

## Winter Camping Goes Retro

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A dogsled ferries the author deep into the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness in Minnesota. Photo credit: Colin Clark

**Swearing off high-tech synthetics for cotton, canvas, and a fat stove, a growing cult of “snow walkers” harks back to an era of cold-weather fun — and keeps plenty warm.**

By **Gustave Axelson**

Photographs by **Colin Clark**

Our crew of three scurried to stash three growlers of India pale ale into two dogsleds already bulging with gear. My sled bucked forward as I wedged one of them between duffel bags — the dogs were about to depart whether we were ready or not. As soon as the lead musher stepped aboard, the dogs dashed us away from the chaos of our staging area in the outfitter’s parking lot and the only sound was the *shush*-ing of sled runners on fresh snow. Soon we had crossed the nonmotorized threshold into the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, where the trail emptied out into a wide-open 17,000-acre ice-covered lake. The wind froze my eyelashes as I nuzzled deeper into the hood of my anorak.

We were embarking on a four-day winter camping trip into the boreal heart of the Boundary Waters. But instead of the finest high-tech Gore-Tex parkas and windproof mountaineering tents, we were outfitted with technology from a century gone. I was here to try out a new style of winter camping, which is really an old style of winter camping called snow walking.

The newer tradition can be traced back to post–World War II, when army surplus gear was abundant and camping became a popular form of recreation in the U.S. In 1968, Minnesota outdoorsman Calvin Rutstrum even published a book called *Paradise Below Zero*, admonishing

Americans who stayed indoors in winter. His book included instruction on camping with a wood stove and canvas tent, as snow walkers eschew anything synthetic in favor of tents and clothing made entirely of natural fibers such as wool and cotton. They also resist ultralight fanaticism while embracing old-school comfort.

As the name implies, snow walking typically involves man-powered travel via snowshoes or skis, but because we had only a few days, we opted for a dogsled ferry to get us 15 miles deep into the wilderness (and prime lake-trout waters) more quickly.

Finally, our dogsled train crossed the lake and funneled through an overland portage on Minnesota's international boundary line. This would be the end of the road for me, my fishing guide Mike Prom — the

only experienced snow walker among us — and photographer Colin Clark. Within minutes of disembarking and unloading our gear, we saw the sleds fading in the distance. It was 4 pm, about 90 minutes until sunset, and the temperature was dropping. The windchill was -15 and that was probably the high temperature for the day. That night, when I crawled into my sleeping bag, temps dropped to 40 below. I scrounged for a wool sweater to add layers, the musher's last words ringing in my ears: "See ya in three days!"

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"It's about enjoying winter, not enduring it," explained Michael Olker, a snowwalking veteran who rented us our toboggans. "Winter is the most magical time to be in the North Woods. No people, no bugs — just deep solitude and deep snow." Having lived in Minnesota myself for 10 years, I had heard of snow walking but initially judged it to be the realm of fur-trader reenactors, the *Dungeons & Dragons* geeks of the outdoors. But I'd also been on a handful of "high tech" winter camping trips, and all I could really remember about them was lying awake all night in the bitter cold and all my gear freezing solid. The maximalist approach of snow walking made it sound downright inviting.

"It's still kind of a cultish thing, but we're getting bigger," says Kevin Kinney, owner of Empire Canvas Works, a clothing manufacturer that specializes in canvas and wool apparel for snow walkers. "It's not about being retro; it's about comfort. These natural fibers that were used 150 years ago keep you warmer than today's high-tech stuff."

We were losing light fast, so we raced to get our tent up. I admired Prom's pick of a campsite: Expansive views to the eastern outlet of the bay and across the southern sky provided maximum exposure to the sun. When we finished, Prom climbed inside and dug a pit down to the lake ice near the entrance. This is where the stove would sit, atop the two-foot-thick floor of ice that separated us from the frigid lake water below. Although there was no chance of the ice breaking or melting through, Prom did occasionally have to slide small wooden shims under the stove's legs as the ice melted unevenly beneath them. The cold air inside the tent would sink, get warmed up by the stove, rise, and circulate back to our elevated cots.

