

Ben Gadd's list of things to bring on a ski trip to the Wapta Icefield

The key thing in all back-country skiing is to keep your pack as light as possible. You fall down less, and you can get up more easily. Bring only essentials. This list will help.

Skis

- Light, strong skis designed for back-country trips. Width at tip 90–100 mm, plenty of side-cut, length no more than head-high. This type of ski works for both telemark skiing (boot flexes at toe, binding is not hinged, heel doesn't lock down,) and alpine touring ("A/T," boot does not flex, binding is hinged, heel locks down).
- Cable telemark bindings, three-pin bindings, tele-cable bindings (three-pin plus cable) and alpine-touring bindings are all popular for icefield skiing. The idea of tele-cable is to ski uphill on the three-pin, sans cable, which gives good heel-lift, then snap on the binding if needed for difficult downhill runs. Plus you have something to keep your boot in the binding if the pin-holes rip out.
- Spare binding parts: extra binding screws, extra bale if not riveted on, extra cable if used, whatever tends to break on your A/T rig.
- Runaway straps, connecting your skis to your boots. If a ski comes off partway up a glacier or on a pass or near the summit of a peak, you might never get it back. Runaway straps can easily be made from nylon cord.
- Waxes: yes, they work on icefield trips. I carry skins and use them for steep climbs, but waxing is really preferable. The skis are lighter and move forward more easily. One needn't keep putting skins on and taking them off. What works for me is Swix "Dry Snow," Storte "Universal Minus" or equivalent dry-snow (cold) wax in a two-wax system, plus purple. Bring scraper and cork. Before the trip, I hot-wax my skis with dry-snow wax, tip to tail. In cold conditions this will get me up moderate slopes. If I start to slip, I apply a light line of purple the full length of the ski, not rubbing it in. Typically most of the purple wax has worn off when it's time to turn around and head downhill.
- Skins are very useful for long, steep grades and really lousy snow conditions. They are standard for A/T rigs. If some party members are using skins, all party members should be using skins, because those on wax will be unable to do the steep angle of ascent that skinned-up members can do.
- Strong poles, with large baskets for powder snow. The poles should be short, such that they come up no higher than your armpit when measured indoors. Most glaciers and icefields are not kick-and-glide country—you're either slogging uphill or running downhill—so long poles are not very useful. They just make you raise your arms higher on each stroke. Further, long poles are more trouble on steep slide-slopes. I use Life Link poles, which assemble into an avalanche probe. Adjustable-length poles are currently popular, although they're heavier and weaker than plain poles, and the adjustment mechanisms are inclined to slip or stick.
- Plastic or leather double boots, or insulated telemark single boots. Plastic boots of both the alpine-touring and telemark type are the most common ones seen on icefield trips these days. They're heavy and stiff, but they give the best possible downhill control. They're warm, they don't get wet as leather does, and the inners can be worn as hut shoes.
- Strapping tape (fibreglass tape) and duct tape for quick equipment and clothing repairs
- Screwdriver for tightening bindings. A Leatherman tool is handy, with its various blades and needle-nose pliers.

Avalanche & snow-cave gear

- Avalanche transceiver. You can't get to the Bow Hut without venturing into avalanche country, so a rescue beacon is essential. The new digital ones (I have the Backcountry Access "Tracker") are wonderfully easy to use. They point the direction to the victim and tell you the distance in metres. Cost is about CDN\$400. They can be rented. Whichever beacon you bring, be sure that it works on the standard 457 kHz frequency.
- Light portable shovel. Metal-bladed ones work better for digging in hard snow than plastic-bladed ones, with their thick front edge that doesn't cut as well.
- Avalanche probe, or use poles that screw together to form a short probe.

Re roping up in case of a fall into a crevasse, professionally guided parties often do because licenced guides have to be extraordinarily careful. Unguided parties rarely use rope, or even bring it, because the chance of falling through a snow-bridge into a crevasse is quite small when you're on skis, which spread your weight so well. Still, falls into crevasses do occur, typically (1) when people are off their skis—put on or take off your skins one ski at a time, keeping the other ski on your foot—(2) when skiing in flat-light conditions down a convex slope and into an open crevasse not seen until it was too late—I have done this myself, and luckily the crevasse wasn't deep—and very rarely (3) when skiing along a hidden crevasse rather than across it, then falling through the snow at a weak point.

