



Educational Articles by
**Catskills Preventive
Search & Rescue Committee**

Why Fall Is the Best Time to Prepare for Winter Hiking in the Catskills

by David Oliver, PSAR Chair
and The PSAR Committee

Everybody gets excited about fall hiking in the Catskills. The leaves are changing, the temperatures are more comfortable, the bugs are mostly gone, and the mountains are as beautiful as they'll ever be. That's what most people think about when they think of fall hiking.

I look at fall a little differently.

To me, fall isn't just another hiking season. It's the season where I start preparing for winter. In fact, I'd argue that if you wait until winter arrives to change your gear, habits, and planning, you've already waited too long.

In the Catskills, fall has two personalities. Early September, and even much of October, can feel like a continuation of summer. It's warm, the trails are dry, and you're probably still hiking in a T-shirt. Then, as November and December approach, everything transitions into what's known as "shoulder season." Shoulder season is the period between fall and winter, just as there's another shoulder season between winter and spring. The late fall shoulder season is one of the best opportunities you'll ever have to become a better winter hiker.

Over the years, I've helped quite a few hikers on the trail and have been involved in a number of rescues and assists. One thing I've noticed is that people don't get themselves into trouble because they suddenly forget how to hike the day winter arrives. What usually happens is much more gradual. Throughout the summer, they develop habits that work perfectly well when the weather is warm, the days are long, and the consequences of a mistake are relatively small. Then winter shows up, and they don't adjust those habits.

During the summer, people carry less gear. They pay less attention to the forecast because a rainy summer hike usually isn't a big deal. Navigation is a little more casual. They leave the trailhead later because there's daylight until well into the evening. Hydration slips a little. Planning becomes something they do on the drive to the mountain instead of the night before.

Summer lets you get away with those habits. Winter doesn't.

By the time the first real snowstorm rolls through, many hikers are still thinking like it's October, and that's when little mistakes start turning into bigger problems.

The Mountains Are Already Changing

One of the biggest mistakes hikers make during fall is assuming the conditions at the trailhead will match the conditions on the summit. In the Catskills, that's often completely wrong.

The mountains begin transitioning into winter long before most hikers do. The days become noticeably shorter. Temperatures steadily drop. Frost starts appearing in the mornings. Ice begins forming on rocks, especially in shaded areas where the sun doesn't



Deep Hollow from Panther Point - Photo courtesy of Steve Aaron #3199

reach. Sometimes it's just a thin layer that you don't notice until your boot starts sliding across it.

Higher elevations change first. I remember doing a club hike on Big Indian Mountain years ago. It was fairly warm at the base of

the mountain, and nobody was thinking about snow. As we gained elevation, though, the weather changed dramatically. Before long, it actually started snowing. We weren't in a dangerous situation, but it was a good reminder of just how quickly mountain conditions can change. That's exactly what makes shoulder season so valuable.

The mountain is giving you a preview of winter. You're dealing with colder temperatures, stronger winds, frozen rocks, shorter daylight, and rapidly changing conditions weeks before the calendar says winter has officially arrived. Every one of those experiences teaches you something that you'll need later when the conditions become even more demanding.

Instead of looking at those changes as inconveniences, I look at them as opportunities. The mountain is slowly introducing you to winter, one lesson at a time. If you're paying attention during the fall, you're becoming a better winter hiker before winter ever gets there.

Fall Gives You Time to Fix Problems

One of the things I like most about the fall is that it gives you time to fix the little problems that summer allowed you to ignore. Instead of waiting until the first winter hike to discover something isn't working, you have weeks, sometimes months, to identify weaknesses and improve them before conditions become much more challenging.

Start with your navigation system. Have you downloaded your maps? Do you have a backup? I know a lot of people rely almost entirely on their phones, and I use my phone too, but I also carry paper maps and a compass. Knowing how to use a compass is outside the scope of this article, but having multiple navigation tools gives you options if something fails.

