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Eye on the Environment: Staying Alive and Off the Couch in Winter

By Anne Dahl for The Seeley-Swan Pathfinder

How do people survive outdoors in the mountains during winter? They go prepared. But how prepared are we really when we set out on skis, snowshoes or snowmobiles? I've taken many missteps over the years.

I returned to my car a few weeks ago wet from head to toe after skiing for a couple of hours. I had been exercising hard, so my sweat had drenched me from the inside out. And the large wet snowflakes falling all afternoon had soaked me from the outside in. I was able to stay warm as long as I kept moving and the air temperature didn't drop. I had dry clothes in my car for the drive home. But I would have died in the night if I hadn't made it back to the car; my pack was virtually empty of survival gear.

Several years ago I broke a ski returning from Glacier Slough. I discovered I could ski on one ski. But it was tiring. Every time I accidentally stepped down on my ski-less boot my foot sunk into the snow and knocked me off balance. Luckily the trail wasn't steep, the snow wasn't deep, and the car was only a mile or two away.

At the time, I owned a plastic ski tip designed for attaching to the front end of a broken ski. But I hadn't brought it with me. And if I had packed it along, it wouldn't have helped because my ski broke underneath my binding. There was no place left on the front of the ski to attach the plastic tip. So what should I bring and what should I leave home?

What if I were seven miles from the car, somewhere in the Mission Mountains during a wet snowstorm, when my ski broke? The terrain up there is steeper and the snow is deeper. Instead of balancing precariously on one ski, I would fall often and burn a lot of calories extricating myself from the snow. I would be drenched and exhausted from the effort. I probably would spend the night out.

I still own that plastic ski tip as an artifact. It doesn't fit the newer, fatter skis we use these days. The new skis are less likely to break. But what if I broke my binding or my leg?

Many years ago a friend broke her leg in several places skiing in the Colorado backcountry. Her companion left her to go for help. At dark she was dragging herself across an open slope, preparing to spend the night in the thick forest nearby where the night air would be warmer, when rescue crews arrived. She was lucky to be near a ski resort where a rescue effort could be quickly launched.

We don't have a ski area nearby with trained and outfitted rescue crews on standby. If we get hurt in the mountains, our survival on an unintended night out will be up to us: ourselves and our companions. So what do we collectively carry in our packs and in the compartments under the seats of our snowmobiles to stay alive and come home with all our toes?

The answer varies depending on how far from home we plan to travel and how much weight we can reasonably carry. My minimum list for ski trips of a couple miles includes duct tape for mending broken things, knife, lighter, light wool sweater to put on next to my skin when the polypropylene underwear is soaked, rain pants, rain jacket, Clif Bars and garbage bags. Yet I hope I never sleep in those garbage bags.

On longer trips the list includes a high energy lunch, down parka, headlamp, lightweight shovel, probe pole and an avalanche beacon (which I haven't bought yet but know I need). I own a bivvy sack that would be far superior to garbage bags for sleeping out. But I seldom carry it. I should also carry an insulated sleeping pad to separate me from the snow if I have to spend the night out. Weight is the issue.

How many snowmobilers carry snowshoes or skis? When sledders travel in packs they can help each other. But we all know people who like to snowmobile alone. When my old snowmobile still ran, I carried skis because it would often break down or get stuck. One time I skied all the way home to get a shovel to dig my sled out. It was one of those bottomless snow days. I had to dig to the ground to get traction. Why didn't I carry the little shovel with me in the first place?

I've been reading books on survival. One thing I've learned you must pack along on every winter trip is the right attitude. We are destructible. Leave arrogance at home. Avoid trouble. If you are lost or injured don't expect to be rescued. Take an avalanche refresher course every few years. Your friends' lives may depend on it.

If you are smart enough to travel with friends, put your minds together, use your collective ingenuity and make sure everyone gets home safely. The books say survivors think moment to moment. They don't feel sorry for themselves or panic when they are in trouble. At least they get past those emotions in a hurry so they can focus on their own rescue one step at a time.

That said there are a lot of things we should all know before we set out into our beautiful snowy mountains: Don't wear cotton. Dress in layers. Stay dry. Stay together. Bring high energy food. Drink water.

Know how to build a snow cave. Recognize avalanche conditions and avoid them. Watch the avalanche and weather reports. Be alert to changing conditions. Bring extra hats and gloves. Trees are hard if you hit them. Wear your helmet.

Above all avoid the most common danger: staying home and growing weak on the couch. There is shiny bright winter world out there for all who go prepared.