

SECTION IV – SNOW TRAVEL

CHAPTER 15 – SNOW TRAVEL FIELD DAY

By Tim Musil, March 2008

Objective – Upon completion of this exercise, you will be able to employ safe and effective techniques for traveling on snow-covered mountain terrain.

DESCRIPTION OF THE DAY

Your instructor team will select a location for this field day based on the amount of snow coverage, expected weather, and accessibility of the area for that day. They will not use or traverse avalanche-prone terrain. From the trailhead, your group will hike a short distance to the snow slopes. You will learn and practice methods for preventing a fall and for self-arresting – techniques for quickly stopping the slide – in case a fall does occur. Self-arrest exercises will cover how to react to a fall regardless of your position on the snow. Afterwards, you will learn some basic techniques for backcountry survival in winter conditions. By the end of the day, you should have a solid foundation of snow travel skills.

If you are apprehensive about using an ice-ax, keep in mind that graduation from Wilderness Trekking School is allowed without performing the ice-ax exercises. However, you must complete the exercises, with demonstrated competence, if you plan to take Basic Mountaineering School. Nevertheless, we believe that you will find that learning to use an ice-ax is easier than you think. The ice-ax is a very effective tool for traveling more safely on snow.

WHAT YOU WILL NEED

Bring your ten essential systems. The school will provide ice-axes and helmets. As a safety precaution, you must wear a helmet while on the snow slopes. Unless your instructors state otherwise, snowshoes will not be required. WTS does not use crampons, although your instructors will explain their purpose and use.

For safety and comfort reasons you should bring gaiters, wear extra layers of warm clothing, and bring an extra pair of gloves and socks. Since there will be slipping and sliding on snow, your outer layer should be waterproof or substantially water resistant. Now is a good time to waterproof your boots.

SKILLS AND SUBJECT AREAS COVERED

In the Colorado mountains, snowfields remain on the slopes all year, especially on the highest peaks. With practice and good judgment, you can travel safely on snow. Proper techniques will also conserve your energy. In short, learning to travel proficiently on snow enables you to handle unexpected summer snow as well as opening up the

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mountains to year-round hiking. You can now consider a slope you might have avoided in the past to be a better pathway to your destination and an opportunity for a fun and exhilarating glissade on the way down. Your instructors will discuss the following topics. You will practice techniques to develop basic snow travel abilities:

- Techniques for ascending snow slopes, including hiking single file and kick-stepping
- Techniques for descending snow slopes, including plunge-stepping and glissading
- Using an ice-ax as a third point of contact
- Rest step and rhythm-breathing
- Avalanche risk recognition and avoidance
- Self-belay using an ice-ax to prevent a fall
- Self-arrest with an ice-ax to stop a fall
- Self-arrest without an ice-ax to stop a fall
- Carrying and stowing an ice-ax
- Choosing the proper ice-ax length
- The parts of an ice-ax
- Routefinding on snow
- Postholing and how to avoid it
- Survival in winter conditions