



By Cicely Gilbert

“**A**n ideal day would be about 20 degrees during the day and in the single digits at night,” suggests Don Erdeljac.

He’s not talking about cross-country skiing, ice fishing or even the perfect temperature to curl up indoors with his favorite book.

Erdeljac was the senior trip leader for Venture Outdoors’ recent Winter Camping Introduction program, and he’s talking about spending upwards of 24 hours in exactly those conditions.

Winter camping takes more than “get up and go.” It takes great planning and preparation, both with specialized gear and location scouting.

According to the state’s Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, only six of the state’s 117 state parks ordinarily stay open during the winter months. This year’s budget cuts have left only two with active programs between December and April. Reservations are first come, first served.

There is, however, public forest land that is open and accessible year-round. Friends of Allegheny Wilderness is a non-profit organization founded specifically to address wilderness preservation areas in the Allegheny National Forest.

"One of the best ways to get people excited about protecting public land is to get them to enjoy the public land," said Kirk Johnson, executive director of Friends of Allegheny Wilderness.

Venture Outdoors offers an ideal trip for first timers. Camp sites are pre-set near the starting points, giving participants a chance to explore the wonderland while not having to haul their gear to a remote location.

"It really allows people to improvise," said Erdeljac. "If something goes wrong, there are options to get out easily."

The Boy Scouts of America warn that hypothermia is a serious concern when venturing outdoors overnight, and that staying warm and dry are the biggest concerns cold campers face. Proper gear and equipment is specially designed to minimize exposure. Even food factors in to preventing exposure. A high caloric intake and proper digestion help our bodies to resist the elements.

Wet feet might be uncomfortable on a summer camping trips, but in cold temperatures, it could result in the end of the trip.

"Once your feet get wet in the winter, you're going to have trouble," said Johnson, who sponsors several backpacking trips throughout the year. The best case scenario is to build a fire and dry off any wet clothing before moving on.

Previous experience with other cold weather activities, such as cross-country or downhill skiing, makes it easier to transition to winter backpacking and camping. For more advanced winter adventures, previous backpacking experience during warmer times helps, as well.

Precautions can be taken to prevent uncomfortable cold, but there is nothing to be done about the num-

ber of daylight hours this time of year. Winter campers should give themselves at least an hour of daylight to set up camp before nightfall. During the shorter months, that usually means stopping to set camp between 4-5 p.m. As the sun rises later and sets earlier, there are about 14 hours of darkness..

"You can sleep maybe eight of them," suggests Erdeljac. It's hard to consider what to do on very long nights, not only with keeping occupied, but staying warm."

Beyond the concerns of cold weather and the threat of hypothermia lies an experience unique to this time of year.

"Hiking in the middle of the forest after a fresh snowfall, the snow clings to the branches and tree trunks and sometimes you can see fresh animal tracks," said Johnson. "You could be in the same track of woods as you were in June or July and it's a completely different experience."

Erdeljac said his ultimate goal during seven years of providing camping instruction has been to prepare campers to venture out into the cold on their own.

"People who have never tried it before tend to act surprised, but really it's not much different than going cross-country skiing or doing any other winter activity. We just sleep out over night."