Then look at everything else. How's your time management? Are you still leaving later than you should because you got used to having 14 hours of daylight? Are you telling somebody exactly where you're going and when you expect to return? Are you paying attention to layering before you leave the trailhead, or are you throwing extra clothes into your pack without much thought? How's your hydration been all summer? Have you been planning your trips ahead of time, or figuring things out once you arrive?

These are all habits that become much more important in the winter.

Summer has a way of hiding weaknesses. You can underestimate how long a hike will take, forget to download a map, carry less gear than you probably should, or leave a little later than planned and still have a perfectly enjoyable day. Winter exposes every one of those weaknesses.

Snow covers herd paths. Tracks disappear. Conditions change overnight. Visibility can drop dramatically, and there are fewer people on the mountain. Those little shortcuts that seemed harmless during the summer suddenly become much bigger problems.

That's why I think every fall hike should be an evaluation. Look back over your summer and ask yourself what habits you've developed. Which ones actually made you a better hiker, and which ones simply worked because the weather was forgiving? Fix those habits

while you still have time to practice.

Start Carrying Winter Gear Before You Need It

One of the biggest mistakes I see is people waiting until the first official winter hike to think about their winter equipment. Then they're digging through closets, looking for gear they haven't touched in 10 months, and replacing batteries the night before a hike.

Winter preparation shouldn't start when winter arrives. It should start during the fall.

Take all of your winter equipment out and actually go through it. Look at your headlamp. Does it still work? Replace questionable batteries and carry extras. I even recommend buying a simple battery tester. They're inexpensive, and they eliminate the guesswork. If there's any doubt, recycle the old batteries and start the season with fresh ones.

Another mistake I see fairly often is people carrying exactly the same pack from July straight into December without making any meaningful changes. Your pack should evolve as the seasons change. Winter demands different equipment, and your pack should reflect that. The transition doesn't happen overnight. It happens gradually throughout the fall as the weather slowly changes.

I, for example, carry almost everything all year long. The only equipment that generally comes and goes is some of the heavier winter-specific gear like snowshoes, crampons, and a few specialty items. Everything else stays in my pack because I don't want to spend the first few weeks of winter getting used to carrying extra weight or figuring out where everything belongs.

I would recommend starting by adding an extra insulating layer. Put a warm hat back in your pack. Add gloves and a spare pair. Throw in a neck gaiter. Carry hand warmers. Make sure your headlamp is packed and that you have extra batteries for it. As conditions begin changing, add your microspikes, and if you're getting toward late fall, start carrying your snowshoes as well.

Some hikers also like carrying a thermos with a warm drink. Personally, I don't. I've always been perfectly happy drinking room-temperature water, but that's a personal preference. If a warm drink works for you, this is the time of year to start carrying it and figuring out how it fits into your system.

Your emergency equipment should also transition. Carry an



emergency blanket or bivy, a foam sit pad, and extra food.

Go through your traction devices as well. Look closely at your microspikes and Hillsounds (or other brand of crampons). Rubber can deteriorate over time if it's stored improperly, especially if it's been sitting in a garage or basement all year. Also check for cracks, stretched harnesses, worn chains, and dull spikes. Then inspect your snowshoes. Check every strap, every buckle, and every connection point. Make sure nothing has loosened, cracked, or broken while they were sitting in storage. The equipment may have been fine when you put it away last spring, but months in storage can change that.

Toward the end of the fall, I start carrying my snowshoes even when I know there isn't going to be any snow. People think it's funny. I hear comments all the time asking if there's supposed to be snow at the summit because they see snowshoes strapped to my pack on a warm November day.

I've never understood why that's funny. To me, it's exactly like studying before an exam. I'm preparing for what's coming. I want to know how the snowshoes ride on my pack. I want to know if the straps stay secure. I want to get used to the extra weight. If something shifts, comes loose, or feels uncomfortable, I'd rather discover that now than halfway through my first real winter hike.