Duane Lottig is the one-man operation behind Snowtrekker Tents, headquartered in a garage behind his cabin in the northern Wisconsin woods. Lottig started winter camping more than 15 years ago with his family but found that his three young sons couldn't summon the stoic endurance necessary for normal winter camping. He introduced a small wood-burning stove to the mix, but his synthetic tent and the stove didn't get along. In the end Lottig decided to make the perfect snow-walking tent himself and bought a commercial sewing machine. His designs remain the most popular models for enthusiasts.

Our 10×12-foot shelter took just 10 minutes to assemble, but it would take another exhausting hour to gather, saw, and split enough firewood for the evening. That night we would go to bed very warm indeed, but it wouldn't last.



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By morning the fire had long since burned out, and cold air bit my cheeks and nose, the only flesh exposed from my sleeping bag. All three of us were awake, but nobody moved, nobody talked. Finally Prom roused to go outside and returned with an armful of firewood — he who had to piss worst got up first — and soon there were sharp snaps and crackles of igniting tinder. Within minutes the tent was toasty again.

“Drink plenty of water today,” Prom instructed, handing me a Nalgene bottle. “Winter dehydration can sneak up on you because you don't feel thirsty.” Eating wasn't quite so simple.

A man who usually requires 2,000 calories a day needs to consume up to 6,000 calories in deep-cold conditions. We had decided those would come from big fat lake trout. Prom explained that they were actually easier to fish in winter: “The trick is to jig vertically. It's hard to do in summer when your canoe is constantly getting pushed by waves.” Prom demonstrated his jigging technique by flicking the tip of his rod. Wearing a broad, chubby smile and wool overalls, he

reminded me of a good ol' boy at a chili feed, clearly a man in his element. Then his pole bent and the smile disappeared. He landed the fish in seconds and groaned, "Shit, it's a guppy."

That evening we gutted and cooked our catch, while enjoying more ice-cold IPA. We talked until midnight, then packed the stove with as much new wood as it would take an

d snuffed out the overhead lantern. In the darkness the stove door projected dancing flames as flickering orange lights on the white front wall of the tent. I stared at them until I drifted to sleep. Sometime later in the night I bolted awake at a gunshot crack from the settling lake ice.

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On our final full day in the back-country, I decided to snowshoe north to the upper basin of Ottertrack Lake to marvel at the palisades, a 120-foot-high rock wall of pillowed greenstone painted with a giant mural of lemon yellow, brilliant orange, and lime green rock-shield lichens. Lichens radiate in winter because they continue to photosynthesize during the sun-deprived season, when every other plant in the area slumbers.

On my return to camp I bushwhacked through dense forest to avoid snowshoeing across the narrows, where the lake's upper basin empties into the lower one. Narrows, as well as the areas around the entrances to beaver lodges, are chronic spots for bad ice; the moving water inhibits proper freezing.

When I arrived in camp, it was time to prepare our final night's feast. We taxed the last IPA and ate the last of our trout, this time served fried as cashew-encrusted fillets and grilled with a garlic-and-brown-sugar glaze. I was feeling a little down at the thought of leaving our tent in the snowy wilderness. Outside, a fresh arctic front arrived and the temperature plummeted past zero, 5 below, 10 below. Bitter cold descended on the

North Woods. No matter. We were full, and a fire roared in our stove. Tonight we would go to bed warm.

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## Go Snow Walking This Winter

*Plan a DIY Adventure anywhere there's snow, or for a trip like this in the Boundary Waters, look up these guys:*

**THE GUIDE:** **Mike Prom's Voyageur Canoe Outfitters** ([canoeit.com](http://canoeit.com)) and **Mark Black's Black Magic Kennels** ([blackmagickennels.com](http://blackmagickennels.com)) offer a combo three-night trip in the Boundary Waters for \$1,500 per person, which includes dogsled drop-off, a fishing guide, and equipment.

**THE GEAR:** **Snowtrekker Tents** ([snowtrekkertents.com](http://snowtrekkertents.com)) sells winterized canvas tents (from \$825) and portable wood stoves (from \$179). Or rent both from **The Canoeist** (from \$120 for two nights; [thecanoelist.com](http://thecanoelist.com)).



**THE BEER:** Glass and cans are forbidden inside the BWCAW, so **Fitger's Brewhouse** ([brewhouse.net](http://brewhouse.net)) sells 64-ounce Nalgene growlers of beer for \$17 (refills are \$11). We recommend the El Niño IPA.

