to follow when the beaten path is buried under deep snow. Hikers should bring a map and compass and know how to use them. Don’t rely on electronic devices or cell phones, which can fail in the cold.

In terms of clothing and gear for a day hike, what are the essentials and what is overkill? Wear an outer layer or shell such as Gore-Tex jacket and pants. Fleece is very good for a middle layer. I prefer heavy gloves and, if it’s around zero degrees or colder, I use heat packs. Snow gaiters are good to keep the snow out of your boots. Long underwear can help in cold weather such as Bergelene or a micro fleece if it is very cold. For ice traction, the use of crampons and microspikes are recommended, having a walking stick also helps to prevent falls from slips and lost traction. Pack a map and compass, whistle, matches or lighter in case of an emergency. I pack my flashlight separate from my batteries, so the batteries don’t go dead and there is no acid leakage in the flashlight. A headlamp is good, but not if it is foggy and dark — then it acts like a high beam and you can’t see where you’re going. Packing some rope or non-climbing cord can have many purposes such as for first aid. I also keep my bottle of water close to my body so it doesn’t freeze and I insulate the water I am drinking on longer hikes.

Being properly prepared for winter hiking is essential. Mistakes made before you go out on the trail will at best, make your winter trail hike miserable, and at worst could cause physical injury. Trails.com has an excellent page on winter hiking visit their page for more great winter hiking tips: http://www.trails.com/how_54_winter-hiking-tips.html