The goal of carrying snowshoes in the fall isn't to be prepared in case you need them. The goal is to make them a part of your system before the day you need them arrives.

Practice With Your Winter Equipment

Having winter equipment is only part of the equation. You also need to become comfortable using it, and the fall is the perfect time to practice.

Put your microspikes on. Take them off. Do it several times until it becomes second nature.

Adjust your trekking poles while wearing gloves. Open your backpack with cold hands. Practice finding the equipment you need without digging through every pocket. Attach your snowshoes to your pack, take them back off again, and make adjustments until everything feels secure.

One thing I've learned over the years is that consistency makes winter hiking much easier. Pack your gear in the same place every single trip. Your gloves should always be in the same pocket. Your headlamp should always be stored in the same location. Your emergency gear should always be packed the same way.

That way, when you're standing on a windy summit with cold hands, you aren't trying to remember where you put something. You already know.

A lot of people also switch backpacks as winter approaches because they're carrying more gear. That's another reason to practice during the fall. Get used to the new pack. Figure out where everything fits. Make adjustments before you're dealing with snow, ice, and freezing temperatures.

The less you have to think about your equipment during the winter, the more attention you can give to the trail, the weather, and the decisions that really matter.

Build Strength for Winter Loads and Conditions

Here is one phrase you'll hear every winter: "I don't have my winter legs yet."

People say it all the time, especially during the first month or two of the season.



Personally, I think that phrase is a little misleading. There isn't some magical set of winter legs that suddenly appears after a few hikes. What's really happening is that these people's bodies have deconditioned. Maybe they hiked less during the summer, maybe they were carrying very light packs, or maybe they simply weren't preparing for the additional demands that winter places on your body.

Then winter arrived, the pack got heavier, the snow got deeper, and every hike suddenly felt much harder.

That's exactly why I think fall hikes should become training hikes.

As the season progresses, start increasing your pack weight. Add the extra clothing you'll eventually be carrying all winter. Put your traction devices in your pack. Start carrying snowshoes toward the end of the season. Add the extra food you'll need. Begin carrying additional water and start transitioning to insulated bottles so your hydration system is already dialed in before freezing temperatures arrive.

You're not carrying those items because you necessarily need them that day. You're training your body to handle them when you eventually will.

A heavier winter pack changes everything. It affects your pace, your balance, your endurance, and how quickly you become fatigued. The sooner your body adapts to those changes, the easier the transition into winter becomes.

It also makes recovery easier. One reason people talk about

not having their winter legs is because every hike leaves them exhausted. They spend several days recovering, then go out again and repeat the cycle. Building that conditioning during the fall helps eliminate much of that adjustment period.

Strengthen your legs before the snow arrives instead of afterward. Work on your balance while you're still dealing with rocks, roots, mud, and patches of early ice instead of several feet of snow.

Descending is another skill worth practicing. A controlled descent saves energy and reduces fatigue over the course of a long day. The stronger and more confident you become during the fall, the more enjoyable your winter hikes will be.

Prepare for Earlier Darkness

One of the biggest changes people notice during the fall is how quickly daylight disappears.

During the summer, it's easy to become spoiled by long evenings. If a hike takes a little longer than expected, there's usually plenty of daylight left.

You might not even think about sunset before leaving home because you know you've got hours to spare.

That mindset has to change as winter approaches.

Start checking sunset times before every hike. Leave earlier in the morning. Monitor your progress throughout the day instead of simply hiking until you feel like turning around. Establish realistic turnaround times and stick to them.

These habits become incredibly important because darkness arrives much faster than many people expect.

Your lighting system also becomes much more important. Make sure your headlamp is reliable, carry fresh batteries, and always have spare batteries with you. This isn't the time of year to discover your batteries have been sitting in storage for eleven months.

In the warmer months, if something goes wrong, you have a lot more options. In the colder months, darkness and dropping temperatures can quickly change the situation.

