



Mt. Williamson in Winter

Trip Notes



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It is not necessary to travel long distances to undertake a major climb and expedition. In our backyard is a climb that rivals any other in North America for its length and in winter is a major trip requiring planning, stamina and expeditionary techniques. Mt. Williamson is the second highest peak in California but rises from the Owen's Valley at 4,000 feet to its 14,375 foot summit, easily eclipsing Mt. Whitney in base-to-top relief. Our route, the Northeast Ridge, was first ascended in 1925 by Homer Irwin. The first winter ascent was made in 1954 by John Ohrenschall and Warren Harding. Since then many other climbers have made the winter attempt but few have succeeded. Harding had taken part in an earlier failed attempt on the peak and at that time the trip leader judged Harding to be a weak individual who would probably not amount to much as a climber. Harding went on to make the first ascent of El Capitan in Yosemite by the Nose route, as well as countless other Yosemite climbs, and came to be known for his endurance and stamina. Overall this route up Williamson involves over 8,000 feet of elevation gain over a distance of five miles, with exposed camps and several long sections of fourth class terrain.

To travelers along Highway 395 Mount Williamson dominates the view as one passes south of Independence. The northeast ridge is very prominent with two towers up high, just below the summit. We will carry everything needed for the ascent and in winter this can be quite a big load.

Itinerary: We leave the dry desert at about 6,000 feet and climb a narrow, sandy ridge, working our way around towers and scrub to what passes for tree line on the route. We hope to put our first camp in around 10,000' but of course this depends on conditions. Beyond this is a technical, but short ridge section that puts us in another large bowl. Here we hope to place our last camp and be positioned for a summit attempt on the fourth day, conditions willing. Above high camp we traverse another technical ridge section before crossing over the East Horn and then the West Horn before the broad summit plateau and the final ascent to the top of the peak. Descent will be back down the route.

Meeting place and time: We plan on meeting at the public park at the south end of Independence on the west side of Highway 395 at 8.00 a.m. You can turn west on W.Citrus Street and park. Be breakfasted and ready to do a thorough equipment check. After final packing we'll head to the start of the trip, near (but not at) the Shepherd Pass trailhead parking area.

Dates and Prices: Check the latest brochure, call us or go to our web site for dates and rates. Should minimum participant numbers not be reached you will be given the option of paying our private rate, rescheduling, or cancelling. Price includes guiding, permits, all necessary group climbing gear, avalanche beacons, tents, kitchen gear and dinners, lunches and breakfasts (you bring snack items).

Notes and other information: This area lies within the range of the Sierra bighorn sheep and we need to be aware of these animals and the need not to disturb them. There are few of these magnificent animals left and we will be doing our part to avoid disturbing them during this critical time of the year when they are forced low in search of food but subject to mountain lion predation.

For a map look at the Mt. Williamson 7.5 minute map. Guide books include Secor's "The High Sierra; Peaks, Passes and Trails" and "Climbing California's Fourteeners" by Porcella and Burns.

Proper acclimatization to the elevation will greatly increase your pleasure and enjoyment of the trip. We highly recommend getting at least one day and night at altitude immediately prior to the trip, for instance, by staying in Mammoth.

Prerequisites: This is a major ascent so come prepared for hard work. Prior climbing experience is essential. You need not have camped before under winter conditions, but you do need appropriate cold weather equipment and a positive mental attitude. Have your systems down so that once we get to camp you know how to get organized, into the tent quickly and out of the cold. Packs will be heavy and the snow may be deep. Careful avalanche hazard assessment will be essential. There are no guarantees of success in winter and a big storm may well put all of our careful planning into disarray. Do not be summit oriented but go out with the goal of gaining skills and enjoying a very different climbing season.

