



*Waking in a Winter Wonderland*

*No Mosquitoes!*

# NO CROWDS. NO NOISE. NO HEAT.

## Winter camping offers a unique adventure

by Jim Muller

It was cold, about 19 degrees, and four of us—myself, my nephew Mark Hay, and friends Jay Katonica and Scott Handy—were bushwhacking up Warren County’s Mount Blue on a slippery, snow-covered slope. Our canine escort, Maddux, an immense German shepherd/husky cross, bounded ahead with enviable ease as the rest of us struggled on the slick footing.

As a founding member of **wintercampers.com**, with more than 30 winter camping trips logged, I’m often asked “Why go winter camping?” To the uninitiated, the concept of going camping in the wintertime conjures up images of sitting huddled and shivering, with icicles freezing on the end of one’s nose.

solitude and discovery. Another advantage is that freezing temperatures allow you to explore areas that are too wet or overgrown to traverse during other seasons. In fact, these are often ideal destinations for winter camping. A conservation benefit of winter camping is the durable surface provided by snow that protects heavily used trails and campsites.

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Our plan was to have lunch at the summit, then hike down and spend an overnight at the lean-to on the western shore of Lizard Pond. Earlier, donning snowshoes we crossed frozen Garnet Lake, then followed the mile-long trail leading to Lizard Pond on the southwest shore. We left the Lizard Pond trail where the swamps in the pond’s valley first become visible, and headed up the mountain.

When we stopped on a ledge to rest and soak in a breathtaking view of Garnet Lake and Lizard Pond, I thought about the advantages of winter camping, such as how that view would be obscured by vegetation in other seasons. I also reflected on the fact that there were no crowds, no noise, nothing to disturb the sense of

I got hooked on winter camping many years ago when my nephew challenged me—then an experienced three-season camper—to a January weekend in the Siamese Ponds Wilderness. I loved the feeling of independence and confidence in my survival skills inspired by that winter camping trip.

Mount Blue, which rises from a solid ledge deep in Garnet Lake to a height of 2,940 feet, is part of the Wilcox Lake Wild Forest, a popular winter recreation area in the southeastern corner of the Adirondack Park. But snowshoeing on a blanket of fresh snow this winter day, it seemed like virgin territory, with no other people and no traces of snowshoe or ski tracks. There weren’t any bears or varmints, and no black flies or mosquitoes.



Winter camping presents unique challenges—and rewards.

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But winter camping is not for everyone. The days are short, the nights cold and long. It's an activity that requires planning and preparation, physical stamina, the right equipment, an adventuresome spirit and a positive mental attitude. In the winter, the margin for mistakes is small, with discomfort or worse as the penalty. And truth be told, crawling out of a cozy sleeping bag on a freezing morning to melt snow for coffee is not most people's idea of a dream vacation.

A snug sleeping bag was hours away as we continued our trek, with treeless patches on the southeastern side of the mountain—the result of a 1908 fire—affording us splendid vistas. Taking advantage of these open areas, ledges

and false summits, one can enjoy 270 degree perspectives of Crane Mountain, Lizard Pond, Bearpen Peak, Baldhead Mountain and Moose Mountain. To the west are Georgia Mountain, Harrington Mountain, New Lake Mountain and Wilcox Mountain.

With these glimpses of the impressive panorama providing inspiration, we scrambled onward and upward. Although Mark, who had planned the trip, touted the hike as “relatively easy,” we found out later that DEC's Wilcox Lake Wild Forest Draft Unit Management Plan characterizes it as offering “moderately difficult bushwhacking opportunities to adventuresome hikers and snowshoers.”

This proved an apt description. For me, it was extra tricky since hip

replacement surgery had left my balance and leg strength somewhat less than desired. Fortunately, Jay had packed trekking poles, which he graciously loaned me for the bushwhack up and down Mount Blue. Needless to say, they were a great advantage and I purchased my own trekking poles after the trip.