Learn Cold Weather Layering

Layering is one of those skills that you can't really learn by reading about it. You learn by doing it.



Fall gives you the perfect opportunity because temperatures fluctuate throughout the day. You might leave the trailhead wearing one combination of clothing, remove a layer halfway up the climb, put it back on during a rest break, and then add another layer once you reach an exposed summit.

You begin learning what your hiking temperature feels like. You learn what your body needs during a long rest break. You discover how wind changes everything. You figure out how well your clothing manages moisture and whether your layering system actually works together.

It's also a great time to visit your local outdoor stores. Places like REI, Kenco, Camp Catskill, Ramsey Outdoor, and other local outfitters have people you can actually talk to.

You can try on different layers, see how they fit together, ask questions, and build a clothing system instead of simply ordering random pieces online and hoping they work.

The goal isn't owning the most expensive clothing. The goal is understanding how your clothing system works before you're relying on it during a winter hike.

Give Your Feet Extra Attention

Your feet do a tremendous amount of work during the winter, and the fall is the perfect time to make sure everything is ready before conditions become more difficult.

Start by looking at your boots. Are they still waterproof? Are the soles wearing unevenly? Are there any loose seams beginning to separate? If your boots need waterproofing, now is the time to do it. Don't wait until the first icy hike of the season to discover that your feet are getting wet after the first stream crossing or patch of slush.

Take a look at your socks as well. Winter socks are often thicker than those you wear during the summer; that changes how your boots fit. If you haven't worn your winter socks since last season, spend some time hiking in them during the fall. You may discover pressure points or hot spots that never showed up with thinner summer socks.

I always recommend carrying a spare pair of socks too. It's one of those small items that doesn't take up much room but can make a tremendous difference if your feet become wet.

Fall gives you time to work through those issues before freezing temperatures become part of the equation. A small blister during a pleasant October hike is an inconvenience. The same problem on a long winter hike can become something much more significant.

Adjust Food and Water for Colder Weather

Winter changes the way you eat and drink on the trail, and fall is a great time to begin making that transition.

Start thinking about foods that provide more calories and are easier to eat in colder temperatures. Some foods simply don't work very well once everything starts freezing.

That's something I learned myself after realizing I'd drifted toward meals during the summer that weren't practical once winter arrived.

I remember carrying foods like steel-cut oats and chicken during one season because they worked well in warmer weather. As I started thinking ahead to winter, I realized those meals would not be nearly as enjoyable once temperatures dropped. The fall gave me time to change what I packed, experiment with different options, and work out a better system before the cold weather really arrived.

Water deserves just as much attention. Most hikers don't think very much about water during the summer. They drink when they're thirsty, refill along the way as needed, and keep moving. Winter requires a little more planning.

As the weather gets colder, begin carrying insulated water bottles and planning where you're storing them in your pack. Make sure they're easy to reach so you're drinking consistently throughout the day instead of avoiding water because it's inconvenient to get to. Some hikers also carry a thermos with a warm drink during the colder months. If that's something you enjoy, fall is a good time to work it into your system.

The important thing is making these adjustments before freezing temperatures force you to.

Pay Closer Attention to Weather

Weather should always be part of your planning, but it becomes especially important as winter approaches.

One of the biggest mistakes hikers make is looking at the weather forecast for the nearest town and assuming that's what they'll experience on the mountain.

The summit has its own weather. Wind speeds are different. Temperatures are different. Wind chill can dramatically change how cold it actually feels. Conditions can change much faster than they do in the valleys below.

That's why you should begin paying much closer attention to summit forecasts during the fall. Watch how conditions change from one elevation to another. Notice how a pleasant day at the trailhead can become cold, windy, and icy only a few thousand feet higher.

The more you observe those changes during shoulder season, the less surprising they'll be once winter arrives.

Review Your Summer Hiking Season

Before winter begins, I think it's worth sitting down and honestly reviewing your entire summer hiking season.