Equipment List for Mt. Williamson in Winter

The following list is a general guide and will assist you in packing for the program. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have specific questions regarding equipment or if you need assistance prior to making a purchase. The following list will vary according to your individual requirements. Items marked with a * are items that we rent or we can coordinate rentals with a local shop. When packing **THINK LIGHTWEIGHT!**

Climbing equipment

- Boots*: A high quality mountaineering boot is essential for warm feet. We recommend a plastic boot such as an Asolo or Scarpa or a leather boot such as a Sportiva. We have rentals.
- Snowshoes* We rent snowshoes or you can obtain them from southern or northern California REI stores.
- Poles.* Telescoping probe type are best.
- Ice axe.* A general purpose axe appropriate to your height.
- Crampons.* These must be compatible with your boots.
- Harness.* We recommend an alpine style harness that is easy to put on with large boots and crampons.
- Helmet. Should be comfortable and lightweight. We provide these for the program if you do not have your own.
- Two locking carabiners and a couple of non-lockers.*
- A lightweight belay/rappel device.*
- A pair of leather gardening gloves to deal with scratchy vegetation.

Other essentials

- Internal frame backpack of 60-70 L. This must fit all of your personal gear and group equipment.
- Sleeping bag. This should be rated to about -10°F.
- Sleeping pads. A Thermarest and foam pad. A 3/4 Thermarest on a foam pad makes a good combination. Bring a repair kit along with a Thermarest in case of holes.

Clothing

- 3 pair synthetic or wool socks. Ski socks are great since they go above the boot cuff.
- Gaiters. Necessary only if pants don't cover boot top. If there is a gap, snow will get in and your feet will be wet and cold.
- 2 long underwear tops and 1 bottom.
- Warm pants, to layer between base and waterproof layer, such as softshell fabric. Get a lined style if you tend to run colder.
- Another fuzzy sweater top, such as fleece or Polartec.
- Pile/fleece/softshell fabric jacket.
- Light down jacket; synthetic fill is second choice. This is optional & can replace the previous item.
- Good quality rain/wind pants and rain jacket. Must be water proof and jacket must have a hood. Don't skimp on your rain gear.
- Warm hat that covers the ears.
- Visor hat (for sun).
- Neck gaiter.
- Lightweight windstopper-type gloves.
- Shell gloves or mittens.
- Down booties with a waterproof shell are great for in camp.

Etc.

- Sun glasses. Good quality. If you wear corrective glasses you might want a second pair in case of breakage.

- Water Bottles. Two quart (1 liter) wide mouth bottles. Hydration systems and hoses typically freeze, even with an insulation sleeve.
- A pee bottle is far more pleasant than getting out of the tent in the middle of the night. Mark it well though to avoid confusion!!
- Headlamp. With a spare set of batteries.
- Eating and drinking equipment. An insulated mug with a lid. This can double for a bowl. Fork and spoon.
- Pocket knife. Small Swiss army style, not a large Leatherman.
- Personal toiletries. Toothbrush and toothpaste. TP & a ziplock bag to carry out the used.
- Sunscreen and lip screen. 30+ SPF. A 1oz. bottle will be enough. Make sure the lip stuff actually contains a sunscreen.
- Personal Medical Kit. The guide will carry a large kit so yours will predominately consist of foot repair items, mild pain killer such as Advil, and bandaids.
- Camera/phone camera. Small enough to fit in a pocket; please no giant cameras with multiple lenses.
- Plastic Trash Sac. Handy for keeping gear in outside the tent should it rain.
- Optional reading material, journal, Kindle, etc.
- Hand warmers if you tend to run cold.
- Goggles and a face mask are great if it becomes stormy.

Food

- We include meals from lunch on Day 1 through lunch on Day 5. Bring your own snack items like cliff bars, power bars, or gorp concoctions for all days. Also bring your favorite hot drink (tea, hot chocolate, cider etc.) A days worth for most people would be 2 bars, 3 ounces of gorp, and perhaps a candy bar. Don't over do it.

Shared Equipment Provided by SMC

- Shovels
- Avalanche transceivers
- Probes
- First aid kit
- Snowshoe repair kit
- Tents
- Cooking equipment
- Group climbing equipment

You specifically don't need

- Big first aid kits (we have a comprehensive one).
- Deodorant or any toiletries beyond those listed above.
- Items that are not on this list.

Additional Thoughts

- Some people, particularly women, tend to run colder than others. If this is the case add another layer or two, a warmer sleeping bag, warmer boots and extra handwarmers
- Women – see our "Women on the Trail" information sheet at the Women's Trips pages on the website.