
Climbing at 15 below.

Posted by MarkF - 02/04/2007 04:31pm

Decided to "push my envelope" today and go climbing. At about -15 F. Really, a nice sunny day with very little wind - just happened to be about 25 degrees colder than my previous coldest climb. Picked a familiar aspen tree just a little ways into the woods from my house.

Dressing up: I've gotten to really like Duofold long underwear for winter activity, the stuff with a thin layer of polyester against the skin and a wool-poly layer over that. Thick wool/synthetic socks. A polyester pile jacket. A coverall over all of that; when layers coming untucked in the middle of a climb, having skin exposed on back and stomach is distracting. Sorels (thick insulated boots), lined gloves, a Mad-Bomber hat, and a beard (there's a reason more guys wear beards in the north). This worked fine - I had scarf and winter jacket along just in case, but never used them. Being acclimated helps; I've been outside a lot this winter, mostly just for walks.

Oh, one other detail: if you're a male outside at below zero temperatures for very long, a bit of extra insulation over the groin area is helpful.

Tree entry: I'm still impressed that Zing-It throwline doesn't stiffen up more in the cold. It's only a little more prone to throw tangles than in the summer. Only problem was a throwbag ring lodging on a branch stub - actually snapped the Zing-It trying to get it down (never thought I'd do that; maybe the stuff is a little weaker in the cold...). Eventually hit a good TIP but then the next problem came up. Su Sleeves REALLY don't like this kind of cold; the covering gets brittle and cracks, and the sleeve wants to keep sliding off the branch after it's set. The metal inside is unaffected, so it's not a safety issue, but I'm going to have to go back to my leather sleeves for these conditions. Other than these annoyances, the main problem in all of this was maintaining manual dexterity. Body core temperature was fine, but bare fingers (I can't toss a throwbag wearing gloves) chill fast, and bare fingers touching anything aluminum chill INSTANTLY. However you layer up, leaving your neck open enough to be able to put your hands against your neck (or, better, jam them into your armpits) is really helpful.

Climbing: Climbing was pretty much as usual. Since I couldn't grip the rope very well with lined leather gloves, I used my old "training wheels" rig of microcender+footloops for the first 15 feet. Wasn't sure that single footlocking the tail (my usual way of DdRT once I have a bit of rope under me) would work with big fat round Sorel boots, but it was fine. Not too warm or too cold. Crystal clear blue sky and bright snow all over the ground. Didn't hang out as long as usual, and didn't hassle with a second pitch (not a lot farther to go in that tree anyway - the first pitch was near the top), but it was nice up there.

On the whole, not a bad climb.

When I got back, for some reason Wendy didn't want a kiss while I still had ice all over my beard...

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Cold Climbers

Posted by Oldtimer - 02/05/2007 12:53pm

You are a brave-crazy man. I would not go out when it gets below 32 degrees and climbing is out of the question. Current temp.: 58 degrees and clear skies!
Thanks for the report thou.

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Posted by moss - 02/05/2007 04:37pm

Good to know that footlocking the tail works with Sorel boots. I've been climbing recently but at temperatures no lower than a balmy 20 f. or so. Your bare hand down the back of the neck technique works great for thawing numb fingers, it's like a built-in oven. Makes winter climbing possible for me otherwise it's a no go if hands are too numb to grab the rope. Wearing Sorels might solve the numb feet problem for me.

I think you're the official cold weather tester of extreme winter tree climbing techniques. It looks like you've nearly found the practical limit.

Climb photos from the night before last:

http://farm1.static.flickr.com/150/378875076_e499751f1a.jpg

-moss

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Posted by MarkF - 02/05/2007 05:40pm

One other note: I think at these temperatures (noticably below zero F), that tree branches really are more brittle. You can see this with twigs right now: stuff that could be bent double most of the time snap off quite easily with just a slight bend. With this in mind, I'm even more conservative than usual when picking TIPS.

Moss: Nice pic. I'm not sure that my camera wouldn't freeze up at these temps, so haven't tried photos lately. I was pleasantly surprised by footlocking with Sorels; you may have to rearrange the angle at which you hold your foot, but it works OK.

- Yes, I think about -15 to -20F is about my limit. 20 to 25 F feels pretty balmy about now - it's all a matter of what you get used to. I might actually have some kind of temperature range record for climbing within a 12-month period; back in June I was up a Magnolia tree in E. Texas in temperatures in the mid to upper 90's, and during the heat wave last summer we had temps like that in Minnesota.

Oldtimer: I lived in College Station and Houston each for a couple of years before I came up to Minnesota. What feels OK is partly a matter of personal preference, and partly what you have a chance to get used to. Austin just doesn't expose you to much below freezing. For me, Minnesota actually fits better; I always felt like a moose in a rain forest while I lived in Houston.

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Posted by moss - 02/05/2007 07:14pm

Originally posted by MarkF

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At 20-25 f I overheat during ascent if I have too many layers on. It's nice to have the layers when you're sitting in the tree trying to set a new TIP or doing one of the other fun activities that might keep you still for more than 5 or ten minutes in the climb. When the wind blows hard enough it's uncomfortable at any temperature below mid 20's.

I've used my digicam down to around zero, it works fine but the rechargable batteries die fast. I carry extras in my pants pocket to keep them warm so they won't lose their charge as fast. The key to camera and lens health in cold weather shooting is to keep it in a zipped bag when you bring it back into the house and let it warm up gradually.

-moss

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