

Winter walking



Winter in the hills can be magical, but you need to be prepared. Paul Kellagher has some top tips to improve your winter walking skills.



If you enjoy hillwalking you will probably want to extend your pastime all year round. But when snow and ice cover the mountains it can be both exhilarating and daunting, all in one. True winter conditions in Ireland are often short-lived, but conditions can and do occur when you will need to extend your repertoire of skills to stay safe. If you wish to venture further afield to walk in the Scottish Highlands, the lake district, or north Wales, learning some new skills can open up a winter wonderland.



The Mountains in Winter

In Scotland, Winter conditions can often prevail for more than 6 months of the year. Snow will cover tracks and Cairns making proficient navigation skills a necessity. Some Munros will take you along well defined ridges, but peaks like Ben Machdui in the heart of the Cairngorm Plateau require an ability to navigate for many kilometres often in limited visibility with few reference points. Even a light wind can quickly whip up spindrift, creating “White Out” Conditions. Although the advent of GPS has undoubtedly simplified navigation, there has been multiple reported difficulties with phone Apps pertaining to battery life. The basic skills of navigation with a Map and Compass should not be overlooked and should be well honed.

Cairn Mor Dearg, Scotland in stunning conditions

If you are planning to head for the hills this winter, practice your navigation skills, walking on a bearing, and measuring distance using timing and pacing. Get onto unfamiliar and untracked ground in poor visibility or at night. A good headtorch is an essential investment as winter days can be short and travel slower than anticipated due to conditions underfoot. If you are unsure of these skills booking on a Mountain Skills course will help you master the basics.

Boots and Crampons

It is often quoted the Inuit peoples have more than 50 words for snow.

Whilst the reality is not quite the case, snow is an ever-changing entity. As walkers, these variations will greatly impact our travel plans, soft deep snow can be quickly exhausting but at the opposite end of the spectrum hard névé which can turn an innocent summer slope into one where an uncontrolled slide can have lethal consequences. Névé is snow that has partially melted and has been subjected to refreezing. Much emphasis is often placed on the ability to self-arrest, the ice axe break, but the real trick is not to slip in the first place.

Starting at the feet boots are the one thing that you are likely to need to upgrade if you are beginning to pursue winter hillwalking. Boots need to be stiff enough to kick solid steps in harder snow, keep feet warm and support a crampon. Several years ago, New Zealand Mountain Guide Brian Hall established a compatibility system for boots and Crampons. Most retailers will now refer to this in their specifications, boots are rated from B0 (a flexible summer walking boot that will not accept a crampon) to b3 (a fully rigid boot designed for winter climbing) Crampons C1 (walking) to C3, rigid climbing. Although a B1 boot will hold a flexible walking crampon such as a Grivel G10, care should be taken to match the combination carefully. A stiffer B2 boot and corresponding C2 crampon will provide a more stable platform, particularly on steeper ground. Many of the Scottish based outdoor retailers will hire boots and crampons if this is your first trip. Learning to walk in stiff boots and crampons is something that takes time, in particular learn how to walk up, down and across slopes, whilst not tripping or spiking your own leg is well spent time. Also, practice moving without crampons kicking steps into the snow with your boots. This is where a B2 boot excels allowing you to kick firm platforms into surprisingly hard snow.

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*Irish wind blown N  v   on Cuilcagh Mountain.
Crampons are essential for safe travel when it's this hard.*



Descending off Ben Nevis towards Cairn Mor Dearg in winter. here, a simple slip will almost certainly have fatal consequences.

Clothing

Most hillwalkers will already have suitable clothing for Winter walking. A good waterproof jacket with a decent hood is a must, but over trousers will be easier to put on and take off if they have a full leg zip, particularly if you are wearing crampons. Gaiters are a winter essential helping to keep snow, mud, and water out of your boots. Clothing systems should be based on a layering principle, although your focus will be on keeping warm, equally avoid the peril of overheating. Apart from sapping energy, overheating will quickly result in sweat damp clothes which will chill you later. I generally start my day at the car feeling cold, it soon passes with movement.

