

Shades of Winter: Recreating With Care in the Forgotten Season

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Ah, winter. The time of year when nature is in deep slumber, nestled within burrows, passing the time until Spring's thaw. It's a time when the forest is often hidden under a blanket of freshly-fallen snow, and sound carries for miles. The brisk air rustling through the trees is often the only sound we hear, apart from perhaps our breathing. Being out in the forest in the dead of winter, we can feel like there's no other living being for miles – but there is.

Winter – especially when accompanied by a generous dumping of snow, can be an energizing experience in the forest. In the San Bernardino National Forest, when the snow hits, the bustle of activity doesn't seem to slow down. With the ski resorts operating, snow play areas crammed full of visitors, and cabin rentals booked up, it seems as if the mountain's population almost doubles. Of course, not everyone who visits the forest in winter desires to stay close to the amenities of modern civilization. Snow-shoeing, cross-country skiing, hiking and off-highway vehicle recreation are just a few ways that people escape the crowds and enjoy the backcountry during the winter months.



(Two worlds collide: A view of the Mojave Desert from a snow-covered ridge in Holcomb Valley near Big Bear Lake.)

A few days ago, I was lucky enough to go out into Holcomb Valley with Don Alexander from Off Road Big Bear. Don had acquired a new 4x4 and was anxious to put it to task. I jumped at the chance, drove to Big Bear to meet Don, loaded in my gear and away we went. As we tracked along a gorgeous snow-covered road, I started to think

about how great this forest is, and how lucky we all are to be able to enjoy it. My thoughts soon shifted, however, to how fragile and volatile the winter forest can truly be.

The interesting thing about recreating in the forest during the winter is that everything is intensified. What may seem like an inconsequential action or choice in the summer can be severely magnified in winter. When looking over a forest blanketed in a foot of snow, we often fail to remember the fragile ecosystem lying beneath. By going off-trail and compacting the snow, we can cause substantial damage to plants hidden beneath. Snowmelt can leave the ground moist and fragile, and more susceptible to erosion and destruction by careless and negligent behavior, which will still be visible in the summertime.

We may also forget that, though our vehicle may be nice and warm as we drive along, if we run into trouble, that same vehicle may not be quite so warm come midnight when we're enduring a forced bivouac. Being prepared in the winter cannot be overstressed; after all, that's what will get us back home. It's a cliché, but the idea of

“hope for the best, plan for the worst” is most appropriate in the winter. I didn’t figure that Don and I would have any problems on our day out, but I brought an overnight kit along just in case. Regardless of how we choose to spend our time outside in the colder months, we need to be prepared to take care of ourselves if things go awry.



(This group of OHV enthusiasts is prepared for the unexpected. By having enough clothing, food and water for an overnight stay – plus capable off-highway vehicles – they can help ensure that their experience in the forest is a good one.)

Extra warm clothes, some food, water, flashlight, a blanket or sleeping bag and maybe a portable heat source will all help to make an unexpected night in the woods in the dead of winter little more than an exciting tale to recount – instead of reading like a Greek tragedy. Knowing where you’re going and you and your vehicle’s limitations is another way to prevent problems. Winter is not the best time to get your vehicle stuck in the backcountry. Staying on a legal route is important in the winter not only to protect the fragile lands underneath the snow’s surface but can serve to help bring us home safely. By going off the trail, we might end up in an unpleasant situation. Snow covered ground can be tricky, and while it might look like a flat stretch, we could very well find ourselves stuck windows deep in a snow bank, preparing to spend a good deal of time (if not the entire night) just to get out.

Extra consideration also needs to be shown to animals in the winter. This season is particularly hard on animals, who are most concerned with finding food and shelter. Chasing, harassing, or taunting animals should *never* be tolerated anyway, and especially not in the wintertime. Another thing to consider is how sounds carry through a barren winter forest. Most trails are designed to allow for sufficient buffer zones for noise, but in the winter we need to be extra cognizant of how our voices and noise from our vehicles can carry. Anything we can do to reduce stress on the animals with which we share this forest should be done.



(Those trails can be hard to see under a blanket of snow, but by having a map, compass and/or GPS, we can still follow them and prevent illegal riding/driving in the forest.)

Winter is a truly great time to get outside and enjoy the outdoors, but it should not be taken lightly. Planning ahead, being prepared, and following established routes are examples of responsible recreation that should all be followed regardless of season, but especially in the winter. By following these simple protocols, we can get out into the backcountry of our remarkable forest and

experience sights and sounds (or lack thereof) that folks on the slopes and snow-areas may never find.

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