

How to find food in the wilderness when the temperature drops

If you're someone who enjoys exploring cold, wild environments, it's crucial to be prepared for the challenges ahead. Food can be scarce in these conditions due to freezing temperatures and harsh weather. Even wildlife and plants that thrive in cold climates are usually limited in variety and quantity.

To survive in such environments, adaptability is key. While you may find some food, it often requires significant effort to gather it. Foraging and trapping become essential skills, as you'll need to rely on readily available resources to sustain yourself. Knowing how to make the most of what's around you can be the difference between staying nourished or starving.

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Challenges you will face

In cold wilderness environments, finding food presents unique challenges, largely due to snow and ice. There are two main factors to consider. First, your ability to move around depends heavily on snow and ice conditions. In early spring,

when the snow is still firm, you can cover long distances using snowshoes or skis with minimal energy. But as the snow begins to melt in late spring, moving becomes more difficult, requiring more energy and forcing you to stick to paths and ridges to avoid sinking into soft snow or slush.

Second, in areas where cold weather dominates most of the year, you'll likely have to travel farther to find food, which is often frozen, meaning you'll need tools to thaw or break through the ice. Cold environments make it physically harder to gather food compared to warmer climates. Hypothermia and frostbite can set in after just one night without fire, and while good clothing helps, the real issues build over time. Lack of food leads to hypothermia, and the physical effort required just to stay warm or move causes fatigue, increasing the risk of accidents.

With fewer edible plants and the difficulties of traversing snowy landscapes, food needs to be gathered from a wide area, requiring both keen observation and an awareness of potential dangers. In addition to dealing with ice, and snow, and locating prey, you must also understand the behavior of the animals you're hunting.

Relying solely on the idea that you can live off the land because you've seen it done or read about it is risky. Without extensive survival knowledge and skills, surviving in such conditions becomes nearly impossible. Preparation and experience are essential in these environments.

Edible Plants

Learning about the plant species in a specific region is crucial for knowing which plants are safe to eat and how much to consume. Many edible plants can be found in colder areas, but the key to safely relying on them for survival is knowledge.

People who depend on these plants, either for survival or to supplement their diets, typically have a deep understanding of edible species. This knowledge is often passed down through generations from elders, teachers, and communities, ensuring that they know what to eat and how to use these resources wisely.

It is mandatory to learn about the edible plants in your region and test your knowledge in the field throughout the year. As I've said many times before, you need to be able to identify plants during their complete growing cycle because you won't forage for certain plants only during the warmer months.

For example, below are some plants that can be foraged also during the winter. Do they grow in your region? Well, that's for you to figure out.

Wintergreen (*Gaultheria procumbens*) – Found in forested areas, wintergreen's berries and leaves are edible. The leaves can be used to make tea, and the berries provide a mild winter snack.

Pine (*Pinus* species) – Pine trees are common across the U.S., and their inner bark is edible. Pine needles can also be brewed into a vitamin C-rich tea.

Cattail (*Typha* species) – Often found near wetlands, the roots and shoots of cattails are edible year-round. In winter, the rootstocks can be dug up with a little bit of effort and eaten.

Chickweed (*Stellaria media*) -This is a hardy plant you will find in fields and gardens, even under snow. The leaves and stems are edible and can be added to salads or soups.

Hunting and Trapping

In cold wilderness areas, you might feel the need to start hunting for food, but it's important to move as quietly as

possible to avoid scaring off any animals. In large, remote areas, game tends to be scarce and very cautious. Smaller, quieter hunting groups usually have more success. Common animals you can hunt include rabbits, squirrels, various rodents, grouse, and other game birds. Being stealthy and patient is key to increasing your chances of catching something.

During the winter months in the USA, several animals can still be hunted and trapped, though options are more limited compared to other seasons. Small game like rabbits, such as the Eastern cottontail and snowshoe hare, are active throughout the winter. These animals are often easier to track in snow due to their distinctive footprints. Squirrels, including both grey and red squirrels, also remain active during this time and can be hunted or trapped.

Fur-bearing animals are another option in winter. Beavers, muskrats, and mink are typically hunted or trapped for their pelts but can also serve as a source of food. These animals are usually found near bodies of water, and setting traps in their natural pathways can produce satisfying results.

In some regions, certain species of game birds, such as grouse and wild turkey, can still be hunted during the winter. Grouse are known to stay active in snowy forests, while turkeys often forage for food in open fields or woodlands.

Larger game animals, like deer, can also be hunted in certain states during late hunting seasons. Deer tend to move less in deep snow, making them somewhat easier to track, but they are still cautious and require a strategic approach.

Snares and Traps

In winter, trapping requires specific techniques and types of traps that can withstand cold, snow, and ice while remaining effective. There are various traps and techniques you can use

for procuring food using these methods.

