

# BACKCOUNTRY

Snug in his warmest layers, a hiker atop Mount Washington's summit takes advantage of calm winds and clear skies to watch a cloud sea swirl in the air beneath him. Photo by Pete Ingraham

A person wearing a bright orange hooded jacket and dark pants stands on a snow-covered mountain peak. They are looking out over a vast, undulating landscape of white clouds that stretch to the horizon under a clear blue sky. The foreground shows the texture of the snow and some dark rocks.

# TRY IN WHITE

STORY BY KAREN INGRAHAM

**T** snow fell slowly, as if suspended in air. Eventually, the tiny flakes touched down and collected on my clothing as I hunched over and pulled tight the laces of my orange plastic mountaineering boots.

I started to shiver in morning air chilled to 25 degrees Fahrenheit. But that was okay. We'd be moving soon.

It was the first day of March, and my husband Pete and I had been relieved to find the Stony Brook trailhead parking lot—on Route 16 in Gorham, N.H.—plowed. Overnight, nearly 18 inches of powder, just moist enough to make a good snowball, had fallen in a wind-whipped frenzy atop an already impressive base. As I strapped my snowshoes to my pack, I wondered how long our luck would hold before I'd have to add their weight to my feet.

We were headed to the Imp Shelter, 4.3 miles up on the Carter-Moriah Range in the White Mountains. Most of the journey would be on the Stony Brook Trail, a moderate climb that begins gradually on an old woods road, crisscrossing a brook before gathering steam a mile below the ridge. Stony Brook's terminus intersects the Carter-Moriah Trail, which we'd take to reach the shelter's spur trail less than a mile to the south.

It was my fourth winter backpacking trip, having graduated from day trips to overnights the previous winter. I was no veteran of winter hiking, though; I had added the snowy season to my tramping repertoire only three winters earlier. But in the course of those seasons, I came to love—even crave—winter hiking, more so than the cross-country skiing and three-season hiking I had spent the better part of 20 years doing.

I confess that I was already enamored with winter, having spent many long, cold ones growing up north of the Whites. I went sledding and cross-country skiing—the wood stove at home was never too far away—but I didn't hike in the winter. Like many three-season hikers, I imagined that every mile would be permeated with bone-numbing cold.

I was wrong. While cold is certainly a factor that can't be ignored, I learned that it could be managed easily. If I wore the right layers, packed the right equipment, ate enough, drank enough, and stuck to routes and weather conditions I was prepared for, then I could stay plenty warm while I explored terrain that was both new and exciting in its layers of white.

## New Terrain

Pack hip belts cinched and trekking poles extended, Pete and I took one more glance at his trail map before we set out. We had picked Stony Brook Trail because we hoped to camp one night in our tent at the Imp Shelter before hiking 7 miles over the Carter-Moriah Range and spending a second night at AMC's Carter Notch Hut.

The route promised views of the Presidentials and the Wild River Wilderness when it passed over open balds—where clusters of dwarfed fir trees and ice-covered rock lie exposed to the elements. Another world in the waiting.

Prior to our departure, we had made sure the mileage and elevation gain each day were within my comfort zone. Pete had been a mountaineer for 13 years, but we chose routes based on my abilities, not his. He could easily go farther and longer than I, and neither of us relished the idea of an unplanned overnight—or worse—if I became too tired.

We entered the quiet woods that ran alongside Stony Brook, still gurgling where the current was too swift for the water to freeze. The trail was coated in fresh, shin-high powder, but the underlying base was hard packed. We could walk easily; no snowshoes needed yet.

We had gotten an early start—earlier than we might have in the summer. Winter hiking can be slow going, especially if you have to break trail or swap gear on and off as trail conditions or body temperatures change. Even if a path is packed down (thank those who came before you!) and the day warm, you will still carry more clothing, gear, and food than you might for a summer hike.

This became clear to me on a day hike Pete and I did three winters ago up 3,500-foot Mount Chocorua, in the White Mountain National Forest. We didn't get to the Champney Falls trailhead until 11 a.m. It was a popular route year round, so we figured that other hikers would have already packed down the eight inches of powder that had fallen the night before.

