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# The Winter Wilderness Companion, Garrett and Alexandra Conover

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- Skills and guides - Library -



Publication: Friday 19 March 2004

## **Description :**

This is a review of Garrett and Alexandra Conover's winter operations and traditional skills manual. I have included a few selected quotes and some of my observations.

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**This book is a natural follow up to my earlier review of [Calvin Rutstrum, His Published Works](#).** Rutstrum, in his *Paradise Below Zero* and to some extent in *New Way of the Wilderness* covered winter operations in the North country. Garrett and Alexandra Conover have both updated Rutstrum's earlier works, and added tremendous detail.

Probably the best way of introducing *The Winter Wilderness Companion* would be to quote from the Conover's acknowledgements:

*Like any good trail companion, this book is quirky, opinionated, and has a sense of humor. At its best we hope it will be thought provoking, fair, gracious to allow for differences of opinion, and well reasoned to survive disagreement.*

*Although we've never met, we are indebted to Calvin Rutstrum. His book Paradise Below Zero set us on a course we are yet navigating. Although shy on detail and technique, the book has steered countless winter wanderers toward comfortable northern living. Once we personally crossed the threshold we encountered a host of experts who held the keys to various details.*

This book is filled with winter operational detail, from selecting equipment to the skills needed to use it at its best, and most importantly enjoy the time in the cold. Where Rutstrum gave some specifics of some techniques and equipment, the Conover's provide detailed procedural descriptions, and provide exact manufacture's product recommendations. This wilderness how-to is at the same time amazingly easy to read. They have taken daily operational skills and written them into chapters that educate and most importantly illustrate with excellent imagery. What could have been very dry reading is really a pleasure to read. Tidbits of personal experiences are included in each of the chapters which more fully illustrate both the techniques and the joy of the time spent in the wilderness.

Chapters include: Snowshoes and Footwear, Toboggans, Tents and Trail Stoves, Clothing for the Elements, Tools of the Trail, Provisioning, Finding Your Way, Caring for Mind and Body, Snowmobiles and Komatiks, along with equipment lists, and clothing and tent patterns. Each chapter is through and very well written and generally includes a vendor information/contact page at the end. Illustrations and photographs are very well done. The Provisioning chapter has a great many good trail food recipes and tips that, in itself, makes this text a good addition to any avid canoeists or backpackers bookshelves who operate in any weather.

As promised in the acknowledgements quoted above, they are not shy to express opinions, rather unpopular opinions too I would guess. This is my favorite passage. It illustrates an environmental awareness that is rarely expressed, sadly little considered, and much less understood by many outdoorspersons.

From Tools of the Trail: *Perhaps the most cited symbol of the low-impact school of campcraft is its insistence on the use of a camping stove rather than an axe to build open fires for cooking. Ostensibly, use of gas stoves for cooking eliminates the need for fire building and using up deadwood for fire. In heavily used areas, firewood becomes scarce, and in many areas such as high elevations, deserts, or north of the treeline, deadwood for fires is extremely limited and best reserved for those in true emergencies. Most heavily used areas also require that campers stay in established campsites (a management tool to control and centralize erosive use), and even in a firewood-rich area, such sites have little remaining wood. In these situations, using a stove is a way to reduce immediate impact.*

*The irony embodied in considering gas stoves low-impact tools requires a more encompassing view. A stove user unwittingly enlists a global army of extractors, smelters, refiners, machinists, manufacturers, and distributors, all of whom consume nonrenewable resources, contribute to toxic waste through manufacturing and transportation, and create a product that demands still more finite fuels once in use. Stoves have their place but they are anything but*

*low-impact.*

*From the conservation of limited, artificially bounded preserves, a stoves-only policy is a necessary and useful management tool. Stoves also have a place in fragile environments that have little wood to begin with, and in all woodless areas such as the high Arctic, the Antarctic, extreme elevations, and upon the seas. However, the stove might be best regarded as a **displaced**-impact item, and not held aloft as the shining symbol of a camper's light and caring touch in the world.*

This passage, of all the opinions in the book illustrates not only their preferred winter methods (wood stoves, canvas tents, toboggans etc), but, for me, tells me that they "get it". That is, they understand that *local* impact reduction is different from world-wide impact. This is a concept that I rarely see expressed by fellow backpackers. This, in my view, tailors very well with some of Calvin Rutstrum's thoughts expressed over 25 years ago. Here is an excerpt quoted from Rutstrum's 1975, *A Wilderness Life*:

*Having enjoyed more than a half century of living a large part of the year in the wilderness, and by virtue of it having lived close to manual processes, I am inclined to regard many of the mechanized devices of modern life as not so tragically dispensable should they suddenly become unavailable or greatly reduced in number through energy shortage or some other unforeseen condition. Much of the seeming indispensability of the goods of modern living is mere illusion gained from nefarious advertising, or from consumers succumbing to convenience gadgets that permit a physically phlegmatic life. We could become a stronger people by having less. We could become nobler by improving our sense of personal and national economy, avoiding all kinds of needless waste of resources.*

While this Rutstrum quote is not necessarily supporting wood fires and condemning gas stoves, it is illustrative of how it is easy to become so attached to a new tool or technique that the total impact is forgotten or at least minimized. The Conover's have similar strong opinions on other traditional tools and techniques like wool vs synthetic clothing. This, another probably unpopular opinion about synthetic clothing is expressed with humor and style:

*Next time you see a lunch-stop shot in someone's slide show, you'll be able to pick out who has what for underwear as if you had X-ray vision. Those flopped comfortably in the snow are probably-wearing layers of wool, and those standing with hunched shoulders and pinched expressions are probably desperately trying to heat up moisture trapped in a layer or two of synthetics.*

*Each year, news of the latest synthetics is covered exhaustively in outdoor magazines. The outdoor magazine trade is almost entirely funded by advertising contracts with purveyors of synthetics, and few editors are brave enough to offend their backers. Most of what follows concerns the virtues of natural fibers, as they are rapidly being forgotten. A whole generation of outdoor enthusiast has grown up in the age of synthetics and has no way of knowing whether alternatives exist or what they might be.*

Of course, these quoted passages are not really examples of the norm as the book is filled with excellent operation guidelines and techniques that are main stream, if somewhat specialized to the North Country hand-pulled toboggan style of winter enjoyment. There are plenty of things to learn from this manual, even if you disagree with the method or style. Their thought-provoking prose, their excellent presentation of skills, and their ability to paint a wonderful picture with words are the main reasons I so enjoyed this book.

Overall, this is a very well written manual of cold weather operations, with enjoyable reading style, a great sense of humor and well-thought out and presented techniques. The tools and techniques are somewhat unique to their environment and guiding styles, but make both for fine reading and even better dreaming. I know I will probably

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never operate in such an environment with such techniques, but I definitely enjoyed the reading and dreaming this book encouraged.

The 2001, 358 page, Ragged Mountain Press soft cover is getting more difficult to find. Bookfinder lists a few as new selling from \$14, and used selling near \$100! I have not reviewed (or seen) the original 1995 printing edition.

### Resources

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*Post-scriptum :Version 1.5 3/18/2004*