



□ by Rob Kesselring

Guide To Winter Tents

Things change in winter. You're wearing long wool underwear, the lakes are frozen, frost claws at your nose and instead of paddling a canoe, you are pulling a toboggan or riding a dogsled. But what really defines a winter camping experience in the Boundary Waters is the tent in which you camp.

I remember reading an article when a cold BWCAW evening forced winter camping enthusiasts to regularly get up and out of their tent, do a sequence of vigorous calisthenics until they were on the verge of sweating, and then retreat to the tent again and begin to literally chill out. Continually repeating this cycle got them through the night and earned them bragging rights, but it was plainly an exercise in survival, not camping.

These adventurers were not wearing the same clothes they wore in summer, not traveling in the same manner, not fishing with the same tackle, but they were sleeping in the same tent! The key component of enjoyable winter camping is the tent. A specialized tent that is dry and warm completely changes the dynamic of winter camping. The choice of tents is crucial to the success of your winter enterprise.

My summer canoeing buddies may shake their heads when I head up north in the winter to go camping, but once they have accompanied me on a trip, they too learn that winter camping can be as big a recharge as a summer canoe journey. That feeling of gaining strength as the trip progresses is exactly the opposite of what people predict will happen in

winter.

Most people assume winter camping is survival based, a mindset reinforced by popular mountaineering stories and films. Alpinists start off at 100% with dry gear and full strength. As they climb and camp their resources slowly diminish. Clothing and sleeping bags become increasingly damp, bodies tire, skin freezes and climbers race with ever-diminishing resources to reach their goal, a summit, and get the heck off the mountain before their expedition tents become frosty tombs. This presentation of cold weather camping makes for exciting storytelling and creates the dramatic tension of man versus nature. These stories also scare people, and as a result, keep the BWCAW almost empty during the winter months.

Although canoe country gets as cold in winter as any mountaintop, it is not a land of treeless tundra and rock. Rather, the Boundary Waters is part of an unbroken forest from Quebec to Alaska: a forest full of spruce, pine, fir and birch, some which is dead and a source of heat for the camper. A tent that can safely hold a wood fire becomes a warm and dry refuge regardless of the weather. Camping in winter in the right tent you will not just survive, you will thrive.

My niece and I were camping on Sunday Lake in Quetico last February. She made a short video of the interior of our tent and showed it at a family gathering over Easter. I got the

giggles watching this film. My family was speechless. They were prepared for a wretched frozen existence, and here I am in the soft glow of a lantern, wearing just a T-shirt, munching popcorn and sipping a drink. The only suggestion of ice was floating in our cups.

What is called traditional winter camping is rapidly gaining popularity, but to many remains an unknown. Because the crux of traditional winter camping is the tent, this article will compare three of the best-known tents designed for use with a wood stove.

As the name implies, traditional winter camping is not a new idea. Camping in tents equipped with wood stoves has always been the normal way trappers, hunters and commercial fishermen in Canada's interior have camped. Even further back and long before the arrival of Europeans, North America's aboriginal people made their winters comfortable by bringing the fire inside their skin lodges. The newest tent and stove designs have combined traditional styles with modern materials and innovations to reduce weight, bulk and to simplify set-up. Older canvas wall tents and tipis required poles cut from the forest creating much greater environmental impact than the newer designs. The tents tested in this article include aluminum poles and can be pitched in a "no trace" manner.

In the winter of 2005-06 I camped in winter tents of three different manufacturers and

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with three different wood stoves. These manufacturers are small outfits. The world-wide headquarters of Four Dog Stoves is a garage an hour's drive north of Minneapolis; SnowTrekker Tents (formerly Empire Canvas) is a small plant in Solon Springs, Wisconsin; Frost River is a small Duluth company and Kifaru is a family business located in Colorado. I talked with several of the owners and manufacturers (often the same person).

All of these tents and stoves are undergoing a process of continual improvement; Yankee ingenuity at its best. The SnowTrekker-4 and Kifaru tents are the ongoing results of prototypes tested by real campers in the forests of North America. These tents and stoves are not mass-produced, they are not out-sourced to some distant land, rather the very people who have designed and used them craft them.

They are truly custom products and that makes them both exciting to purchase and expensive. Expect to pay in the neighborhood of a thousand dollars for any of the tent/stove combinations described in this article. For most people a winter tent is a major purchase. The tents tested are not really in direct competition with each other. They all have their own specific niche, and my purpose is not to rank them but rather to explain them and help you make sure you end up with the tent/stove combination that meets your specific needs.