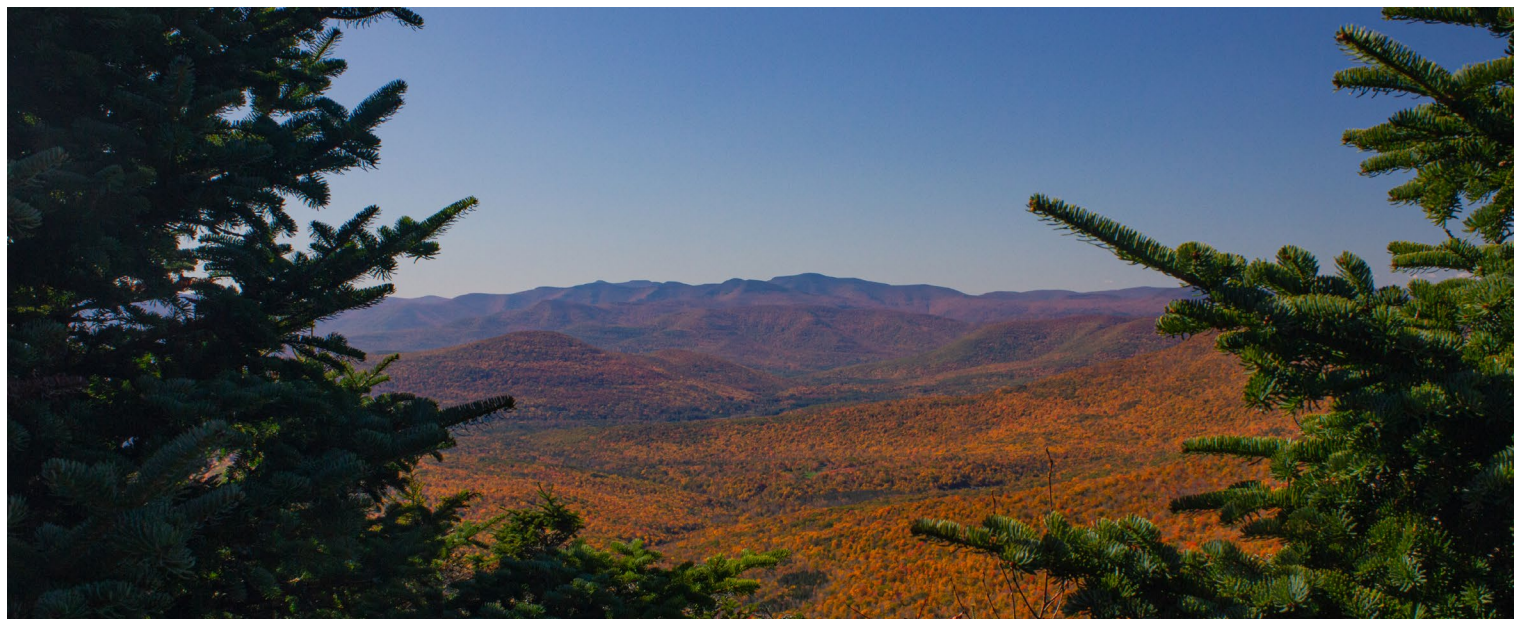
Ask yourself a few simple questions:

- Which hikes took longer than you expected?
- Which pieces of gear worked really well?
- Which equipment did you carry every single trip without ever using?
- Was there something you wished you'd brought but didn't?
- Which trails challenged you the most?
- Which skills still need more practice?

Those answers become your preparation plan for the fall.

Instead of randomly buying new equipment or changing your entire system, focus on the areas that actually need improvement. Maybe your navigation needs work. Maybe your pacing could be better. Maybe you realized your layering system wasn't very effective during cold mornings.

The goal isn't to reinvent everything. The goal is to use everything you learned over the summer to become more prepared for the winter that's just around the corner.



Viewpoint from Twin - Photo courtesy of Alexander Setzko #4315