

Preparation for long winter alpine days

By Jack Roberts

Today I am wasted. Yesterday was long. My partner and I walked into the East Face of Long's Peak in Rocky Mountain National Park, climbed Alexander's Chimney in epic weather conditions arriving back to our car after a RT twelve hour adventure. This morning I wake up dehydrated, starving and needing more sleep. Why? It's the beginning of the winter alpine climbing season of ridiculously long days in RMNP. And it happens every year.

November always brings the itch for Alexander's Chimney, The Smear of Fear, Vanquished, Necrophilia, etc. All of these climbs involve 4am starts, lengthy walks with a heavy pack, frigid temps, never enough food or drink and another endless walk out. AND then there is the climbing. These days inspire me and fill me with immense satisfaction but they are unending and usually leave me with a hangover of fatigue and hunger. A typical alpine day is an endurance day and good nutrition is essential for performance and complete recovery.

Eating for Performance

Hard working muscles need carbohydrates in order to keep body and mind together. If your day is going to be long but with low-intensity climbing you may be relying on your fat stores as well as carbohydrates for energy. If your goal for the day is going to be harder and faster then carbohydrate fuel dominates and you will need to choose your fuel accordingly.

Carbohydrates are stored as glycogen or glucose. Prior to going out on a long day it is important to get as much glycogen in the muscles and liver as possible in order to delay fatigue on the day of your climb. Two days prior to your big day eat plenty of complex carbs such as pasta, rice, cereals, bread, potatoes etc. The day before you leave drink plenty of water to ensure that you won't become too dehydrated too soon. Skip the alcohol.

The morning you begin the climb you should have a big breakfast (even if you aren't hungry) to boost your metabolism after the night's fasting. Oatmeal or muesli is ideal as they combine complex as well as simple carbs to get you through the first part of the approach to your climb. It is important to consistently maintain a high blood glucose level throughout the day. Regular snacks at each belay not only help to maintain a high energy level but function as fuel to keep you warm. Some recommended snacks include halva, chocolate, peanut butter, honey sandwiches (cut into small bite-sized chunks. Energy gels such as G.U or Cliff-shots also work well in cold temps. Don't take Powerbars or Snickers bars as these freeze and become inedible. I find that about 200 carbs per hour while I am active is a minimum for me to eat.

When the long day is over be sure to eat plenty so that you replace those carbohydrates you lost and can recover to climb the next day. Eating within two hours of getting into the car and driving home is best for optimal recovery because that is when glycogen is stored at its fastest rate.

Drinking to Survive

When the temperature is cold and it is windy, hydration is the last thing on climbers' minds but is the most important part of nutrition. You can't always feel it but sweating is magnified in cold weather and at high altitudes and is a significant factor in muscle fatigue.

The trouble is no one feels like drinking when it is cold out so we have to make it convenient and desirable to do so. I find that hot or warm flavored sports drinks that are trapped in an insulated container or thermos in my pack's outer pocket keep it convenient and easy for me to drink at regular intervals. One thermos of Chai and another of hot H2O GU keep me going every time. Some of my partners climb with an insulated hydration bladder on their back. This doesn't work for me but seems like a good idea. Staying hydrated is critical for any endurance activity. For really long days I will drink two liters during the approach. When we arrive at the foot of our climb I will take out my Jetboil stove and melt enough snow to refill those containers for the route, then after the climb and during our hike out I will drink another two liters. That's six liters for the day and I will still be dry when I wake up in the morning.

Recover to Climb Again

Eat, drink, eat and drink some more. When you get home you'll want to celebrate pulling off that knarley alpine climb nothing tastes better than a celebratory beer after a long day. If one tastes good two must be better but if you are climbing tomorrow hold back on the alcohol. Beer might be good for the soul but it still dehydrates you. So, if you gotta drink that beer,,,,,,well, drink a pint of water for every pint of stout. Eat lots of protein and complex carbohydrates, which means steak and potatoes. Go on. You've earned it!