If you like to paddle wood canvas canoes, enjoy wool shirts and cotton hats you will appreciate the timeless design of Frost River's Campfire Tent. Often called the Baker or lean-to design, this style tent has been around a long time. It got a huge boost from Paul Mason, Canada's legendary canoeist in his book, *The Song of The*

Paddle. It is truly a four-season tent. In the summer a huge screen door makes it seem as if you're camping beneath the stars. A large awning provides shade and shelter from the rain for cooking. In cooler weather side panels provide more weather protection. In winter a separate end piece with a stovepipe hole turns the entire structure into a weatherproof heatable tent.

In its winter configuration, with almost 144-square feet of floor space, it was the biggest tent I tested. On a four-day Quetico dogsled trip last winter there were only two of us, but a third or fourth could have easily joined us. The main body of the tent has a canvas floor so we pitched that directly on packed snow. The kitchen and work section we scraped to bare ground. This made it easy to keep the elevated sleeping platform clean and dry and prevented the

stove from melting down; this clearly separates the sleeping area from the kitchen area.

Because of the volume of this tent and the less-than tight seal between the side flaps and awning, in sub-zero weather this will never be a T-shirt tent. Although the big flat walls provide extraordinary interior space, in a wind they billow and act like a bellows, blowing out warm air and sucking in outside air. But with the titanium Four Dog Stove hissing and popping it was cozy in the tent, especially after the first night when we banked the front walls with snow and snugged up the seams.

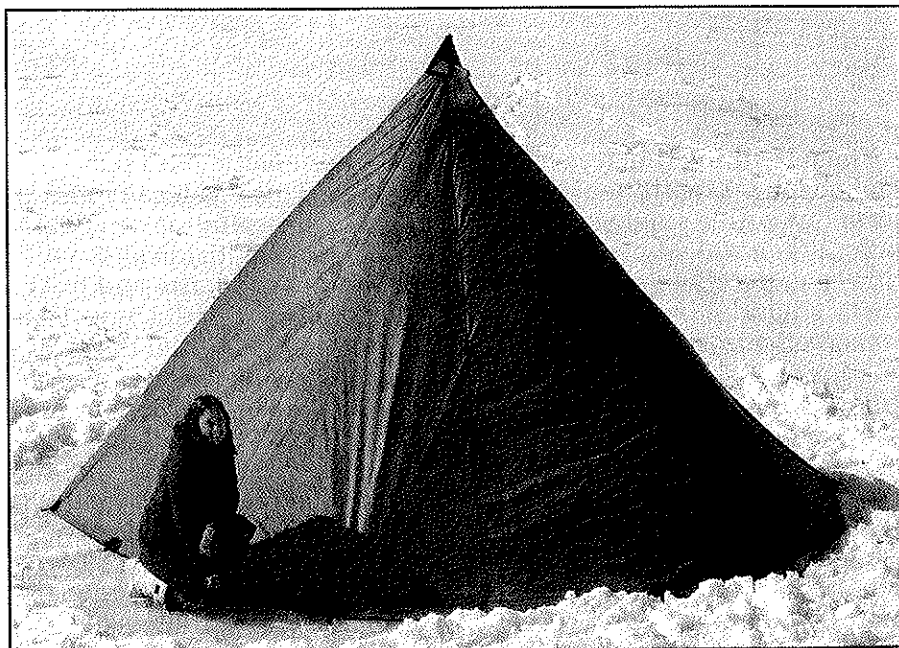
This is not a self-supporting tent. Pegs are not crucial, but you need several trees and rope. It is especially nice if you can utilize two high limbs to hoist up the awning and slanted back section. I have used this tent on a few autumn canoe trips in addition to this winter sojourn. In every case, my original plan was to move camp every day, but on all the trips, after getting the tent up I decided to "base camp."

Once pitched, this tent is a beauty. Pitching it requires some patience and creativity. The 10-ounce canvas is rugged, waterproof and it breathes. By running a few clotheslines beneath the front awning, you can create a drying rack that would put a commercial dryer to shame. Even felt boot liners will be bone dry before bedtime, and because of the flat roof, there is lots of space.