We were wrong. We followed two ice climbers for a short while until we saw them leave the main trail to head for a climbing area. We then broke trail with our snowshoes for three miles, until Chocorua's impressive rock summit emerged from the trees. By then, it was 3 p.m., the wind had picked up, I was tired, and darkness would engulf us in 90 minutes. Only a half-mile shy of the peak, Pete and I turned around. We had headlamps, but we didn't have summit fever.

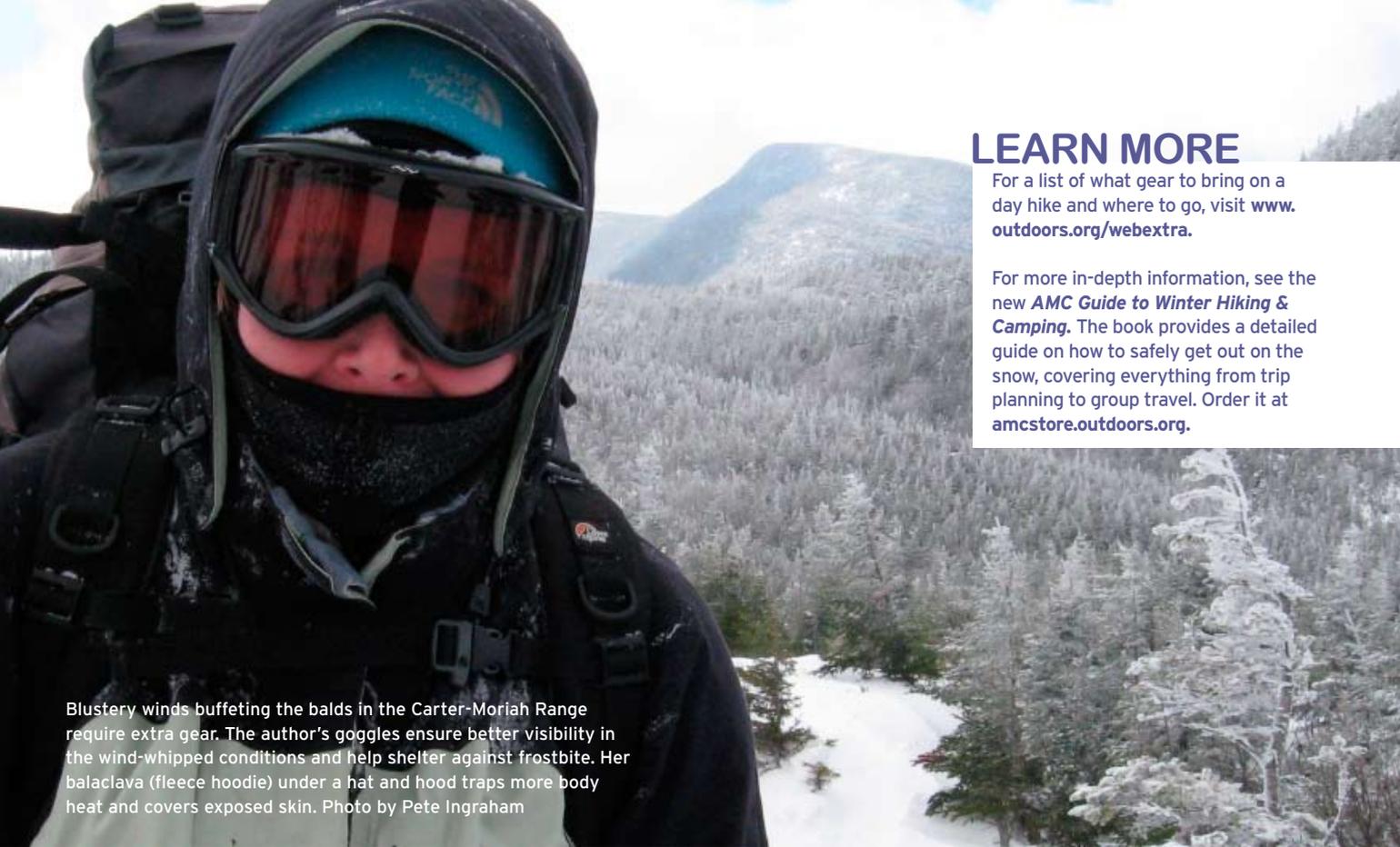
The hike had already been superb. We had spied several tracks in the snow, the faint prints of rodents and arrow-like patterns made by grouse. I was startled by a snowshoe hare that darted in front of me, and we had both savored the eerie joy of being the only humans on Chocorua's northeast flank that day.