The trick here is to know enough about glaciers and crevasse fields to recognize hazardous places and avoid them. I'm familiar with the Wapta Icefield—have been going there for 34 years—and avoid any spots I know to be dangerous.

Pack

The best pack for skiing is a long, slim internal-frame backpack, medium capacity (around 50 litres), such as the MEC Serratus "Alpinelite." Such a pack is large enough to comfortably hold everything needed for a four-night hut trip, yet small enough to use as a day-pack when you're out touring around. It's also very light in weight.

You may want to line the inside of your pack with a plastic garbage bag, to keep the contents (especially your sleeping bag) dry in case the weather warms up enough to make the snow wet. Bring a couple of extra garbage bags.

Clothing

- Re socks, I wear a light inner pair and a heavy outer pair. Both are wool/polyester blend. Try wearing your inner socks inside out, which puts the smooth side against your skin and thus helps to prevent blistering. For plastic boots, which press hard against the front of the shin, you'll want long socks, which provide a smooth surface and prevent pressure blisters where the tops of shorter socks form a bump.
- Long underwear, including a long-sleeved undershirt. A turtleneck or zip-neck will keep the wind off your throat. Re polypropylene underwear, which is popular because it dries quickly after sweating up, undershirts made of this material typically get smelly very quickly. And I still like the feel of plain cotton against my skin.
- Tightly woven shirt. Nylon is windproof, but it rustles constantly. I like a regular cotton/polyester collared shirt.
- Warm pants. I have "salopettes," which are thin pile overalls. Insulated pants (pile plus an outer windproof layer) are also popular, although they can become too hot on a warm day. With pile plus lightweight wind pants you can adjust things.
- Wind pants to pull on when the breeze comes up. These needn't be waterproof. Get the kind with full-length zippers, so you can put them on without removing your ski boots. Hint: don't undo the zippers all the way, such that you have to assemble your wind pants in a gale. Undo them up to the crotch only, so you can step into them in your big ski boots, then close the zippers down the legs.
- Gaiters with under-foot strap, or pants that fit closely over the tops of your boots. Regular knee-height cross-country ski gaiters are fine. Some pants have a hook on the leg to attach to your ski boots and keep snow out.
- Thick pile jacket. Should be as wind-proof as possible.
- Down jacket, or other insulated jacket. Choose a fairly light one, which will be warm enough. Big down jackets are good for only two things: climbing K2 or waiting for the bus in Winnipeg in January. No hood needed if you're bringing a hooded wind shell. Your down jacket can be placed in your sleeping bag's stuff sack and used as a pillow in the hut.

- Wind shell, with hood. Uncoated fabric is best for winter, because it breathes very well and needn't be waterproof. Rain or wet snow is rare on an icefield in winter. Goretex is okay, but it tends to ice up inside at low temperatures. I use a lightweight one-layer ripstop-nylon anorak with a decently deep hood.
- Light knit or pile gloves, for a warm day, for wearing in the hut on cold mornings, and for wearing in your sleeping bag.
- Warm ski gloves of waterproofed leather, or nylon with reinforced palms. Look for comfortable-fitting gloves that are soft and supple, such that your fingers are not forced apart or tightly enclosed, conditions that restrict circulation and make your hands cold.
- Warm mitts for really bitter, windy conditions or if your hands get cold easily. The huge, heavy arctic type are not required. I pack a pair of light, puffy down mitts.
- Warm, windproof hat with earflaps and bill to shade your eyes. It should have a chin-strap to keep it from blowing away in the wind.
- Balaclava, to prevent frostbite on nose and cheeks if winds are strong and cold. Get the kind with eye-holes and a mouth-hole, not just a big face-hole. Also good for robbing convenience stores. If you can't find one like this, bring a scarf to tie over your nose.
- Tuque (note correct spelling of this truly Canadian word) for milder conditions, and to wear in your sleeping bag, and to have as an extra in case you lose your hat in the wind.
- Something to wear on your feet in the hut. Lightweight cloth booties—the kind with stiff insulation under the foot—are a real joy in the hut, with its cold floors, and they can be worn outside to go to the pooper or fetch snow for melting. Meanwhile your boots can be drying out. If you're wearing double boots, you can wear the liners in the hut instead of booties, provided that the liners are made with a thin rubber sole, which they usually are. However, you might still want to bring booties anyway, so your liners can be placed aside to dry.
- Sleeping bag. For most people a three-season bag is fine for use in the Alpine Club of Canada huts on the Wapta and Waputik icefields. The temperature in the sleeping quarters of these huts seldom goes below –10°C regardless of how cold it is outside. If the night becomes very cold, wear extra clothing and your booties in the bag, and put on your down jacket. If you sleep cold, bring a winter bag. A foam pad is not required; these huts all have thick foam mattresses.
- Headlamp, not flashlight. You'll be skiing, so your hands won't be free to hold a flashlight. A small headlamp is okay; a large one with a halogen bulb is better. The new LED lights are terrific: lightweight and powerful, with exceptional battery life. Make sure your headlamp has fresh batteries.
- White gas, if you're going to the Scott Duncan Hut, which still relies on Coleman stoves and lanterns. One-half litre per person per night should be sufficient. Among the icefield huts, the Bow Hut is the cushiest, with propane installed for cooking and lighting. There is a wood-burning stove, and the wood is supplied. The Balfour and Peyto (Whyte) huts also have propane for lighting and cooking, but not heating stoves. All the huts have pots and pans, cups and utensils, dish soap and scrubbers.
- Trash bag