Maybe because it is not as tight as some winter tents, the temperature gradient from ground to peak is extreme, but dampened down the stove will hold a fire for a couple of hours and keep the sleeping area cool but not frosty. What I like best though is the way it is almost impossible for sleepers to roll into the stove or the stovepipe. I am an active sleeper, and I have lain awake in wall tents



The SnowTrekker 4 is a winter-tight lightweight cotton/canvas tent with self-supporting pole system. Kind of a hybrid between traditional materials and the more modern design most campers are familiar with.



The Kifaru Tipi 6—lightweight synthetic fabric—coated with silicone. A warm, waterproof winter tent for four people weighing in under ten pounds.

staring at hot stoves afraid to close my eyes for fear of eventually rolling into the stove. With the Campfire Tent design this event is almost impossible.

All this luxury comes at a price. The Campfire Tent is heavy and bulky. Even without the poles it stuffs a #4 Duluth pack. Strap the poles on the side and you have a full load

(and that's when the tent is dry). To put it into perspective: the pole kit alone for the Campfire weighs more than the tent, tent pole, stove, stove pipe and ground sheet of the second tent I will review, the Kifaru Tipi-6! Frost River is now also making the tent available by special order, sewn with a seven-ounce cotton fabric that reduces bulk

and weight but lacks a little of the strength and water repellency of the heavier fabric.

The Campfire Tent is elegant, safe, tough and functional, and it can be used equally well year round. It is a beautiful tent in all seasons but is less attractive if you are a traveler and will be carrying this tent distances and setting it up every evening.

The Frost River Campfire Tent is a tent of vintage design, the Kifaru Tipi-6 makes you question everything you know about tents. First it is made of a strange synthetic fabric used for hang-gliders, second the fabric is double coated with silicone to make it waterproof and impermeable. It comes with a woodstove that fits into a case like you would use for a laptop computer and that includes the stovepipe! Total weight of the tent with the stove is a mere 10 pounds 13 ounces, and the whole outfit packs into a bundle that is remarkably small.

The only thing timeless is the tent shape—a traditional tipi form but with a single center pole. When staked properly, this is an excellent shape to sustain wind; I had this tent staked on a frozen lake in wind gusting to 20 knots with barely any dishing in on the windward side. You MUST follow the staking directions exactly, certain pegs are “set back” a specific distance so that when the center pole is extended to a pre-marked spot, the tent is taut. If you are on level ground that will take a stake, the tent is quick to pitch. But even in July, BWCAW campers know how rare the campsite is where you can get every stake exactly where you want it. Roots and rocks make precision staking impossible.

So as a winter tent in the Boundary Waters the Kifaru must be pitched on frozen lakes. First the pad must be cleared of snow, and then the tent is pitched using nails as

pegs. This system worked fine for me this winter with minimum snow on the lake. But I think back to last season on Knife Lake where the snow was two feet deep and slush at the bottom was more the rule than the exception. So that is a concern. It was my first experience driving nails into a frozen lake, and it worked impressively. Removing the nails was also easy, using a pair of pliers and rotating the nails back and forth, out they came. I cannot comment on this process with different ice temperatures. The ambient temperature when I struck the Kifaru was 20 degrees F. I didn't test them, but also available from Kifaru are special snow stakes (SST Pins). These stakes are designed to enable the tent to be pitched tautly on packed snow and could clearly increase the versatility of the Tipi-6.

A worry which didn't materialize was condensation and interior frost. Unlike cotton, the Kifaru fabric does not breathe. This means any moisture from respiration or cooking is trapped inside and will eventually condense and frost up the interior of the tent. The winter nights I tested the tent were relatively mild, and I was alone in the tent which may have affected the outcome, but frost was minimal.

Even in conditions when frost is extreme, Kifaru correctly banks on the tipi design, venting and the wood stove to minimize frost problems. A thin frost liner is also available as an option to keep any accumulated frost off the participants. I didn't test the liner. Although the footprint of the Tipi-6 is similar in area to the Campfire Tent, the sloping walls make it seem smaller. Six people might be able to squeeze in during the summer season, but for winter use this is a 4-person tent and the people at Kifaru will be the first to admit it. If you plan to

use this tent in winter for four adults, they might even persuade you to purchase the Tipi-8.

The stove that comes with the Kifaru tent and which was designed to be used in a synthetic tent is innovative. It is assembled using long threaded rods and thin, sheet-metal stove walls that slide together. The stainless steel pipe is very unique. It is stored rolled up and resembles a roll of tin foil. First you must unroll it nine feet and re-roll it sideways, and then pull wire bands down the pipe lengthwise to hold it in position. It is a slick system and makes for a very compact package.

