

Footprints in the Snow

A backpacker, wild about West Virginia in other seasons, bundles up to explore during win-

Except for freezing my lips to a harmonica during a shindig with other backpackers who were stranded in a backcountry blizzard, the treacherous winter hike turned out well enough. I still get chills recalling the crackle of icy trees crashing down near our rickety shelter, and I'm still steamed at the klutz who broke our only lantern and doused a promising party. Let me back up, though, because this adventure in West Virginia's Cranberry Wilderness actually began years earlier with a pleasantly snowy photo safari under far less chaotic conditions.

Shutterbug Winter

Growing up outdoorsy in the Mountain State, my friends and I explored remote trails all over. We laced boots, shouldered gear, and pitched primitive camps in blooming springtime, by summer swimming holes, and during brisk autumn weekends. We didn't think to go in winter until one of us took up photography and suggested shooting footprints in the snow.

So, bundled for the season, off we traipsed one February. Artful nature images soon covered our walls at home. In them, frost clings to windswept boulders. Spruce boughs and tightly curled rhododendron leaves sag under heavy accumulation. Trout crouch in ice-rimmed streams. The tracks of deer, fox, snowshoe hare, black bear, and our own boots filled roll after roll of film.

Each winter we reloaded the camera and charted a course, settling on the sprawling, untamed Cranberry area in Monongahela National Forest as our favorite frigid destination. We stumbled upon a series of beaver ponds, frozen like nature's ice rinks in a meadow between forks of a river. We explored a vast field of flat rocks resembling giant elephants' ears and jumped between them. Starlight—and

once a full moon—poured magical light over fresh snowfalls.

Caught in a Storm

Then came a fateful trip like no other. Caught off guard by a sudden ice storm that quickly coated everything with a slick gloss, we headed for one of the old three-sides-and-a-roof shelters scattered in the wilderness. Apparently, so did all the other hikers in the area. A hut designed for, at most, 10 people soon held twice that number.

Huddling for warmth and sharing everything from beef jerky to blankets to a godsend thermos of hot Kahlúa, we entered a long night of howling wind and fierce precipitation. A party atmosphere—as in we're all in this together—emerged. One hiker toting a battered guitar played staying-alive

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blues. I added wailing riffs on my harmonica. Others pounded on pots and pans to beat back the growing gale.

A clumsy dancer's wayward elbow killed the lantern and plunged us into a somber darkness. We shivered through the night, hearing great limbs break loose and plunge noisily to the ground. Yet morning revealed a strange and wonderful world—perfectly quiet and impossibly bright with fantastic ice sculptures glistening all around. We earned the photos we shot that day during the slow hike back to cars buried in snowdrifts at the trailhead.

Surviving that blizzard brings to mind the old Boy Scouts edict, "Be Prepared." Good maps, extra food and clothing, a sense of adventure, and plenty of film all came in handy. To that list I'll add one kernel of wisdom learned the hard way: Always warm your harmonica before pressing it to chapped lips.

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