Still, last winter we planned better and started earlier. Summiting the mountain via the Piper Trail, we climbed onto icy slabs blown clean by wind to gaze down upon frozen lakes and valleys and across at waves of stiff, white-encrusted mountains that broke against the horizon.

## Warming Ways

I had started our hike up Stony Brook wearing my base layers (thin, fast-drying, polyester long underwear), waterproof bib snow pants, and my waterproof shell jacket. Within 10 minutes, I had removed my gloves and would have taken off my jacket too if it hadn't been snowing.

Body heat management isn't rocket science. We are all hard wired with basic survival instincts: We put on more clothes when we are cold and shed them when we are hot. The same holds true when we winter hike, but how we manage heat—and cold—is more nuanced than if we were to go for a walk or cross-



Blustery winds buffeting the balds in the Carter-Moriah Range require extra gear. The author's goggles ensure better visibility in the wind-whipped conditions and help shelter against frostbite. Her balaclava (fleece hoodie) under a hat and hood traps more body heat and covers exposed skin. Photo by Pete Ingraham

## LEARN MORE

For a list of what gear to bring on a day hike and where to go, visit [www.outdoors.org/webextra](http://www.outdoors.org/webextra).

For more in-depth information, see the new *AMC Guide to Winter Hiking & Camping*. The book provides a detailed guide on how to safely get out on the snow, covering everything from trip planning to group travel. Order it at [amcstore.outdoors.org](http://amcstore.outdoors.org).

country ski at a nearby touring center.

Luckily, when I began my winter forays, I already knew the core tenets of layering from my three-season hiking: Avoid moisture-holding cotton; wear fabrics (polyester, silk, wool, polypropylene, fleece) that are designed to trap heat, draw moisture away from the body, and dry quickly; and bring water-proof shells that fit over other layers. Easy enough. The art is in what and when you layer.

On the first winter hike I did with Pete, up to the summit of Carter Dome, I didn't believe him when he told me, "You won't be cold." We were standing at the Nineteen Mile Brook trailhead, and I had on a hat, my base layers, a mid-weight fleece, and my shells. I was just warm enough in the frosty air, but he suggested that I take off the fleece before we began hiking. No can do.

In 10 minutes, we stopped so I could remove the fleece. I was hot and had begun to sweat.

Pausing during a hike to add or remove clothing is a necessary and frequent event when winter hiking. The goal is to stay warm but minimize how much you sweat, since wet clothing—even fast-wicking material—will chill your skin and drop your core temperature. It took a few hikes for me to develop my own layering system. It borrows from some generally accepted principles, but it's also adapted to how my own furnace fires, since we all manage heat differently.

Backcountry experts, for instance, recommend that you hike at a pace where you don't sweat. It's good advice, because the drier your clothes are, the warmer you'll be. But I've found it impossible.

Pete and I hike at a fast, but comfortable, pace, which means we sweat even if wearing a single base layer. It's not noticeable

until we stop and the moisture cools against our skin. To manage this, we both put on mid-weight fleeces under our shells during our break. Sometimes, if it's needed, I will put my down jacket on over my shell and zip on fleece pants over or under my bibs.

The system works, although it took me a few outings to gauge when I needed to add or subtract a layer. Pete also had to remind me that if I became too cold while we were stopped, all I had to do was get up and walk around to reignite some body heat. Problem solved.

The two simplest tricks I've adopted are based on common sense...but easy to forget.

First, mom was right. Wear a hat. In fact, wear two. It may not look fashionable, but if I'm cold, I will put on a second hat, and that usually helps to warm my hands or feet. After all, 50 percent of our body heat escapes through our heads.

Second, the snow is nice to look at, but don't sit on it. Snow, rocks, and frozen stumps drain our bodies of their hard-earned heat, so I sit on my pack or a closed-cell foam sleeping pad when taking five.

### In the Clear

There's an old saying that goes, "A happy mountaineer always pees clear." Light or clear urine is a sign of good hydration, while darker urine indicates dehydration, and that can trigger lethargy, fatigue, and possibly hypothermia.

After my first season of winter hiking, I chose a new jacket based largely on the fact that it had a front inside pouch to hold my water bottle. I am a lazy drinker. Even in the warmest months, I can let hiking get ahead of hydration. It's doubly hard in the winter, when drinking cold water is less appealing.

