

Sandia Mountain Winter Conditions and Traction Devices

This is a review of trail conditions encountered in the Sandia Mountains when hiking in the winter. Also reviewed, are what types of traction devices are appropriate for winter use in the Sandias.

Sandia Mountain Winter Conditions

Trail conditions in the Sandias are highly variable. In dry years there may little or no snow. In wet years as much as five feet of snow may be present.

Deep snow and icy conditions increase the chance of slips or falls. Slip and fall risks can be mitigated by using traction devices.

Lower Trails

The lower trails are typically dry for most of the winter season. After a snowstorm, snow or ice may be present for a day or two, followed by a day or two of mud. Then dry conditions typically return.

Mid-Reaches

During winter, a few inches to a few feet of snow is usually present. Because of warm days, a layer of ice often forms on sections of trail in shady areas. The conditions often alternate between dry, muddy, snow packed, and icy areas. Sections with a layer of ice are a primary area of concern because walking on ice can lead to slips and falls. This can be addressed by using traction devices.

Alternating conditions also pose a problem because installing and removing traction devices is difficult with gloved hands and no place to sit. Traction devices less subject to wear on granite are preferred.

High Reaches

Conditions vary substantially from year to year. In some years, conditions may be dry with little snow during the winter and may more like the lower or mid-reaches described above. In other years, as much as five feet of snow may be present in the upper Sandias.

Icy conditions are less likely in mid-winter but may be encountered in the spring and fall because warm days cause the surface of the snow to melt during the day and freeze overnight.

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Types of Traction Devices

There is little uniformity on naming conventions for the various categories of traction devices. Marketing terms vary significantly. In general, crampons refer to very aggressive devices used in difficult technical conditions. Micro-spikes or traction cleats are medium aggressive devices used in less challenging conditions. Winter boots or snowshoes may also be used to improve traction.

Types of Traction Devices:

- Crampons – Used in harsh technical conditions with deep snow, ice, and steep slopes.
- Snowshoes – Best for Deep snow. Cleats or crampons are built in which improves traction in steep and/or icy areas.
- Micro-Spikes – Good for typical winter hiking. Not as good for mixed conditions with sections of dry trail.
- Traction Cleats – Great for typical winter hiking. They are slightly less aggressive than micro-spikes; however, they are better for mixed conditions.
- Winter Boots – Aggressive tread, often insulated. Good for packed snow but not great for steep or icy conditions unless combined with one of the above traction devices.

Crampons

Crampons are generally not used for hiking in the Sandias. They are heavy and too aggressive for typical Sandia winter conditions. However, they may be appropriate in special situations if heavy snow or ice is present.



Snowshoes

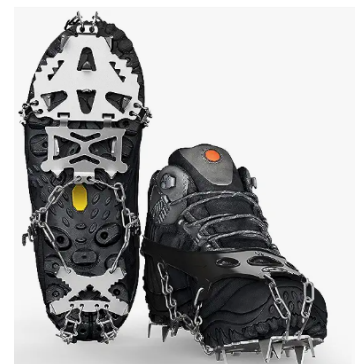
Snowshoes are the most used traction used in the upper Sandias during the winter. They provide floatation on snow; however, snowshoes also have cleats or crampons built in to help with icy conditions.



Micro Spikes

Micro spikes are much less aggressive than crampons. They are good on packed snow with icy conditions. However, lower to mid-reach Sandia trails tend to alternate between dry trail, ice, and snow and walking on granite dulls the spikes.

Slippery rocks may be encountered crossing streams and micro spikes don't grip well in these conditions. In mixed conditions, taking micro-spikes on and off many times during a hike poses a problem because there is no place to sit, and gloves must be removed in cold conditions. Fumbling with micro-spikes is a challenge with cold, wet hands.



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Traction Cleats

Traction cleats are very appropriate for the Sandias during the winter season because they work well in alternating conditions, and they are less subject to wear than micro-spikes when walking on dry trails. Because they are light-weight and work well in varying conditions, most experienced hikers carry traction cleats for Sandia hiking all during the winter season.



Winter Boots

Winter boots are available which have an aggressive tread for hiking on snow. Winter boots may also be insulated to help keep feet warm. However, winter boots do not perform well on ice.

In some areas, trails can become densely snow packed and snowshoes are not needed. Winter boots with an aggressive tread plus traction cleats are often used in these conditions.



jrb/2023-08-26