



In search of winter

BACKPACKING INTO A FROZEN LAND

Story and photos by Ed Culhane

I thought I would be warm and cozy that first night sleeping in a snow coffin, deep in a winter wilderness. It didn't work out that way.

Weather conditions, equipment failure and human stupidity combined to make for a cold, miserable night of fitful sleep. The packed snow inside my coffin was hard and glossy smooth and it was, most unfortunately, not level.

Try as I might to wedge myself inside, I kept sliding down and out through the flap over the entrance hole, leaving the bottom half of my body — only partially encased in a sleeping bag with a broken zipper — exposed to the freezing night

air. Gripping the bag from the inside, I'd wiggle my way back into that tight space and pound elbows into the hard, merciless snow in a futile bid to gain traction. Then just as I was falling asleep again, the cursed bag would begin its inevitable downward slide.

My son, David, didn't do much better in his coffin. In fact, it caved in on him.

Setting the scene

It was late February 2016. We were deep

in the Rainbow Lake Wilderness in Bayfield County, having hiked in on snowshoes, carrying heavy packs. We would have three days and two nights without another soul in sight.

Let's call it a learning experience, an experiment in father-son bonding. It was invigorating, after all, and we'd found the challenge we were looking for. There were moments of great beauty, blissful isolation and quiet contentment in that snowy wilderness. And in the end — a shared feeling of elation.

At this point one might understandably conclude this was my first time at this, but I had slept out in the winter three times before. Once was in a double-walled tent, once in a snow coffin and once, long ago without shelter, in a borrowed, minus 20-degree-rated sleeping bag, encased in a waterproof sack



Winter backpacking and camping sharpen your senses. You are enlivened by the awareness of risk and the knowledge you are on your own.

dars, there was little or no snow on the ground in much of Wisconsin. There was still 2 to 3 feet in Bayfield County, but a lodge owner in the area said it had the highest moisture content he had ever experienced.

Weather is the critical component on such trips. Ideally you want deep, soft snow and temperatures between zero and 30 degrees, the optimum being 15 to 25 degrees. Anything above freezing is a problem because of melting snow.

Two days before we left, the previously ideal forecast shifted dramatically. Temperatures that Saturday were expected to rise well above freezing under a bright sun. Determined to push ahead, we rationalized temperatures would be lower during the early and later parts of the day and fall below freezing at night.

We stayed at a motel Thursday night in Iron River and packed our bags. My son was unforgiving. Things that weren't absolutely necessary were disinvited. The fleece liner I'd planned on stuffing inside my sleeping bag was deemed a bulky luxury and left behind, along with other things I had hoped to bring.

When he suggested I leave my little tin coffee pot behind, however, I rebelled. I can put up with a certain amount of privation, but going three days without brewed coffee felt like cruel and unusual punishment. I also insisted on bringing a small, metal wood-burning stove as a backup to my backpacker stove. There is no way you can carry enough water for three days in a frozen landscape. The ability to turn snow into boiling water is critical.

made of breathable nylon.

On previous trips, one member of the expedition always pulled an inexpensive plastic sled piled high with heavier gear and other supplies that didn't fit into backpacks.

David, an experienced backpacker at age 27, had never made a winter trip before. He argued against pulling a sled and I concurred. Sleds were for sissies, we agreed in shared manliness. We would keep gear to a minimum.

Another important difference: my previous trips were all led by one or more experienced winter backpackers. This time I was the leader, though my son, starting at age 2, has always had trouble with this concept.

The first setback was a sudden change in weather. By late February, when we were finally able to coordinate calen-

The packs were ready to go before one last night in a bed. Using a bathroom scale I'd brought along, we weighed them. Each had two 32-ounce water bottles attached (8 pounds of liquid, not counting my whiskey flask). David's pack weighed 53 pounds; mine weighed 45.

Into the wilderness

Early Friday morning, we left the car at a pull-out on a little-traveled road in the Chequamegon National Forest. One of our rules was there had to be enough snow to require snowshoes. There was. Average depth was about 2 1/2 feet, and in areas of drift it was much deeper.

Donning the huge backpack for the first time, I was shocked by the sheer weight of it. Not pulling a sled was cool, but I now realized the subsequently heavier packs could be a limiting factor. More frequent rest breaks would be necessary and the distance we could cover would be less. Still, I'm in half-decent shape for a gray-hair, so I fell into the rhythm of it.

David was my secret weapon. He's quite strong. Once when I fell, with all that weight on my back and my snowshoes splayed out behind me, he hiked back. I squirreled around and bent my knees to provide upward thrust. He crouched down and simply lifted me back on my feet. Clever of me to bring him along.

"This is cool," David observed on one of our breaks. "Not many people go winter camping with their dad."

Then, after further reflection, "You



Eventually the trekkers came upon a small lake encircled by pine-green slopes and set up camp on a north-facing cove.

know, this is the first time I've been in the woods with you when we weren't fishing."

Quest for the perfect site

The key to building a snow shelter is getting an early start, so we wanted to reach our destination while the short winter day still offered a few hours of light.