Small items

- Toilet paper, which is not provided at the huts.
- Wide-mouth one-litre water bottle. Water is gained from melting snow in large buckets on the hut stoves. Nasty fecal organisms have been found in old snow around the Bow Hut, but if you're careful to bring in only freshly fallen, uncontaminated snow, boiling or pump-filtering your drinking water is not required.
- Lighter, carried in your pocket where it's kept warm (butane won't burn in cold conditions) and always handy.
- Small first aid kit. Item most frequently used: blister pads. Most popular drug: Advil taken with dinner to combat stiffness in the morning.
- Alpine Club of Canada hut-reservation receipt, Parks Canada back-country permit ("Wilderness Pass")
- Credit card, bank card, driver's licence and some cash
- Small binoculars
- Small camera, with fresh batteries that you know will work in the cold, especially if it's a digital camera.

- Sun-block lotion with high UV-blocking value
- Sunglasses. Brownish-yellow view is best for snow. Your sunglasses should be large, to provide full protection. Some people use goggles, which also protect the eyes from wind.
- Small pocket knife
- Handkerchief or bandanna
- Comb, toothbrush, floss
- Compass and (way better for icefield use) a GPS receiver. Know how to use these essential tools.
- Map: *Touring the Wapta Icefields*, by Murray Toft, available at bookstores in Banff and Lake Louise
- Any medications required
- Over-the-counter sleeping pills if you tend to lie awake at high elevations
- Ear plugs to shut out snorers. Sort of.
- Tolerance for the weird, arrogant people one sometimes finds in mountain huts.

Food

I usually carry freeze-dried suppers on multi-day ski trips, to save weight. Most of these meals are single-dish glops, very handy because you just pour in boiling water and eat out of the bag. If the label says “feeds two,” it lies. You’ll eat the whole thing yourself.

Most people eat insufficiently at breakfast (a little porridge, etc.) and are soon hungry again. To avoid this, eat heartily in the morning. My favorite breakfast: a couple of cups of instant bean flakes and instant rice mixed 50/50, with mild salsa, cheese and crunched-up corn chips for topping. Sometimes I just eat the same sort of freeze-dried meals for breakfast that I eat for supper.

Other good ski eats:

Cup-size packets of instant soup

Instant Japanese noodles

Dried fruit, fruit bars, granola bars, candy bars, hard candy

Tea, coffee, cocoa, Postum, Lo Han Quo (a tasty, sweet, non-caffeine Chinese drink)

Sausage, jerky

Cheese, which can freeze very hard, so cut it up into bite-size pieces before you go.

Crackers

Tough, squish-resistant bread

Jam in a crush-proof container

Butter mixed with olive oil, so it spreads easily when cold

Soft-style cream cheese. Honey not recommended; it always seems to escape.

Cookies

Great pick-me-up: chocolate-coated coffee beans

Gorp (stands for “good old raisins and peanuts”). I like to make gorp of cashews, almonds, Smarties (Canadian M&Ms), sugary fruit chunks, banana chips and sunflower seeds.

If your mum were along she’d want you to take your vitamins. And don’t forget your meds.

Fresh fruit and vegetables usually freeze on these trips, so I don’t bring them.

— February 2004