

Essential Skills: Your winter rack by Rob Jarvis

The winter game is a tough one, but a cool head, warm body and an eye for conditions will all help you get up your chosen route. That and having the right tools for the job.

Go too minimalist (à la Tom Patey on Eagle Ridge in 1953) and you'll be in for an unnecessary scare. Take too much and you'll be weighed down by an expensive and spikey payload. Here are some tips on what to throw in the bag and what to leave behind this winter.

Standard kit

You'll have all this kit from rock climbing in summer, but don't simply pack your summer rack, be aware of a few things.

Quickdraws. Light krabs are in vogue, but beware of taking this too far. Karabiners need to be big enough so they are easy to clip with a cold, gloved hand and large wire gates are my favourite. Long quickdraws are commonly required, so use 4ft slings which can either be tied off short or extended to full length. Longer slings also come in use for tying off ice-screws, icicles or pegs. Consider using a bandolier - the back of your harness is hard to reach with a rucksack and extra layers on.

Nuts. If you desperately pound nuts into icy cracks, their cables can split. Tap wires in gently, or you'll have an expensive climb.

Cams. Cams and ice don't mix well - you should be aware of the severe limitations of

cams in verglassed cracks. But when the rock is dry or just frosted they can work fine. Some cams are more 'winter friendly' than others - Black Diamond Camalots are my favourites.

Hexes. Rockcentrics are the business in winter, offering large but light protection. They can be strongly encouraged into cracks, ideally with your hammer, and are far less vulnerable than cams to the 'slippery crack' phenomenon. So even if you'd not be seen dead with hexes in summer, think again when winter climbing.

Specialist winter protection

It'd be a strange climber that had this lot on their summer rack.

Ice screws and Abalakovs. For pure ice routes you'll want at least two screws per belay, and if pitches are long and sustained, another 6-8 for runners. Don't economise on ice screws. Yes, good ones are expensive, but you'll regret being on the sharp end with a blunt screw. Get some rackers for your harness and place them in the optimum spot where you can reach the screws, but they don't trash your overtrousers. Match the length of the screw with the depth of the ice, using stubby screws in thin ice rather than tying off longer ones. I always take a range of sizes for protecting the climb and two long (22cm) screws for belays and making threads. Don't forget your Abalakov threader and some spare tat too.

Pegs. Most popular mixed routes are well endowed with runner placements and don't need pegs to protect them. However, on the days when everything is liberally plastered in verglas, pegs may save the day. For folk heading off to more obscure venues they become an invaluable asset - I know of several active new routers who carry large racks of pegs from knife blades right through to fat bongs. On ice or mixed, I'll generally have 3-4 pegs on my harness, but that's usually where they stay.

Ice Hooks. Of psychological value only on ice, they can provide emergency runners on mixed ground. A friend once got committed on steep, serious ground and a hook was the only piece of gear he could find. After an agonising lower off he coolly flicked the ropes and the hook popped right out. Gulp.

Warthogs. The only route where I've used more than the incidental warthog is the 1959 Face route at Creag Meagaidh. They can be handy if you climb on really turfy venues, where the rock is either compact or dubious. If that isn't the case, then don't bother.

Deadmen. I can construct something adequate with my axes and a bucket seat. So, like a nut key, I don't bother taking an extra bit of kit to do a job I can do with something else.

Screamers. All wintery protection may be assisted by using a shock absorbing quickdraw or 'screamer'. These are too beefy to carry lots of, so I usually just use one on the first runner and another on the

Expert Q&A



This issue's expert is George McEwan, head of Mountaineering at Glenmore Lodge. Having climbed throughout the world, and

coached all aspects of winter mountaineering, there isn't much he doesn't know about winter gear.

Q. Where should I gear up?

A. In a safe area. One protected from any falling debris, not in an avalanche runoff zone, and which allows you to put crampons and harness on without the risk of tumbling back down the slope. Gear up on the corrie floor if the climbs are just a short ascent above (e.g. Coire An-T-Sneachda). For climbs with a longer approach (e.g. Smith's

on the Ben), then you have a bit of a dilemma - gear up lower down and sweat your way up, or do the balancing act higher up. If you do choose to gear up later, still select a location out of the way of any debris, and stomp/cut out a ledge to comfortably sort yourself out on.

Q. What's the best way to place ice screws on the lead?

A. Find a suitable piece of ice, located where you can stand in balance. Drive one of your axes in (making sure it's bomber), hang straight-armed from it,

remove your hand from the other tool, and in one fluid action unclip one of your ready-racked ice screws. Place it against the ice at about waist height, turn the screw back and forward to start a hole, then screw home - a good placement should give you constant resistance, whilst extruding an obvious core. When the screw has been placed up to the hilt, unclip an extender, clip this to the ice screw, clip your climbing rope, grab hold of your other tool and hang from this, remove your hand from the tool you have been hanging off and shake this



Get the right gear and top out in style like Pete Rowlands.
Photo: Rob Jarvis.

next bit of gear that seems remotely dodgy.

Belay plate. Finally, all this well chosen, well placed gear won't count for much if your mate drops you because of cold, gloved hands and the slippery combination of a traditional belay plate with modern skinny ropes. Make sure you have a belay plate suitable for the diameter of the ropes you're using.

One of the best ways to decide upon what to take is by tuning into current mountain conditions. Check web forums for articles on recent ascents, and ask around. If you're not sure what conditions are like, keep an open mind and take a large flexible rack so you can make the best of whatever you come up against. ■

AMI member and MIC holder Rob Jarvis is as enthusiastic about the forthcoming Scottish winter season as he was for his first 15 years ago. He now provides guiding and instruction through his company highlandguides.com. Catch Rob this November as he co-delivers the BMC Winter Essentials lectures with Dave Hollinger.

arm out. Replace your hand on this tool and you're ready to move off - all going well you should be able to do this in under a minute. I don't bother clipping tools etc, it takes up too much time - better to become more efficient at placing screws in the first place.

Q. Is it worth investing in ice screws with handles?

A. To place ice screws fast you need lots of cutting teeth at the sharp end, lots of well-polished high relief threads (and polished inside as well = low friction), and a handle arrangement to use mechanical advantage. So if you're planning to climb steep water ice (70°+), then yes, you'll be glad of handles.

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FURTHER INFORMATION

Winter Skills: Essential Walking & Climbing Techniques

£19.95

Packed with essential information and techniques for walkers and climbers. This book is the official handbook for the Mountaineering Instructor Certificate and the Winter Mountain Leader Award. Available from the BMC online shop.



Winter Essentials DVD

£10 members / £14.99 non-members

Get the essential winter skills with this DVD from the BMC in conjunction with Mountain Leader Training England and Mountaineering Council of Scotland. Available from the BMC online shop.

BMC Safety and Skills Information

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Plenty of archive articles on all aspects winter gear. Check out Steve Long's article at www.thebmc.co.uk/Feature.aspx?id=1765.



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