We hiked down into a valley, circled a large lake, and then set out for something more distant, winding our way up progressively steeper hills and carefully negotiating the downhill runs, which can be difficult on snowshoes. The condition of the snow worked against us. It was heavy with moisture, and on south-facing slopes, the freeze-thaw cycle formed a hard, slippery crust. I used a pair of ski poles to prevent downward slides, bracing myself around sharp corners.

Eventually, a frozen creek bed led us to a small, pretty lake, its surface a blanket of unblemished snow, a pure white disc encircled by pine-green slopes. The tracks we made across the lake were the only evidence of human activity.

This is the wonder of winter backpacking. It all looks so soft and pristine, embracing and nurturing, but at the same time completely indifferent to your comfort or survival. It is a stark and terrible beauty, and it sharpens your senses. You are enlivened by the delicious awareness of risk, the knowledge that you are on your own.

We turned into a north-facing cove, sheltered from sun and wind, where the snow was deep, and climbed onto a natural shelf between the protective arms of two fallen trees — our new home. I dropped the pack and breathed a sigh of relief. I felt light and springy.

Setting up camp

The first order of business was to pack down the area with our snowshoes. Without them, every footfall would have dropped us into a 4-foot hole. We found a log for a bench, flattened out an area for the kitchen and used a shovel to sculpt out a "kitchen counter." We then beat down paths to the sleeping area and, in another direction, to the designated bathroom. After a couple of hours, the kitchen floor and paths became hard enough to walk on without snowshoes. Taking them off brought a second wave of relief.

People shiver when I tell them I'm camping out in winter, but staying warm is generally not a problem. Layers of high-tech materials preserve body



David placed branches to form the roof of his snow coffin. Next came a tarp, then a layer of snow.



Even careful planning and unforgiving discipline meant the author's pack weighed in at 45 pounds. He used ski poles to prevent downward slides on steep slopes.

heat and wick away moisture. The key is in regulating movement. Sweat is the enemy, so if moving too fast or exerting yourself too hard causes you to perspire, simply slow it down. If inactivity makes you feel cold, get moving and you'll warm up in no time. There are always tasks at hand, such as building a sleeping shelter.

There are various kinds of snow shelters. A quinzee, for instance, is formed by creating a huge mound of snow, waiting hours for it to solidify and then hollowing it out from the inside. These are wonderful but take too long to build, and the excavator ends up soaking wet.

A snow coffin can be built quickly from the outside. Start by digging into a slope, excavating a rectangular depression in the shape of a coffin with enough extra room for rolling over on your side and other night movements. The excavated snow is used to build up the three sides of the elongated U-shaped hole, a few feet longer than your height. Place branches across the top for support and spread a thin plastic painter's tarp over them, securing it along the edges with packed snow. Shovel a good layer of snow over all of this and in a couple of hours it hardens into a sturdy cover.

Ideally, the coffin floor is a few feet above ground level. The entrance area, now covered by some kind of flap or backpack, is dug closer to the ground, with side walls. You crawl into this lower area and then up and into the coffin. The lower area becomes a "cold sink" and whatever warmth your body generates gathers in the elevated coffin while colder air sinks into the lower entrance cavity.

In our case, David built sturdy coffins, but they were a bit too large and I'd forgotten to tell him about the cold sink. Wider than necessary, they required longer sticks for the roofing with inside space too wide to be efficiently heated by our bodies.

The biggest problem was the snow, so heavy with moisture it bordered on slush, and too heavy for the thin plastic tarps that took up minuscule space in the packs.

"It's like half-dried concrete," David observed.

The problem with my coffin was the barely noticeable but wickedly effective downward slope. In David's, the heavy snow cracked a supporting branch and a basketball-sized area of snow-filled plastic caved in where his head needed to rest. He managed to pound it into a smaller bulge and arrange some kind



David chose a high tree branch to hoist food and other sweet-smelling supplies out of reach of bears and other nocturnal marauders.

of support, but it condensed the moisture of his breath into cold water that dripped on him all night. (Hint: when designing a snow coffin, create a bit of an arch above so moisture rolls down the sides.)

The evening's entertainment was watching David prepare to hoist our food and anything sweet-smelling, such as toothpaste, high above the ground where it would be inaccessible to bears and other nocturnal marauders. He chose a high tree branch some distance from camp and using a stainless steel thermos for weight on one end of a long line, made a dozen attempts before successfully throwing it over the branch.

That first evening, taking a few "medicinal" sips from the whiskey flask, we were rewarded by a dazzling night sky, thick with bright stars.

This is another gift for those who seek winter wilderness. Stars are brighter,

more distinct. Freezing air is dry and crisp, more transparent. And in winter, the northern hemisphere is pointed away from the light pollution created by the Milky Way. Ask any die-hard sky watcher and they'll tell you — winter nights are better, and when far removed from city lights, they are fantastic.

The silence was so profound it was almost a presence. We fired up the tiny wood stove and watched the dancing flames. It was one of those moments when you felt you were in exactly the right place.

