



Winter skills webinar Q&A

January 2022

As Ben was not able to answer all the questions during the live winter skills webinars, we've answered more of them below. If you have any additional questions about mountain skills or safety please email ben@mountaineering.scot

Visit the #ThinkWINTER section of the Mountaineering Scotland website for more information about heading to walk, climb or ski in the Scottish hills in winter: www.mountaineering.scot/safety-and-skills/thinkwinter/clothes-and-kit

Avalanche awareness

Can you get much info about avalanche possibility by digging into the snow on the hill (without expert knowledge)?

Doing a snow profile and stability test within the snow can give useful information, but only if you know what you are doing and what you're looking for. It also really only gives a small glimpse into what is happening around the mountains. Looking at the weather and avalanche forecasts and being observant to the conditions will give you a better understanding of snow conditions, when out on the mountains.

There are some really useful resources on the 'Be Avalanche Aware' website and app from Scottish Avalanche Information Service: <http://beaware.sais.gov.uk/resources/>

What's the best way to spot cornices?

Cornices can be easier to see from below - it looks like an overhang of snow. They can be a little harder to spot from above as you must look for where ground ends and snow begins. If you are close to a steep drop or corrie edge and there is a lot of snow covering the ground, which you can't see over, the chance is it's a cornice. If in doubt as to your proximity to an edge, give it a wider berth than you think you need to.

Read more about cornices at <https://www.mountaineering.scot/thinkwinter/cornices-advice>

What are 'shooting cracks'?

Shooting cracks happen when a person (walker, climber, or skier) puts an additional load (weight) onto the surface layer of snow they are travelling on and causes a cracking line to appear, which can run to the depth of any weakness within the layers of snow and can stretch out in front of you. This is a **BIG RED FLAG** which indicates there is instability in the surrounding snow and can inform you of what may be happening on a larger scale throughout the mountains. This link to The Scottish Avalanche Information Service resource page is very helpful:

<http://beaware.sais.gov.uk/resources/>

Winter clothing and kit

Any recommendation for a synthetic insulated jacket?

We are spoilt for choice these days with so many companies making similar jackets that keep you warm. It's always best to try lots of different ones and find what works best for you. My personal choice is a good balance between lightweight, packability and warmth along with a hood that will fit over a helmet for when I'm climbing. However, if you're not needing this option, look for a snug close-fitting hood that's also comfortable.

Watch our clothing and kit video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6E8Kq1JQ-vw&t=7s>

In windy conditions do you have a recommended map holder, or do you use a laminated section?

These Ortlieb map cases are a great option. They are soft and flexible and can easily be stored in a coat pocket.

https://www.ortlieb.com/uk_en/map-case+D13

Best make of head torch please?

There are lots of brands out there, some more affordable than others. I have always used Petzl and Black Diamond head torches but, have recently started using Fenix torches and they are pretty good so far! In terms of brightness, I would look for something that has a long burn time and a minimum brightness of Around 300 lumens. Other considerations are beam width/spread and distance. Make sure you have spare batteries or, ideally, a spare headtorch in winter, as it's much easier to put on a headtorch than fiddle around with changing batteries.

Are there goggles you'd recommend that let you read maps but protect you from glare? Also, polarized or not?

Clear lenses are better for reading the maps and for protecting your eyes from extreme wind and snow in the air. On a sunny clear day, sunglasses would be the better option. Polarized lenses help to block out direct glare from the eyes and don't distract from reading the map too much in good light. However, in dull or flat light conditions (or even in the dark!) clear lens goggles are much better for clarity.

What Garmin locator device were you referring to?

There are a various Personal Locator Beacons (PLBs) on the market, some of which require a subscription to make full use of the features available, such as, the Garmin InReach Mini. The SPOT device is a good starting point if you want an additional device that can send pre-set message and SOS if out in areas of poor or limited phone signal.

Have a look at this video which takes you through some of the options: <https://youtu.be/U1IP5hQhopw>

More information about PLBs: www.mountaineering.scot/safety-and-skills/thinkwinter/emergency-beacons

Can you recommend a specific first aid kit for taking up the hills?

