



The author's companions join her for a romp through the winter landscape.

Winter woes – or winter **WOO-HOOS!**

Mae Smith

Winter can be several long, cold, miserable months; the cause for numerous cases of cabin fever, rambunctious children, and frazzled parents.

Or – winter can be wondrous and invigorating; a time to put on the creative caps, bundle up the children, and explore the beauty and excitement of this less-explored season. With a good story and proper clothing and gear, the whole family will be having so much fun the kids won't even know it's educational.

The “Story”

Children have wonderful imaginations – much better than adults – so jump start your child's imagination

with a story. This will take their minds off the cold, physical activity, and the education being slipped into the adventure. Here's one story. You are an expedition of mountain men in Wyoming for the winter. Wildlife for food and warmth is needed to survive. Ammunition is limited, so the best option is to trap animals. Before setting those make-believe traps, scout the area so traps are set in the best place.

Questions to get the exploration started:

- What animals are in the area?
- How do you know what animal it is?
- Where do they hide?
- Are there travel paths?

- Where would you set trap lines?
- How do animals survive the cold winter?

You could even build a shelter and talk about winter survival of a mountain man caught in a blizzard.

Trapping animals may not appeal to some families, so here's another possible story. You are a family of cottontail rabbits that just moved to the area. You need to eat, find a home, and escape predators to survive winter.

Questions to get the exploration started:

- What would you eat?
- Where would you hide?
- Are there other cottontail families?



The Wyoming winter invites an adventure.

- Are there signs of predators like coyotes or foxes?
- Where do predators travel (so you don't run into them)?

This story can be used for any wildlife. Your child may have some great ideas, so just let the story go where it will.

Both scenarios can take the family on a grand adventure in the park, woods, pasture, or backyard. It can be a short activity or a recurring weekend outing. Some of the educational components of these particular story lines are animal tracks, scat, winter habitat, food, and survival. You may find signs of rabbit, snowshoe hare, coyote, fox, squirrel, chipmunk, raccoon, bird, deer, moose, and other big game animals. Snow makes a very visual backdrop for these signs not as clearly seen in other seasons.

Human navigation and survival is another focus. There are numerous field guides to help identify critters and signs that might be seen.

The Essentials

A good story and willing participants are only the start to an enjoyable outdoor experience. Ensuring every member of the family is warm, safe, and happy will keep them pulling on the gloves and getting outside all winter. Frequently check children to ensure they are warm because getting cold will turn something fun into a bad experience and ruin the idea of future outings.

Tips for staying warm:

- Dress in layers instead of one big winter coat. Vigorous physical activity will quickly warm the body.
- Try to avoid sweating because as soon as you stop moving, you'll cool down and excess sweat will turn you into a popsicle.
- Synthetic fabrics or wool are a much better layer choice than cotton for base layers because they wick sweat away from the body.

- Hand and foot warmers are a great addition to pockets or a backpack in case someone does get cold. Preventing chilly hands and feet will make the fun last longer.

If the winter adventure involves traveling through deep snow, snowshoes or cross country skis can be helpful. These are available as rentals at local ski and outdoor shops. Store staff members are very knowledgeable and can equip each member of the family with the right size. Young children who want to walk on their own usually don't need poles. Skis work well in areas where the snow is packed so they glide on top. The advantage of skis is they slide and therefore move faster – but for beginners this may result in more falling. If the snow is deep and not packed, snowshoes may be a good choice; they won't slide out from under you. Children too young to tromp through the snow can be carried in a backpack or pulled in a sled.

A backpack is helpful to carry layers that are shed, snacks, water, and books. Remember to stay hydrated. Because it is colder, you may not feel like drinking but will be sweating. A thermos full of warm water, hot cocoa, or cider may be a nice addition. The winter trek may take longer than originally planned, so food is a must. Throwing in some winter survival gear such as a reflective blanket, fire starting material, and a headlamp doesn't hurt.

So there's the cure for cabin fever – get out and enjoy winter! The whole family will be amazed at how much there is to see. Who knows? Winter may become your favorite season.

Mae Smith *doesn't get cabin fever in the winter because she spends all her spare time skiing and snowshoeing. When not outside enjoying one of her favorite seasons, she is the University of Wyoming Extension educator covering northwest Wyoming and can be reached at (307) 765-2868 or maep@uwyo.edu.*