

Sleeping in snow not as bad as it sounds

"Mr. Arneberg, what's your bag rated for?"

That's a question I hear often from Boy Scouts in our troop. Truth is, I have no idea! I bought the sleeping bag for \$20 from a friend in high school in 1977. And at that time it was already a few decades old.

I think it was manufactured before bags were rated for temperature tolerance, but fortunately not before goose down was invented.

My trusty down bag got a workout the Saturday before last at L.E. Phillips Scout Reservation, north of Rice Lake. For the first time in 27 years, I slept outside in the winter!

Last time I tried that was in January 1982. With the temperature hovering around a bitter -22 degrees that night, I remember wanting to test the bag and also see if my tent poles would bend enough to work.

The poles worked, but the bag was not quite up to those temperatures. I don't think I slept at all. So I guess if it was rated, it would be warmer than -22.

Actually, now that I think of it, the coldest I've been at night after that experience was, strangely enough, the following July. My brother and I had stopped for a night in Yellowstone National Park on our cross-country bicycle trip in 1982. In our brilliance, we decided that it was so beautiful out that we'd sleep under the stars. After all, it was the middle of the summer!

I don't remember our exact elevation, but we flatlanders learned a lesson about overnight temperatures at high altitudes, and we froze our tails off that night.

Maybe that's why it took me 27 years to try sleeping in the snow again.

After starting our Boy Scout troop in 2001, I was thrilled when my wife had my down bag dry-cleaned. It weighed the same afterward, but the bulk was at least double! I



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hadn't realized that because it was so compressed all those years, it lost a lot of its ability to insulate.

Since the cleaning, I've had no trouble sleeping on backpacking

trips in April or October when the mercury dipped below freezing. But I still wasn't confident enough to try it in January.

Then a couple years ago, a new guy started helping out our troop.

Steve Atchley, an Eagle Scout, moved to Chippewa Falls from Alaska about 20 years ago. We all noticed something peculiar about him — every time he joined us on a winter weekend outing, he slept outside!

In fact, on our Jan. 9-11 campout on the banks of the St. Croix River, he even slept outside when it sank to -2 on Friday night. He brought enormous down bags with him from Alaska that are not officially rated (they must be as old as mine), but they look like they'll keep you toasty in any weather.

In Boy Scouts, if you spend a night outside when it gets below zero, you earn a special "Zero Hero" award. So my son David and his friend Mackenzie Nutzmann eagerly accepted Mr. Atchley's offer to try sleeping outside the next night.

Mr. Atchley taught them his trick of pouring boiling water into a water bottle and throwing that in your bag 20 minutes before you climbed in. This worked well with sturdy Nalgene bottles, but Mackenzie discovered that thin Chippewa Springs water bottles are not meant for boiling water. His water bottle deformed and leaked all over his bag, so he had to retreat to the heated one-room cabin for the night.

David slept well in the monster bag, but unfortunately it only got

down to 6 degrees. "Single Digit Hero" just doesn't have the same ring to it.

Back to our Jan. 31 campout at L.E. Phillips. With a low of a balmy 20 degrees, it was the warmest night for a month! So most of the troop decided to sleep outside.

The boys all slept in snow caves or "quinzees." A Quinzee is a simple structure made by piling up snow 8-10 feet high, then digging out the interior. As long as you leave the ceiling and walls only 10-12 inches thick, it is considered safe against a collapse.

Snow can retain heat better than you might think. All our Scouts reported a cozy, warm night's sleep, even those with bags not designed for winter use.

Not to be outdone, all the adults in the troop slept outside, too, only we didn't have any snow structures. We just rolled out our bags under a tarp.

It wasn't too bad! The temperature was friendly, but the wind was a little annoying, as the tarp a foot or two above our heads wouldn't stop flapping all night.

I definitely stayed warm enough, though — at least, when I didn't have to get up to go to the bathroom. (I don't remember that being an issue in 1982.) It did help that Steve let me use his wool sleeping bag liner, undoubtedly from Alaska.

It also helped that I've added a bit more natural body insulation to what I had in 1982. Who needs a bag rated for -20 when you make a strategic move like that?

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ON THE WEB

To see photos of Tom Arneberg's winter camping trip, go to www.troop72.com.