On average, hikers should drink between 4 to 6 quarts

Trees locked in snow and ice frame the Willey Range Trail as the author descends Mount Willey in Crawford Notch. Even though the temperature did not rise above 14 degrees Fahrenheit, staying warm was easy. Breaks were brief, and layers were put on and taken off as needed. Photo by Pete Ingraham



(liters) of water per day, even more if conditions or terrain demand it. Keeping the water bottle near me does two things: It prevents the water from freezing because it's next to my body and it allows me to drink on the go. Lucas St. Clair and Yemaya Maurer, authors of the recently published AMC Guide to Winter Hiking and Camping, also suggest wrapping a thin cord around a bottle's lid, stringing it around your neck, and tucking the water bottle inside a shell. Water bottles wrapped in extra clothing or in an insulated pouch can stay on or in the backpack too.

I've also developed a palate for warm water. Pete and I pour hot water into our water bottles before a trip to keep the liquid from getting to a teeth-chattering temperature. On mild days, the water will stay warm for a good three to four hours. (We avoid doing this with our old polycarbonate plastic water bottles, as they can leach Bisphenol-A, a potentially dangerous chemical.)

Hot chocolate is also worth the weight of the thermos in my pack. The steamy liquid is easy to drink in cold temperatures and provides a small fraction of the 4,000 to 7,000 calories we can burn while winter hiking. Which brings up another fringe benefit of winter hiking: Zero guilt in eating good, fatty foods. Most people will be hard pressed to consume more calories than they use in the backcountry. The greater risk is often in not packing enough calories. A general rule of thumb, according to Maurer and St. Clair, is to plan on 2.5 pounds of food per person, per day.

### If the Shoe Fits

We had hiked almost two miles on the Stony Brook Trail, and were surrounded by leafless, thin birch trees and evergreens draped in white when the untracked snow began to lap at our knee caps. Grudgingly, we took off our packs to fetch our snowshoes.

Snowshoes are absolutely essential gear for winter trips. Their decking and cleats provide traction and stability...but I've learned not to be too eager to put them on.

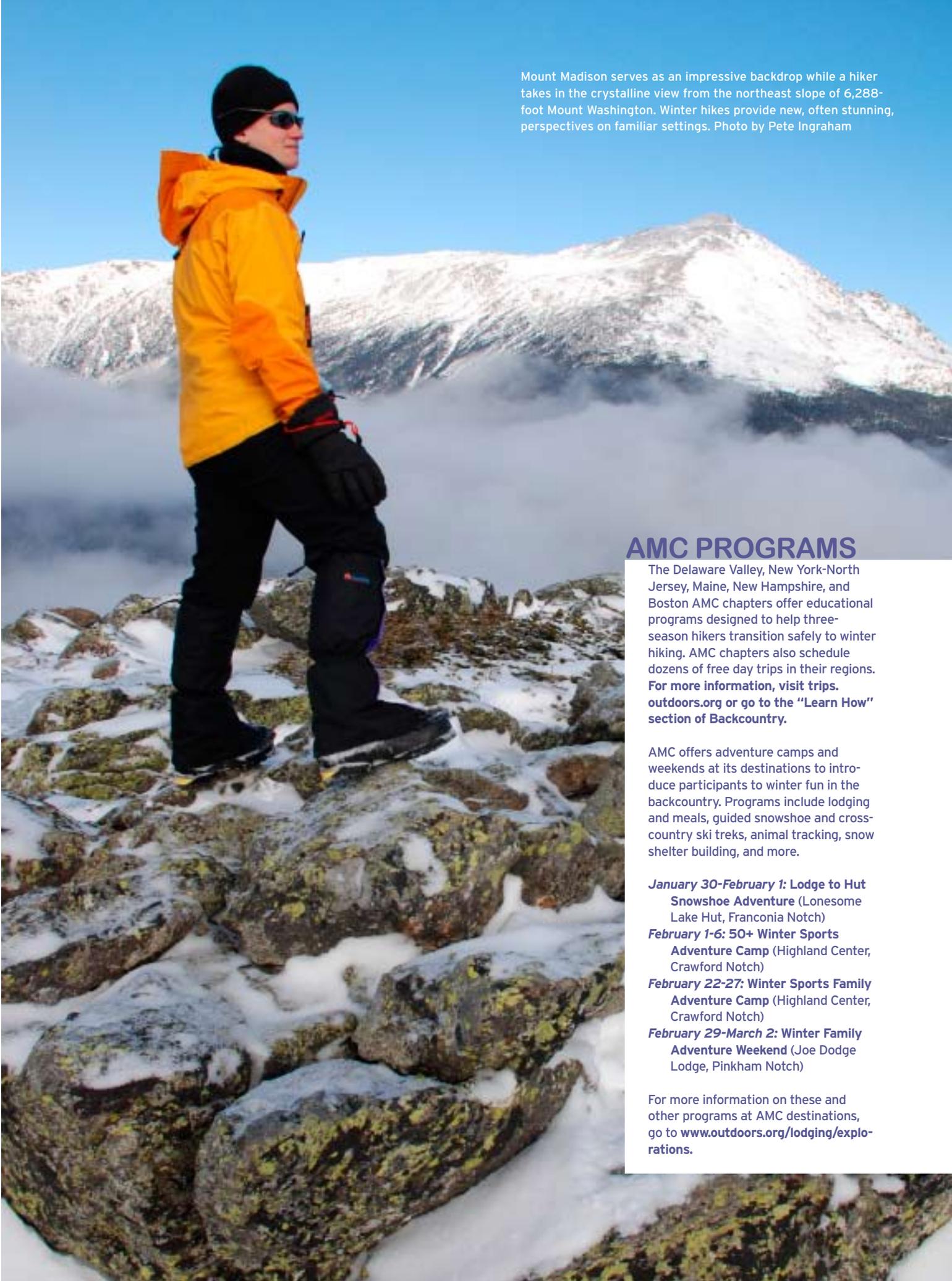
Every pound added to your foot is the rough equivalent to putting 5 to 10 pounds on your back. And, if you're snowshoeing uphill, you can burn 1,000 calories or more per hour. It's strenuous work, especially with a good-sized pack on. We leave the shoes off on packed, stable terrain where there's no significant post-holing (when your boots break through the surface and sink deep into the snow).