However, on a sub-zero day it is difficult to imagine assembling the stove and stovepipe. Do not buy this tent/stove combination if you do not possess good fine motor skills. Noodleling around assembling the stove and re-rolling the razor-sharp Kifaru stovepipe system is very different than extending a telescoping stovepipe of a traditional stove and pushing it out a tent jack. On the positive side, with the Kifaru system you will not worry about the pipe coming apart or collapsing in the wind.

Although the Kifaru firebox is less than half the size of the other two stoves, this stove heats up faster than any stove I have ever used and warms the Tipi-6 in short order. The nine-foot 3.5-inch diameter pipe creates a lot of draft, and the stove gets cherry red in a hurry. More than the other two, the Kifaru system assumes you will set up the tent and stove, cook dinner, maybe play some cards or read for awhile and then let the fire die out as you turn in.

In the morning a fresh fire will melt off the frost while you cook breakfast and get ready to strike the tent. The small firebox means a lot of tending and the thin metal construction made me wonder about sustained use. However, Kifaru founder Patrick Smith stands behind these stainless steel stoves with an

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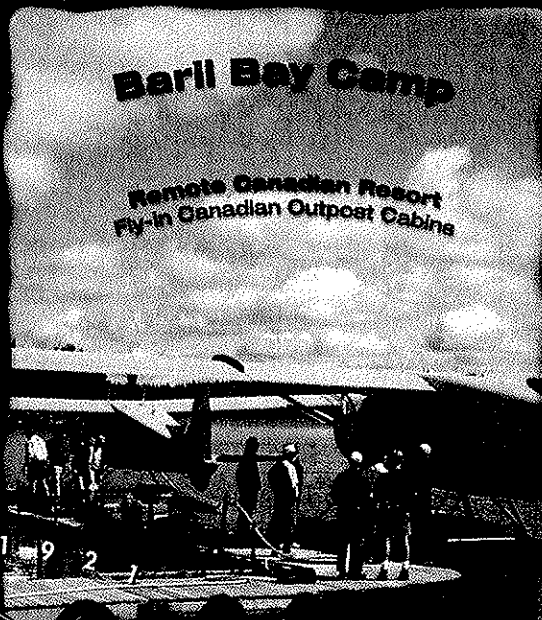
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unconditional guarantee and shared with me that some of these stoves have performed well for 18 years. Nevertheless, the location of the stove would make sleeping while the stove is fired-up a bid dodgy.

While canvas tents can tolerate an errant spark, synthetics melt. Kifarú solves this problem with the use of ember screens which are inserted just below the stovepipe. The screens, combined with the nine-foot run of stove pipe, minimize the chance of melt holes in the tent, which if they do happen can be patched with seam sealer. My tent arrived well used but without a single spark hole.

The Kifarú tent is an extraordinary engineering accomplishment. High tech minimalist campers will marvel at its ultralight construction and innovative solutions to winter's challenges. For campers that do not appreciate a sewn-in floor,

this tent is a four-season solution. But it lacks the coziness of the other two tents, and its structural integrity is dependent on being able to stake it properly.

The final tent I tested was the SnowTrekker four-person expedition model manufactured by SnowTrekker Tents. Owner Duane Lottig sent me over a brand new one to test, and as I opened the package I was impressed by the tightly woven cotton at 6.3-ounces per yard and with a very high thread count. It was some of the finest cotton I've ever handled. Duane has this cotton woven to his specs, and the bulk and weight saved over the more common heavy canvas duck is impressive.

The SnowTrekker-4 is in many ways a design hybrid: a cotton tent but with many 21st century innovations. One outstanding characteristic is that similar to modern 3-season

tents, the SnowTrekker-4 is self-supporting. It accomplishes this with a network of five shock-corded, heavy-duty, three-quarter inch, Easton aluminum poles similar but much larger in diameter than quality mountaineering tents. Not needing to be staked is a huge advantage for a winter tent. The SnowTrekker-4 can be pitched on the ice, in the trees or on deep-packed snow, and you can do the entire set-up with mittens on. The self-supporting pole system holds the tent to shape, and nylon snow flaps are utilized to hold the tent down. Although not required, you can billow out the tent a bit with side pullouts by utilizing a couple of convenient trees or making a couple of pickets.

