

Okpik: An Advisor's Story

by Dave Greenlee

Okpik, I am told, is pronounced with a long o sound, like ook-pick. It is an Inuit name for the bird we call the arctic or snowy owl. Since the early 70's, the BSA's Sommers Canoe Base near Ely, Minnesota has provided training in cold-weather camping and winter survival, while providing a super place for skiing, ice-fishing, and just plain fun in the snow. In the early days, I know the Okpik program was teamed up with the military who used the Base during the week for cold weather survival training. On weekends, the Scouts would come up for a three day camping experience. With these ties to military survival school, its no surprise that the training is fast paced, no-nonsense, and professionally presented. We found the gear to be practical, high-tech, and well adapted to the type of snow and cold that the Base enjoys for several months each year.



Members of our Explorer Post from Sioux Falls, South Dakota, understand cold and windy winters, but we have only been on one winter outing together. On that outing, we stayed indoors tending a fire in the Scout house at Newton Hills. Okpik taught us more about how to stay comfortable while having fun in the cold. Here are some pictures from our weekend.

I think most of our crew just wanted to have fun in the snow, so the up front training didn't always capture their undivided attention. On the other hand, after we got out on the trail, we found out who was listening! We learned that our sleeping bags

would be augmented to become "cold-weather sleeping systems", and those of us who had inadequate footwear would check-out "mukluks" and "bat-wings". Our Peak-1 camp stove would get "pre-heater paste", or we could switch to an alcohol burner. We would be carrying water bottles close to our bodies and we would make an extra effort to keep ourselves hydrated. We would wear mittens on a string so that we could quickly flip them off, use our hands, and then quickly put them back on.

With our minds packed full of new winter camping techniques, we head for the heated cabins to rest up. We'd better get some sleep and process this information so that we can spend tomorrow night on the trail. It is about zero degrees, and we are told it probably won't be any warmer on Saturday night.

Saturday morning, after breakfast in the dining hall, we are outfitted with cross-country skis that are short and especially well adapted to maneuvering through the woods. The trail we will be on is a summer portage trail with tight corners and lots of ups and downs. We check out covered sleds that resemble little boats that we can drag easily over the snow. Even though we are well prepared, several of us choose to augment our personal gear with parkas, boots, mittens, and hats that will keep us more comfortable.





With our classroom training and outfitting completed, we hit the trail Saturday morning. We find that these skis don't glide as well as touring skis, especially when pulling a sled. On the other hand, they are quite maneuverable, easy to learn on, and we can move much faster than we would with snow shoes. The skis have "Berwin bindings" that were developed at the Base. These ingenious little numbers provide us with a way to ski while wearing the mukluks and felt lined boots that keep our feet warm.

Winter food is the highest caloric foods we can carry, because we will burn extra fuel just to stay warm. Add to that the demands of skiing and building a snow hut (called a quinzee), and you are talking thousands of calories per day. They sent us out with lots of gorp, bay bread, peanut butter, and military type MREs (Meals Ready to Eat) that are loaded with fat, carbohydrate, and protein - i.e. fuel for our stoves.



It seems like every time the food comes out, a Canada Jay joins us. Some are pretty brazen and certainly earn their nickname - camp robber. In addition to an "in your face" attitude in the winter, we notice that their gray color seems to contrast the snow much more than the dusty appearance we remember from summer.



After we ski to Flash Lake and take time to explore the shoreline, some of us begin building a quinzee. Its a simple but strenuous job - just pile up a lot of snow and then burrow out the inside. We take turns on the inside so that nobody gets overheated and sweaty - our trainers have warned us that this is a great way to get into trouble later with chills and hypothermia. There are already some tent size quinzees left from previous campers, so everybody will have a snow home to sleep in. We don't need no stinking tents! We make supper in the dark, and hit the sack shortly afterwards. Using a newly learned trick, we run around the campsite a bit in order to generate internal body heat that will initially warm up our sleeping systems. Hey, it works!

On Sunday morning, I realize a major difference between summer and winter. The nights are long! I am quite comfortable in the sack, but I have been in here for about 12 hours now, and its still dark out. Next time, I'm bringing a flashlight and a good book. When we finally get up in the light, it doesn't take us much time to pack up our sleds and make our way back to the Base. It was a cold night, but nobody seems to have suffered from the experience.



I wouldn't yet profess to be as wise as Mr. Owl in the ways of winter. I can't say I would want to be snowbound in the woods waiting out a blizzard. But, after an Okpik weekend, I know we are all a bit smarter about cold weather camping. Also, we had a great time.