Any first aid kit from Life Systems, is a good place to start and there are several options available depending on what you are doing and how much you are willing to carry. Make sure it is in a fully waterproof drybag to protect it from the snow and damp.

Emergencies

In a bad case scenario, pitch a tent to wait it out or walk back?

If faced with an unexpected change in weather conditions, it's always best to think about how it will affect the rest of your day and if the more challenging conditions will add to the time, where your pace may slow down, and more attention is required for navigating.

I would think about the option of getting off the hill first so not to risk being caught out but, if the worst-case scenario is to happen, having a group shelter or emergency bivy bag would be better and much lighter to carrying than a tent. Check out the links below to some of the kit that is always a useful addition to what you need to carry:

Emergency shelter - <https://www.cotswoldoutdoor.com/p/rab-4-6-person-shelter-D1112049.html?colour=157>

Bivy bag - <https://www.cotswoldoutdoor.com/p/lifsystems-light-and-dry-bivi-bag-E7344060.html?colour=157>

Winter skills and other information

What training do you recommend for beginners who never used crampons and ice axe?

There are some great short videos available from Glenmore Lodge that demonstrate the basics of ice axe and crampon use. I would also certainly recommend doing an intro to winter skills course that will give you first-hand experience and opportunities to practice the skills.

Check out the Mountaineering Scotland webpage for our list of winter skills courses or find a local mountaineering instructor:

www.mountaineering.scot/safety-and-skills/courses-and-events/our-courses/winter-skills

How do you strike the balance between when to walk with ice axe and when to use walking poles?

Imagine being on ground that has consequences of a slip becoming a slide and the slide is down an icy slope into rocks or over a steep edge, and the only thing in your hand is a walking pole! Trying to arrest this slide without an ice axe will be virtually impossible! If I am on slope or in terrain where there are consequences, I ask a simple question: "What would happen if I slipped now?" I want to prevent a slip from happening so using crampons and an ice axe is a must on ground where a slip would have serious consequences.

Are snowshoes useful?

Snowshoes certainly do have their place. They are generally more useful for very soft or powder snow, which is not a common occurrence in Scotland (but it does happen!). It's mostly wind-blown snow and compact snow/ice we have to deal with in the mountains, which is where crampons work best.

Do you know if RECCO technology helps at all?

The Recco system is a small reflect device that a signal will bounce off from back to a receiver to help locate a casualty if buried in an avalanche. HOWEVER, it requires a specialised receiving unit to be used by professionals or Mountain Rescue and is more commonly used in Europe. As a skier in a group, it would be better to carry a Transceiver, Snow Shovel and Probe and seek training on how to use them efficiently for any possible rescues.

Are there areas that would have higher avalanche or cornice risk such as the Cairngorms rather than say the Arrochar Alps?

In short, no! All mountain areas in full winter conditions will have potential avalanche hazards. Whether the terrain is simple or complex, it is important to check the weather conditions over a few days and keep an eye on the wind, which will transport and redistribute snow on leeward aspects of the slopes. Also use the Scottish Avalanche Information Service avalanche forecast and blogs to check the conditions for the region, and follow the Be Avalanche Aware checklist to help make informed decisions.

Learn more about avalanches and access useful links at <https://www.mountaineering.scot/safety-and-skills/thinkwinter/avalanche>

Any ski touring tips or key takeaways?

An avalanche transceiver, snow shovel and probe are essential items to carry when ski touring. Knowing how to Use them is vital, as time will be against you if an unfortunate accident should occur. A transceiver should always be switched On and tested before travelling on the hills and worn on your person, rather than being in your pack.

If you are ski touring around ski resort areas, read and follow the Snowsport Touring Code:

<https://www.mountaineering.scot/activities/snowsports-touring/code>

Do you have any recommendations for where to learn map reading?

There are lots of useful videos available to help in getting an understanding of map reading skills but, it is always better to do a course or join a hillwalking/mountaineering club to gain first hand skills. Mountaineering Scotland offer its members a range of navigation courses through the spring and summer, either 1 day or weekend courses. Check out the link to see what's on offer. <https://www.mountaineering.scot/safety-and-skills/courses-and-events/our-courses/navigation-courses>

Are the Cairngorms on the east the best for walking conditions? ie is there better snow quality than in the West, Glencoe area or higher?

