

Get Wild: Leaving no trace in winter

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Leave No Trace principles still apply during the winter season, but they may require doing things a little differently than during the summer.
Tom Callaghan/Get Wild

The peaks and valleys of Summit Country are finally coated in a blanket of snow. Winter has set in: Moose gnaw on aspen bark, migratory birds have left for warmer weather, and the backcountry seems a little quieter. While summer and fall are more popular for exploring Colorado’s mountains, winter also is a fine time. And when you head out for winter hiking, skiing, or camping, it’s just as important to treat the land with respect.

Leave No Trace ethics are commonly referenced in the outdoors community as a way for humans to help preserve the wild areas we recreate in, which are often also areas of special importance to Native people. No matter the season, we should remember these principles in order to help preserve our wild spaces. But, this looks a bit different in winter.

One principle of Leave No Trace is to camp and travel on durable surfaces. In summer, this means staying on defined trails and camping in previously impacted sites. In winter, with snow covering most terrain, the delicate tundra is often sheltered by a layer of snow, so your route may differ a little. That doesn’t mean it’s smart or safe to head anywhere you please off-trail.

What about winter campfires? While perhaps more acceptable with snow on the ground, that doesn’t mean they’re always permitted or a good idea. If you’re in an area and time where fires are permitted, be sure to use only down and dead wood, ensure your fire is fully extinguished and clean up afterwards.

Another aspect of winter anywhere you please that can be challenging is disposing of waste. In summer, digging cat holes at least 6 inches deep helps to mitigate the negative effects of human waste. This isn’t so easily done in winter, thanks to feet of snow and frozen ground. Burying your waste in snow won’t do the trick; it’ll only leave a nasty, melting mess come spring. Instead, pack out your and your pet’s waste in a WAG bag.

who perceive dogs as threats and will waste precious energy to avoid them. Leashing also protects your pet from encounters with angry wildlife, like moose, and helps preserve a natural experience for other users. Also, leashing makes it harder to ignore that big pile your pup just deposited.

One of the most important principles of Leave No Trace holds especially true in winter: Plan ahead and prepare. Trails aren’t as easy to follow when they’re covered in snow, and there’s the risk of avalanche. Take extra care to know your route, be aware of avalanche conditions and safety, and carry adequate survival gear.

Winter is a wonderfully peaceful time to be outside. It’s worthwhile spending time communing with nature all year long. Just remember that, no matter the season, it’s crucial that we humans be respectful of the land we recreate on, and be well prepared for the adventures we take on.



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Stasia Stockwell is a Breckenridge local and avid backcountry skier. A true mountain dweller, she feels most at home in the Alpine. Stasia writes primarily for the outdoor adventure realm, with the desire to connect readers from all backgrounds with nature in a meaningful way.

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