Ice Axe

A good ice axe is an essential winter companion, length is a very personal choice with a 60cm shaft often being suggested as ideal for walking. I prefer shorter at around 50cm, finding it less unwieldy on steeper ground. Your axe is used as support, for cutting steps in steeper ground, arresting a small slip and as a last resort as a break to stop a slip becoming a serious slide. There is still some debate about the use of a wrist leash, although first instinct suggests this as being a good idea, you will be constantly swapping your axe to your uphill hand. Slipping your wrist in and out becomes a faff and you will often see walkers with the leash flailing about. This quickly becomes a serious trip hazard. Most winter mountaineers now prefer no leash, learn to never drop your axe.



The author navigating in rapidly deteriorating conditions on Cuilcagh. Photo: Helen Lawless

My own preference is to carry a quickly detachable leash in the top of my rucksack that I can attach if I find myself on very steep ground. A word of caution on ski poles, whilst a fantastic bit of kit, ski poles can lead to a false sense of security on steeper ground. Avoid using the wrist loops on poles, if they snag between rocks the loop only compounds the risk of injury to the wrist or causing a fall. Larger snow baskets are a must for winter walking. Your axe should be always kept accessible and poles packed away before you find yourself teetering at the top of a long run out. One simple trick is to slide your axe between your shoulder blades and rucksack, this leaves it within easy reach.

Winter Weather and Avalanches

Weather forecasting has greatly improved in my lifetime and allowed us to access updated forecasts for specific areas. The excellent site <http://www.mwis.org.uk/> continues to provide daily forecasts for the majority of mountain areas in the UK. Whilst the Scottish Avalanche Information service provides forecasts in Scotland throughout the winter season <http://www.sais.gov.uk/>.

Following the weather and avalanche forecasts well in advance of your trip will help you understand how conditions change and weather impacts on avalanche risk. In Scotland, the primary type of avalanche is caused by a build-up of windslab. Windslab occurs when the wind, a regular feature in the mountains, transports snow, depositing it in layers, sometimes to a depth of several metres. Weaknesses within the snowpack layers create the conditions for an avalanche to occur.



Sperrin's Avalanche Photo Aaron Castles

The triggering factor is often additional loading, with a single walker often making the difference. It's worth remembering avalanches most frequently occur on angles between 30 and 45 degrees, the sort of place you just might be! Attending an avalanche information course is highly recommended. It's also important to remember that the majority of avalanche related deaths in Scotland are not as a result of burial, but being swept over or through rocks and cliffs. Even a small slide can take you off your feet.



Group learning skills on a winter mountaineering course.

Next steps.

I have only touched on some of the essentials in this short article. Gaining further skills and knowledge opens a whole new perspective to hillwalking and standing on a clear summit in winter looking across miles of mountains is a sight rarely forgotten. If you don't have experienced friends to take you on your first steps, consider joining a course. Mountaineering Ireland runs a Winter meet each February in Scotland with a range of skills courses on offer to members. If you are thinking of joining another course look for the Association of Mountaineering Instructors Logo, <http://www.mountaintraining.org/associations/ami/about-ami>

Members advertising winter courses will be trained and assessed to a high standard in a range of winter mountain skills.

Further information

Winter Skills. Mountain Leader Training Handbooks- Vol 3. Cunningham, A. and Fyffe, A. ISBN 0-9541511-3-5.
BMC Winter essentials video: <https://www.thebmc.co.uk/winter-essentials-dvd>
<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Chance-Million-Scottish-Avalanches/dp/0907521592>

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Paul Kellagher is the current president of Mountaineering Ireland (As of Dec 2020). He is a Qualified Mountaineering Instructor, holds the Mountain Instructors Award, Winter Mountain leader award and has completed WMCI Training.

The hills in Winter are his favourite mountaineering experience. Paul has walked and climbed in Scotland and the Alps for 25 years.

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