The first night I spent in this tent nine inches of heavy snow fell, but even with all the weight on the sidewalls the ridgepole did not sag. This tent

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could sustain just about anything a Boundary Waters' winter could throw at it. The white cotton makes for a cheery interior, and the door closes snug and draft-proof with heavy duty zippers. This cotton tent also breathes so well that, although it stays warm, a constant exchange of air through the cotton keeps the interior from ever feeling steamy or stuffy. Even if your only experience tent camping is during the summertime in a nylon tent, you will discover the freshness in a cotton tent is invigorating.

However, if you are boiling macaroni and need additional venting, the SnowTrekker-4 has two large diameter tube vents which can be opened at the ends of the ridge. The tent is perfect for three people and four would be okay. Despite a howling wind, when camping in this tent I dampened down the stove and was very comfortable in shirtsleeves. There is nothing more cozy than

snuggling up to a good book as the wind howls and the trees snap with frost but on your side of the cotton a fire crackles in the stove, steam rises from the socks and tea steeps next to the stove: this is living.

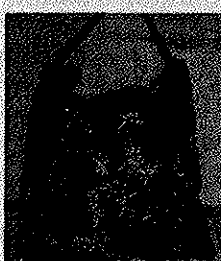
Similar to the Campfire Tent, inhabitants of the SnowTrekker-4 sleep in a line with their feet facing the stove and kitchen area. But at 120-square feet, it is a little tight and for those on the stove side of the tent, I would build a little firewood stockade just to prevent an unlikely but possible slip down against the firebox. The tent and poles together weighed just under 20 pounds, and the shock-corded poles could be packed with the tent in a tight and manageable bundle.

The stove sold by SnowTrekker Tents is a serviceable sheet metal model that is built to last and built heavy. In fact, the stove and pipe were greater in weight and bulk than the SnowTrekker-4 tent. Although the stove worked well and would probably last for a decade of hard use, I would be tempted to upgrade to the Four Dog Titanium ultra-light stove and pipe to save about ten pounds. Either of these stoves is capable of holding a fire well into the night, and campers with just a little effort could bring lighter sleeping bags and maintain an all-night fire. This is the way the D  n   of the Far North travel. But most modern winter campers prefer to let the fire die out as mentioned earlier.

Lighter than the Duluth Pack Campfire Tent, more comfortable than the Kifaru system and easier to set-up than both, the SnowTrekker-4 is the best of the three for pure winter travel. The SnowTrekker-4 also holds its own in the so-called "shoulder seasons." Cold damp weather can define an early spring or mid-October trip, and snow certainly cannot be ruled out in those seasons. The SnowTrekker-4 would be a welcome refuge on the fishing openers when squalls of sleet make you earn every walleye, or in November when you try to sneak in one last paddle before freeze-up. However, unlike the other two, the SnowTrekker-4 is not a suitable summer tent and does not pretend to be one.

All of these tents will only perform if they are treated properly. Cotton tents like the Frost River Campfire Tent and the SnowTrekker-4 are

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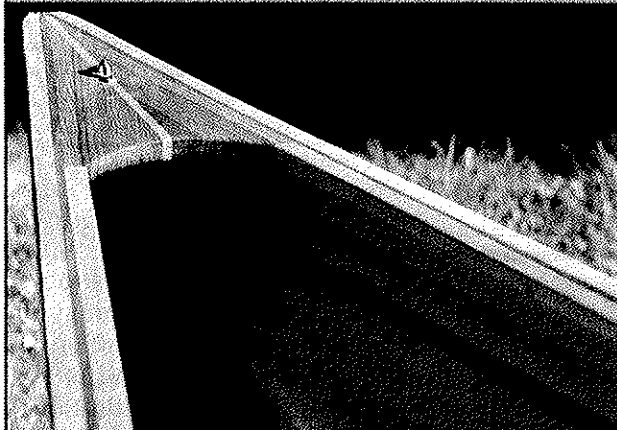
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less subject to UV damage than synthetics and can withstand years of exposure to sun without degradation, but they can be easily ruined if they are not dried properly and promptly before being stored. The Kifaru fabric, because of its double-sided silicon coating, is actually less subject to mold and mildew than even nylon; but still, care should be taken in storage.

No matter which winter tent you choose, you will discover canoe country in winter remains great camping country. Happy trails.

Editor's Note: Rob Kesselring is a frequent contributor to BWJ. His book, Daughter, Father, Canoe - Coming of Age in the Sub-Arctic is available through his website at www.robkesselring.com

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