

Winter memories long forgotten

by Scott_Staats

For most of the year, things operate pretty smoothly in the outdoors. Fish are jumping, birds are singing, elk are bugling. Then all of a sudden three strange things happen -- December, January and February. But these are times when some of the most memorable experiences are sealed in the mind as hard as ice. That is, if you live to tell about it.

Winter offers several activities that you couldn't otherwise experience the rest of the year such as acquiring frostbite, getting snow down the back of your neck, freezing your eyelids shut, sliding off icy roads and making excuses to your buddies why you can't leave the house.

The ultimate outdoor experience has to be winter camping. Many years ago, my older brother and I, along with two of our college buddies, planned a weeklong backpack trip over Christmas vacation. Temperatures hovered well below zero and no less than 20 feet of snow blanketed the ground (okay, maybe it was only two feet but our brains were frostbitten).

After a few miles of trudging, we detected a little doubt (as well as ice) in each other's eyes and wondered if we'd survive the trip, let alone make it back for spring semester. Just then we spotted a natural rock shelter near the trail, pulled in and quickly built a warm fire. There we lived like Neanderthals for four or five days and the fire never went out for the duration. By the end of the trip there wasn't a stick of firewood within a mile of camp.

In more recent times, five of us attempted a winter assault of Mount Washington in New Hampshire's White Mountains. The mountain has the highest recorded wind speed on the planet at 231 mph. Over 100 people have died there from exposure, most of those in the summer. So, using something similar to reverse psychology, we figured if most climbers died in the summer, then why not try it in mid-winter?

We made camp in three feet of snow on a high ridge and started for the summit the next morning. About two miles from our intended goal, we ran into high winds, rain, sleet and snow that forced a retreat. One guy's glasses froze up so bad that an ice ax was nearly required to chip off the ice. Howling winds of 50 to 60 mph made standing almost impossible and we had to call the venture off, not wanting to become five more victims.

The evacuation back down the mountain provided the most excitement. We tied cheap plastic sleds to our packs and by laying them down we had instant bobsleds on an Olympics-like course. To slow our gravity-fed flight down the mountain, we dug in our toes for brakes. At one rest stop I noticed that a side pocket on my pack was open.

“Please don’t let it be the pocket with my wallet and keys,” I said to myself, but apparently Murphy and his laws must have been working overtime that day as those items turned up missing. I started walking back up the mountain, never expecting to find a thing.

In about a hundred feet, I found a comb, then a toothbrush. I wondered how far I’d have to “Hansel and Gretel” my way back up the mountain. Next appeared the toothpaste and even my wallet. By this time, another member of our group came into view and I yelled for him to stop. At that moment, he looked down and saw something shiny in the snow, reached down and pulled up my keys. Murphy was kind that day.

One of the best ways to have a memorable outdoor winter experience is to go ice-fishing. Some may question why anyone would want to leave a perfectly warm house and sit for hours on the ice with the company of hurricane-force winds and snowy blizzards. With ice clinging to the beard and fingers dropping off like leaves in late autumn, you see the tip of the rod start to dance through your freezing eyelids and the world comes down to just you and the fish. What can be more exciting?

One of my most memorable “the-big-one-that-almost-got-away” experiences came while solo ice-fishing. After catching a few respectable plump rainbows, a lunker hit the line. As the fish neared the top of the hole, it spit the hook (as with most big fish I encounter) and I stared blankly at the empty hole.

With all the splashing and thrashing commotion, I thought it turned tail and headed back down the hole. Then to my surprise and mounting delight, I detected movement under the snow near the hole. Between the snow and ice surface was a layer of slush and water. This left me with some hope. My first endeavor was to plug the hole with snow, preventing escape.

The fish and I realized simultaneously that it could transport itself freely over the ice and it began to move. It looked like a mole moving just under the ground, or that worm-like thing in the Tremors movies. To anyone watching, and there were many others on the ice that day, my antics resembled that of a coyote trying to pounce on a mouse. I knew the fish had to be corralled soon or it would swim miles across the ice until finding a hole back into the liquid underworld.

I began compacting the snow, literally making a snow fence around the fish. Then it occurred to me that I hoped it was the fish and not a muskrat or a beaver or I would look even more foolish than I did already. Letting fate decide, I reached under the snow and retrieved an 18-inch rainbow trout. A few other anglers stared wide-eyed. Before I knew it, they began reaching under the snow in hopes of attaining similar results.

Another sure-fire way to freeze things on your body is to go winter steelhead fishing. This activity has to be

only one step up from suicide. Why leave the comforts of home and drive on icy roads only to arrive at a frigid, windblown river with sheets of rain and sleet pummeling your face? On a good day, you may catch one or two fish after standing in butt-numbing water for 4 or 5 hours. Many anglers say it's a good excuse to escape cabin fever and get some fresh air. Gale-force winds and minus 23 degrees will definitely pack some fresh air into your lungs. A word of advice -- if you wear fingerless gloves, you will most likely return home with fingerless hands.

Before we know it, the excitement of winter is over and three more things happen -- June, July and August. Then, as sweat drips into our eyes and the heat stroke is nearly upon us, we glance to the west for any sign of gathering snow clouds.

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