Snares – Snares are simple, lightweight, and effective for trapping small game like rabbits, squirrels, and foxes. In winter, setting snares along established animal trails is ideal, as snow often reveals their tracks. Snares made from wire or cable are preferred because they hold up well in freezing temperatures and can be placed near burrows or in narrow spaces where animals naturally travel.

Conibear traps – Conibear traps are body-gripping traps used for both small and medium-sized animals like beavers, muskrats, mink, and raccoons. These traps are great in winter since they work efficiently in cold water and can be set near frozen streams or ponds. For larger animals like beavers, setting the trap in known water paths or under the ice is common.

Deadfalls – A deadfall trap involves a heavy object (like a log or rock) that is triggered to fall and crush the animal. This type of trap can be useful in winter for small game like squirrels or rabbits. Since it doesn't rely on complex mechanisms, it can withstand cold conditions and can be built using natural materials found in the environment.

Foothold traps – These traps are often used for fur-bearing animals like foxes, coyotes, or raccoons. During winter, these traps must be carefully set to avoid freezing into the snow or ground. Some trappers use bedding techniques with insulating materials like wax paper or dry grass to keep the trap functioning even in harsh conditions.

In cold weather, it's important to check traps regularly to ensure they aren't frozen or malfunctioning. Placement and proper insulation around the trap can significantly improve success rates in winter conditions. It's also important to mention that snaring and trapping require a lot of experience in the field and you shouldn't count on these methods for food

procurement if you have little to no experience using them.

Fishing in Cold Environments

Cold and ice fishing for survival is vastly different from recreational fishing since the focus is on gathering food in harsh, often life-threatening conditions. In survival situations, your goal is to efficiently catch fish to meet your basic nutritional needs, with minimal equipment and under challenging weather conditions.

Ice Fishing

Ice fishing can be a reliable way to obtain food in frozen wilderness areas, but it requires a few basic skills and tools if you want to be successful.

In a survival situation, you will most certainly not have an ice auger or specialized fishing equipment and you will need to use a sharp tool (knife, axe, or even a makeshift chisel) to create a hole in the ice. Some folks recommend using fire to melt a hole, but this can be an energy-intensive activity and you might want to conserve your energy.

You can use a strong fishing line, wire, or any cordage you can improvise (like shoelaces). If you lack hooks, you can fashion some from metal (a bent pin, paperclip) or bone. Bait can be anything you can't find, but the best bait will be small pieces of fish or animal meat.

Now, when it comes to fishing techniques, you'll need to focus on simplicity. Fish are often less active in winter, so drop your bait to the bottom and let it rest there or gently jiggle it to mimic movement. Fish like perch, trout, and pike are your targets in colder waters.

In case you don't have a rod, you will need to improvise a basic "tip-up" system from a stick or branch placed across the

hole, holding the line. This method allows you to set multiple lines at once, improving your chances of catching fish while conserving energy. Having multiple lines also allows you to experiment with the various baits you have available. Make sure to tie the line to a branch and use snow to hold it in place.

Fishing in Open Water

If you're near a body of open water, cold-weather fishing can provide a steady food source, but it demands patience and adaptability since you probably won't have fishing gear at your disposal.

You will have to use branches or vines as a makeshift rod and create a fishing line from any strong material you have on hand. Hooks can be fashioned from bone, metal, or thorns. You can even tie the fishing line to your wrist to save the energy for improvising a rod from available materials.

For lures and baits as suggested before, you will need to use whatever is available, even fabric tied to the hook to attract fish. Slow, subtle movements with your bait will mimic natural prey and increase your chances of success.

Regardless if you try ice or open-water fishing, it's essential to understand that time and energy are precious resources. Set multiple fishing lines if possible, and check them regularly, but conserve your energy by minimizing movement. Fishing close to shore where the water is shallower can sometimes be more productive, especially near structures like rocks or submerged logs.

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It is also essential to prioritize warmth. While waiting for fish, build a fire or create a windbreak to prevent hypothermia. You can set lines and continue gathering other resources (like firewood) nearby to stay active and productive.

Once you catch something, the entire fish can be used. The flesh provides protein, and the organs are rich in nutrients. In colder conditions, fish can be consumed raw (if needed), though cooking them over an open fire is ideal to avoid parasites and for better digestion. What you cannot consume, use as bait for snare, traps, or your fishing lines.

A last word

Procuring food in the wilderness during the cold months is a difficult task and a nearly impossible one if you lack the proper equipment. You can test this theory for yourself now that winter is almost here. During your next camping trip, try and procure food from your environment with minimal equipment and see how that goes. Also, be smart about it and bring enough supplies in case your experiment proves to be unsuccessful.