Luckily, I owned a pair of snowshoes when I began winter hiking, but there were other items on the gear list, like crampons, which I purchased once I decided I liked the activity and would need such equipment. (Renting before you buy is a good way to test your interest level and the gear, which varies widely based on performance and personal preference.)

Once my snowshoes were fastened, I grabbed my adjustable trekking poles—gear I use in every season—and began following the deep tracks Pete made as he broke trail. We were still 2.5 miles shy of the shelter and now wading uphill through snow that would become thigh-deep without our shoes on. But we were also alone in a wood frozen ●

*This is the first in a two-part primer on winter hiking and camping. In the January/February 2009 issue, Ingraham will describe her camping experience at Imp Shelter.*

**Karen Ingraham** is the magazine's senior editor.



Mount Madison serves as an impressive backdrop while a hiker takes in the crystalline view from the northeast slope of 6,288-foot Mount Washington. Winter hikes provide new, often stunning, perspectives on familiar settings. Photo by Pete Ingraham

## AMC PROGRAMS

The Delaware Valley, New York-North Jersey, Maine, New Hampshire, and Boston AMC chapters offer educational programs designed to help three-season hikers transition safely to winter hiking. AMC chapters also schedule dozens of free day trips in their regions. **For more information, visit [trips.outdoors.org](http://trips.outdoors.org) or go to the “Learn How” section of Backcountry.**

AMC offers adventure camps and weekends at its destinations to introduce participants to winter fun in the backcountry. Programs include lodging and meals, guided snowshoe and cross-country ski treks, animal tracking, snow shelter building, and more.

**January 30-February 1: Lodge to Hut Snowshoe Adventure** (Lonesome Lake Hut, Franconia Notch)

**February 1-6: 50+ Winter Sports Adventure Camp** (Highland Center, Crawford Notch)

**February 22-27: Winter Sports Family Adventure Camp** (Highland Center, Crawford Notch)

**February 29-March 2: Winter Family Adventure Weekend** (Joe Dodge Lodge, Pinkham Notch)

For more information on these and other programs at AMC destinations, go to [www.outdoors.org/lodging/explorations](http://www.outdoors.org/lodging/explorations).