

Making the Most of the Winter Season

by Photographer Raymond Klass



Winter is perhaps one of the most challenging seasons for nature photographers. It can be both physically and mentally demanding. Cold temperatures and a lack of greenery can deter us from exploring what has the potential to be one of the most rewarding times to be creative with your photography. In this article, we'll explore some tips and techniques for making the most out of the winter by being prepared for the conditions.

Before you ever step outside with your camera, being prepared for the weather conditions is just as important as bringing the right camera equipment with you. I find that if I am physically uncomfortable – cold, wet, tired - my creativity suffers. I am more likely just to “accept” a mediocre image rather than really working a scene to get the most of the elements available.

Clothing

Being comfortable in the winter starts with basic warmth. Today's fabrics provide an amazing amount of comfort and warmth. One of the best secrets is to wear a wicking shirt instead of a cotton tee-shirt. These special fabrics can be found in clothing made by several manufacturers like L.L. Bean, The North

Face, Marmut and others, and can usually be found at a local camping, outdoor, or ski shop. These garments keep moisture away from your skin while keeping you warm.

For temperatures below freezing, I often find that a good pair of snow or ski pants help both to keep warmth in, and should you need to kneel in snow or ice, they keep your pants dry. They also protect against any wind and act as a good insulating layer. These can be found at an outdoor or ski shop, look for ones featuring Goretex®, though they are often expensive, a good pair will last many years.



If you're going to be outside for an extended period of time, you might want to think about getting a pair of insulated boots. I used to wear my hiking boots with a second pair of socks, but inevitably my feet would be feeling cold after a short while. I've now switched to a pair of insulated L.L. Bean boots, and my feet are warm and comfortable for hours.

Lastly, a good hat, gloves and a warm jacket go a long way. My suggestion here is to find a local ski shop and try on several pairs of gloves, looking for which ones combine the most warmth with the best fit for using your camera equipment. To this end, I have several pairs of gloves, ones that work well above freezing, those that work well a bit colder, and ultimately a pair of mittens for when the mercury really sinks low. Typically the warmer the glove, the less mobile your fingers are, so think about what temperatures you'll likely face, and then choose your glove accordingly. If you'll be out in extreme conditions, when the mercury might be well below zero Fahrenheit, you should consider purchasing a balaclava (an insulated head and neck warmer sometimes with a built in neoprene facemask), and a pair of clear ski goggles. At -20 or -30 Fahrenheit, it can take only a few minutes to develop frostbite on exposed skin, so these extra bits of clothing are really a must.

One of the most important things to remember when photographing in the cold is that it is very important not to begin sweating. While this may be our body's natural reaction to a tough hike or strenuous climb, being wet in a cold environment is never a good thing. For this reason, make sure you wear layered clothing,

and remove layers if you feel that you would otherwise begin to sweat. While hiking through a steep section of powder it is not uncommon for me to take off my jacket as the body begins to generate its own heat. Just remember that after you get where you're going, your body will quickly get cold if you don't put the layers back on.

Getting Around

Depending on where you live, winter can mean a lot of different things. Here in the Northeast, we have weather varying from just plain cold, to deep snow, or slick ice. There are tactics for effectively and safely getting around in all of these conditions.

Cold temperatures are often paired with one of two conditions, and sometimes both at once – ice and snow. For the occasional ice patch, most outdoor stores sell studded, slip-on grippers that slide over your boots and provide good traction on level ice, like a frozen stream or lake bed. If you'll need to be maneuvering through steep or awkward terrain, more aggressive steel spikes called crampons are available. These



come in a variety of flavors, from those made for walking to those made for ice climbing, and can be found at outdoor and climbing shops. They also strap onto your boot and can be removed when you've navigated through the icy terrain.

If you'll likely be walking through snow, you may want to consider snowshoes. These wide platforms allow your feet to stay above deep snow, and many also come with spikes to help should there be ice beneath the snow, or between patches of snow. If you'll be traveling by snowshoe, one option is to take a sled, and instead of carrying your camera bag, simply pull the sled along behind you. You can even take a break and go sledding should you find a hill.

Another option, when there's good snow on the ground, is to use a pair of cross-country skis. These require a little more skill and experience than the crampons or snowshoes, but they can also be faster and a great workout in addition to an effective means of travel.

The Photographic Equipment

One of the biggest issues with cold involves your camera batteries. As we've become increasingly digital, we seem to have more and more batteries. When these little cells get cold, they can lose some or all of their power. One trick is to keep a spare pair of batteries in an inner pocket – this way they will stay warm from the heat off your body. Should the batteries in the camera die, just replace them with the spare set, and then put the "dead" set in the pocket the spares came out of. Often when these cold batteries reheat, they regain much of their charge.

Another issue with equipment can be the temperature extremes between your



heated home, and the great outdoors. Make sure that when you take your equipment in after a long day of shooting to leave your camera closed until the equipment has had time to properly acclimate to the new environment. The problem with opening your bag too soon is that condensation will form on your cold lenses and camera bodies. Whatever you do, don't take the lens off your camera body – this can cause condensation on the camera's sensor. By keeping your equipment in your camera bag, you are providing a barrier through which the equipment slowly warms, preventing condensation.

One other problem I experienced while photographing in Northern Minnesota in the winter is that if your tripod has any moisture on it, this can freeze in the leg locks of the tripod. This occurred one day when I brought my tripod in covered with snow, let it warm overnight, and then took it out in the morning. After a half hour of walking, the moisture from the melted snow re-froze in the leg locks, and I had to take 20 minutes to warm the legs up inside my jacket before I could open the tripod. Make sure if your tripod has been in the snow to open the legs fully in the morning before you head out, and wipe off any moisture with a clean, dry towel.

Most new equipment is built for a wide range of conditions, and as long as you're careful to minimize the impact, you should have no problem photographing in the winter. Though there are some unique challenges, this season can be a great time of photographic creativity and adventure. By being properly prepared, it's possible to be warm and comfortable regardless of the conditions you might face. Next month, we'll talk about some of the creative ways to approach photographing winter scenes.