At the peak, we posed for the requisite group photograph and enjoyed a quick snack while the wind blew in increasingly dark cloud cover. Then it was time to head back down Mount Blue. If the way up was steep and slippery, the way down was steeper and slipperier. Fortunately, no one got hurt as we tumbled and slid our way down the mountain. We hiked the remainder of the trail along Lizard Pond to spend the night at the lean-to on the western shore.

Shelter from the cold: in this case, the Lizard Pond lean-to.



James Muller



Carl Heilmann II

## Getting Started Winter Camping

The following are just a few tips for getting started winter camping. For a complete list of the gear you'll need and things you should be aware of, check out [wintercampers.com](http://wintercampers.com).

❖ **Winter camping can be gear-intensive.** Snowshoes, sleeping bags, down booties, and extra clothing can be expensive—especially if they are only used once. If you can't borrow gear the first time, improvise; for example, use two summer sleeping bags instead of an expensive down winter bag.

❖ **When planning a trip, be realistic and remember that making the trip enjoyable should be your primary goal.** During winter, travel will be much slower than in the summer, so reduce your mileage goal by 50% to 60% and don't worry if you fall short of the intended destination.

❖ **Start first by taking an extended day hike and preparing a meal.** It's a great way to introduce you to winter camping skills without worrying about shelters and sleeping overnight in cold temperatures.

❖ **Join experienced friends and/or hiking organizations** such as a local Adirondack Mountain Club chapter ([www.ADK.org](http://www.ADK.org)) to learn the ropes. You can use these contacts as sources for your initial gear.

❖ **Safety first!** Keep in mind that weather can change quickly—so be prepared. Bring plenty of warm clothing (no cotton) and dress in layers. Warm hats, mittens, boots and jackets are a must. Bring ice picks if crossing any frozen waterbody. They allow you to grip onto the top ice if you fall through, and can save your life. Likewise, crampons are handy on icy slopes. Also, be sure to let someone know exactly where you are going, and how long you'll be gone.

*Enter the world of outdoor enthusiasts who would rather battle sub-zero temperatures than mosquitoes. Wintercampers.com chronicles their travels with logs and photos of their winter camping trips. The website has both serious advice such as winter camping recommendations, gear reviews, and a list of essential items, as well as a lighter side with a camping application and a funny winter camping poem. Informative and humorous, you'll be motivated either for an adventure or a good laugh.*

Once we settled in at the lean-to, we boiled water for hot drinks and wolfed down reconstituted freeze-dried meals. In other situations, what passes for food in these highly processed packages would be turned back to the kitchen. However, the salty, hot food tasted great to four tired, wet and cold winter campers. Maddux had to content himself with dry dog food.

Afterward we sat around a fire and talked until bedtime as flurries floated down. This is one of the best parts of winter camping. Since it is dark early, there is lots of time to chat, laugh and discuss future trips. Not only does a campfire help pass the time during the long nights, but the sense of camaraderie is enhanced as the night deepens around a campfire circle. As our fire dwindled, we settled into warm sleeping bags and took advantage of the extra darkness to log a solid night's sleep.

In the morning, we awoke to the sun illuminating the back side of Mount Blue across Lizard Pond. Mark was the first to arise while the rest of us lingered in our warm sleeping bags and offered breakfast ideas. Despite our imaginative suggestions, Mark gave us hot water, which we used to make a simple breakfast of hot oatmeal washed down by coffee and hot chocolate.

Following this quick breakfast, we snowshoed out the Lizard Pond trail to our cars and searched for a convenient diner for a well-earned second breakfast.

**Jim Muller** has been backpacking since the 1960s. He lives in Holland Patent (Oneida Co.) and frequently camps in the winter. During the other three seasons, he canoes and camps with family and friends.

Photos in this article were taken from [www.wintercampers.com](http://www.wintercampers.com).



James Muller

In winter, you don't need a motorboat to cross a lake.