Depending on the weather systems and wind direction, snow conditions do vary throughout the Scottish Highlands during the winter season. In general west coast mountains are more rugged and generally steeper terrain that can present more challenges when planning a day out on the hills.

Where do you start as a complete newbie to mountain walking? What is the thing that catches most newbies out?

If you are new to hill walking and are keen to develop those all-important skills, check out the Mountaineering Scotland Sofa2Summit online program (available from March 2022). This starts from the basics right up to getting you ready for your first trip out on the hills. Alternatively think about joining a club, where you can meet likeminded people and build up your confidence as part of a group.

One thing I think can catch anybody out on their first time out is being over ambitious and going for a big day out and totally underestimating it! Start off small and build up to the bigger adventures once you've gained more experience and mountain specific fitness.

Do you have any tips for wild camping in the hills?

Wild camping on the Scottish mountains in winter is something which I wouldn't do personally, as conditions are much challenging and not to mention a lot colder! I would certainly wait for guaranteed clear weather windows, with little wind. It might also be best to keep to lower elevations, where it would be more sheltered.

However for those who wish to camp in winter, advice is available on the #ThinkWINTER section of our website: <https://www.mountaineering.scot/safety-and-skills/thinkwinter/winter-camping>

In terms of food, would you bring the same in winter as you would on a hike in summer? Are there any key differences?

I would recommend a mix of foods that you want to eat rather than need to eat just for energy. That being said, not all food is great for winter, for example, mars bars and other similar chewy chocolate can turn almost rock solid, and you may end up losing a tooth! Jelly babies, Turkish delight, cold pressed fruit bars and oat-based bars are some of my favourites. For more savoury options I would have either peanut butter and jam or humous, cheese and apple wraps. Everyone has different tastes, so trial and error are the best way to find what works for you. Good quality slow-release carbs are great for keeping the fuel tank topped up and sweets are great for that quick boost or pick me up! And always remember to pack some extra for emergencies.

How much snow/ice would make you consider taking crampons/axe?

An important aspect to remember is that winter is a season not just having snow on the hills. We need to change our mindset and carry those additional bits of kit and clothing for that season, such as a headtorch because the days are much shorter. So, I think an ice axe and crampons are essential bits of kit. On a journey in the mountains, you just never know what snow or ice conditions you might come across. I always say, 'it's better to be looking at them, than looking for them!'

Read more about crampons: <https://www.mountaineering.scot/activities/mountaineering/winter-mountaineering/getting-started/crampons>

Read more about ice axes: <https://www.mountaineering.scot/activities/mountaineering/winter-mountaineering/getting-started/ice-axes>

Do you take a battery pack?

A lightweight powerpack can be handy to have for those 'just in case' moments when you may need to give your phone little boost for when it gets cold and suck the life from it! If you do take one, think about weight and how often you will use it in a day. You might only need that one charge for an emergency, so lightweight would be the way to go.

Is there a facility to find groups who might be going out and willing to let you join?

Good question. Yes! There are lots of clubs throughout Scotland and the UK that you can be a part of and get out with like with like-minded people, who are always willing to help if you're new to hill walking or just want great company for a day out. Clubs affiliated to Mountaineering Scotland can also provide training for members, which is an added bonus. Follow this link to the Mountaineering Scotland webpage to search for clubs by region:

<https://www.mountaineering.scot/find-a-club>

Is a helmet something to have for winter hiking, maybe light scrambling or is it an overkill?

I think this is a personal choice to carry one but, it will depend on an individual's risk tolerance and what they are setting out to do that day. If I am planning a day where their risks are higher and exposure to more technical terrain are greater, where a slip or fall is far more serious then I would consider having one. It may also be that there are other people doing the same route above you and you're protecting yourself from rockfall or other things coming from above.



Mountaineering Scotland is the representative body for hill walkers, climbers and snowsport tourers in Scotland.

Join us and let us help you get where you want to be:

www.mountaineering.scot