"It's hard to explain," David said. "You're cradled in the great mother's arms out here. It's all good, a little spot of safety and warmth in a huge frozen wilderness."

As if in affirmation, the resonant call of a barred owl rang across the night sky.

Later, in our inadequate shelters, encased in inadequate sleeping bags, we'd feel less wonderful about things, but you take your joys as they come.

A new day brings new challenges

We woke with the sun, refreshed ourselves with coffee and breakfast, and then, free of backpacks, went on a snowshoe hike to explore our new world. I had a topographic map of the Rainbow Wilderness, and using compasses and various landmarks, we made a wide loop that would bring us back to camp.

The sun was a burner and soon we were peeling off layers. It felt great to be so lightly dressed and after a night of shivering, to bask in solar heat, but it soon became a problem. Winter was melting before our eyes. The snow became soft and sticky, pulling at our snowshoes like wet glue.

Back in camp, mercifully shaded by an arc of tall pines to the south, we did what we could to improve the snow shelters. The floor of my coffin was carved level. I spent a frustrating hour trying to get the zipper on my bag to work, while inventing new curses as I went along.

We had another great dinner. Then, after turning a great deal of snow into boiling water and warming our food, my backpacker stove inexplicably ceased to work.

Conditions were quickly shifting. The wind had picked up, bringing in clouds to hide the stars, and temperatures fell below freezing. I tried to fix the stove, but my fingers became clumsy with the cold and I gave up. Instead, we gathered a small mountain of twigs for morning fuel.

We woke to howling winds and squall-

ing snow. I had endured another night of fitful sleep, waking often and feeling chilled. I was in no danger of frostbite. From a survival standpoint, my situation was more than adequate, but it wasn't the warm comfort I'd enjoyed on earlier adventures.

David had slept miserably under dripping condensation. His clothes were no longer completely dry and he was a bit cranky.

Despite the wind and cold hands, we managed to start a fire in the tiny wood stove. By burning enough twigs to fill a bushel basket, we transformed a great deal of snow into a quart of boiling water, brewing enough hot coffee to fill our

thermos bottles and warm our hands in the process. We wholeheartedly agreed this was the best coffee ever brewed in the history of mankind, and clear evidence of our ninja wilderness skills.

We bagged the idea of breakfast, packed rapidly and disassembled the snow coffins, retrieving the torn and ripped tarps as garbage. We policed the site to make sure we left nothing behind. New snow was already erasing evidence of our stay.

By midday we were in the car and soon seated at the Delta Diner, where the staff was entertained by the sheer volume of food David consumed.

We were already making plans for next winter's expedition, debating ways to

improve sleeping conditions. One thing was certain: I was going to purchase a seriously good sleeping bag, rated for sub-zero weather.

"I want to do three nights," David said. "We had enough food. I want to go in the deep winter, when it's cold and there's a ton of snow. We need to plan better and make more adversity for ourselves."

"More adversity?"

"Well, if it's not hard, it's not fun," he said, "but if it's too hard, it sucks."

Somewhere in the middle, we agreed, was the sweet spot. 

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>>> TIPS FOR SUCCESS

- **A WORD ABOUT FIRES** – Different wilderness areas have different rules, but the general idea is to “leave no trace.” A campfire is always allowed in an emergency, but can certainly leave a trace depending on how you manage it. Also, a campfire is a lot of work and of limited benefit since it only provides warmth if you stand near it. The question of fire depends on the situation and your own judgment. On my first winter expedition, one of us built a small breakfast fire which was most welcome. On subsequent trips, we got along fine without it.

A small wood-burning camping stove is an alternative. Some have hinged sides for compact storage. Again, the benefit is muted by the stove's insatiable appetite for twigs. To keep the fire going requires a prodigious pile of them. Still, the flames add a lovely ambience to the campsite and are good for hand warming.

- **BRING FIRE STARTER MATERIALS** – Cotton balls rubbed with petroleum jelly and stuffed into a film canister will burn like crazy. There are also many commercial options, like “fire jelly.” Squeeze some on the end of a long stick for an instant torch, excellent for reigniting kindling. Also, bring a saw, axe or cutting wire for building an emergency fire.
- **EAT “LIGHT”** – Foil packages of dehydrated backpacker meals found in outdoor stores are amazingly tasty but also quite expensive. In planning meals, the goal is to limit weight and volume. Soup mixes in paper packets are great. Discard the box at home and write the instructions on the packet with a permanent marker. We carried two dozen flour tortillas, vacuum-sealed pouches of tuna, salmon and chicken, and two packages of grated cheese. Heat a tortilla in a pan, cover half with ingredients and fold it over, pressing down on the sides to seal it all up with melted cheese. Yummy!

Bring a thin, sturdy platform like a cutting board, on which to place your stove so it doesn't melt into the packed snow “kitchen counter!”

If you plan well, there is nothing inherently dangerous about winter backpacking. Being prepared for emergencies is just part of a good plan.



Campfires “leave a trace” when wilderness camping. Good alternatives are backpacker stoves that burn a variety of fuel.