

## Features

### Beat the Winter Blues

How do savvy locals overcome the winter blues? Great tips on how to make it through the endless season – and even enjoy yourself. by Leah Dobkin

Friday 2/1/2008

So it's February. The holidays are over, and the shiny promise of the new year has come and gone. Spring is right around the corner, right?

Wrong. Each morning brings bone-chilling cold, mounds of dirty snow, hidden ice patches waiting in ambush, and meager daylight that seems to end as soon as it's begun. Many cities are filled with sights and smells of forsythia and crocuses, the soil softening, the sun warming the earth. But in Milwaukee, it will be at least April – maybe late April – before the long winter finally thaws. With an average low temperature during February of 18.3 degrees, spring is far, far away.

Newcomers are warned about our winters: that it snows so much you need to put a rubber ball on your antenna to find your car, that it gets so deep you can actually ski off the top of your roof. Urban legends, perhaps, but not so far off the mark. In darkest February, a banana peel accidentally left in the car can become a life-threatening dagger. An innocent car parked on the street can get buried by the plows. Normally happy people with robust appetites and sex drives become reclusive zombies. Fashion loses the battle against the urge to stay warm, and residents become unrecognizable bundles of layers.

Milwaukeeans often take a perverse pride in our long winters, flocking to witness local traditions like the annual Polar Bear dip into Lake Michigan and swapping tales about shoveling out from the 12th blizzard of the season. When the wind chills dip to 40 degrees below zero, we trudge on, counting ourselves lucky if our nostrils don't permanently freeze together.

Many residents tackle the winter with a whatever-it-takes attitude, determined not to let a little cold weather stop them from enjoying life. There are even those who love the season: the masochists who tough it out and lord it over those from wimpier climates; the outdoor enthusiasts who are invigorated by the cold; the hard-core tennis players who shovel the outdoor courts and keep playing without missing a volley.

Yet even the hardiest of stock are vulnerable to the winter blues, when the wool sweaters get too itchy, the slush piles too high and the winter just *too darn long*. So we asked folks around town for tips on creative and fun ways to cope. Need a cure to the season's blahs? Read on.

### Embracing Your Inner Inuit

The year was 1969. It was 13 below zero with a wind chill factor of 75 below. Joey Sutter, then president of the Polar Bear Club, called off the annual New Year's Day dip into Lake Michigan due to the frigid temps. But Garth Gasky, who started the Milwaukee Polar Bear Club in 1952, wasn't about to be deterred. He and his friend Dean Seitz kept the car running, jumped into the lake, swam 20 feet and ran back inside the car. As if that wasn't enough, then they went back for a *second* dip, this time diving under the water to make it count. "When we got out of the lake that winter, you could have touched our ears or noses and they would have broken off," says Gasky, now 79. He's done it every year since 1952.

Only three times during Lake Michigan's recorded history has the lake totally frozen over, says Gasky, and two of those times occurred in his lifetime. When this happened, he recruited the biggest and heaviest men

around, put them in wet suits, and had them all jump on the ice until they fell in. They pulled the broken ice away to create a hole, and the Polar Bear Club members jumped in afterwards. Talk about balls of ice!

While jumping into near-freezing water wouldn't necessarily be her recommendation, therapist and former *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* columnist Polly Drew, who wrote about such issues as seasonal affective disorder (SAD), does encourage people to brave the outdoors for exercise at least five times a week to combat the effects of SAD.

"Going outside in the winter is counter-intuitive," she notes. "It makes more sense to stay home and bake brownies, but get outside for at least 20 minutes a day. Take a smoking break, but don't smoke."

Drew takes her recommendation to embrace the outdoors to heart. "I drive my car with the sunroof open and turn up my heater. I look at the sky and feel the fresh air."

At the McKinley Marina tennis courts, across the street from where the Polar Bears jump in the lake, you'll find one woman who's always outdoors: retired teacher and librarian Hannelore Schilling Zarse, who plays tennis almost every day in the winter, and has for the past 30 years. She is the only female among 12 "hard-core players," though up to 40 people can sometimes be found at the courts. "Who wants to stay indoors all winter?" she asks. "That's crazy! We play every day we can, and the days we can't, we shovel snow off the court."

She used to play indoor tennis in the winter, but found there were increasingly more nice days interfering with her indoor court time. "They used to take the nets down in October, but we persuaded them to keep them up," she says.

"I have played tennis with temperatures at 4 above, but it has to be calm and sunny," she adds. The only time outdoor tennis is cancelled is if it's snowing, raining or very windy.

Likewise, Brookfield resident Ron Sonntag says it's a shame that people get so intimidated by the weather. "Winter includes three of the nicest months of the year," he says. Sonntag and up to 60 other folks hike every Sunday afternoon in area parks, from October through May, no matter how cold or snowy it might get. The group is from the Vagabond Ski & Social Club, and they have not missed a single hike for seven straight years. "People don't realize that even if the wind chill is minus 30, you heat up when you walk outside," he says. "And winter scenery can be breathtaking."

Brian Gotter, the midday and early evening meteorologist for WTMJ Channel 4, agrees. "I love winter here. It's my favorite season. I have a child, so it gives me an excuse to play in the snow, have snowball fights and make snowmen. Be a kid again ... life's too short – even though Milwaukee's winters aren't."

Dobie Maxwell is a comedian who was born and raised in Milwaukee. He lives in Chicago, but considers Milwaukee his home. He, too, looks for ways to embrace the cold.

"Go to Leon's and have a nice cone of frozen custard on a winter day," he recommends. "The lines are a lot shorter and it's still delicious, even if it is cold outside." Snow cones might work too.

Some people, though, aren't quite as brave, and need a little extra incentive to keep active during the winter. Milwaukee born and bred 87-year-old Jane Kaminsky says you have to keep something on your calendar every day to get yourself out of bed. The active retiree attends a Get Off Your Rocker stretching class and numerous other clubs and activities. Kaminsky's friend, Joan O'Brien, also believes in staying active, so she bought a puppy. Now she gets outside, meets lots of people and feels less isolated during the winter.

*Journal Sentinel* TV critic Joanne Weintraub also uses a dog to beat the winter blues, and loves taking her golden retriever-beagle mix outside. “Even when my nose is about to snap off and I can feel the wind through two pairs of pants, I still love watching her roll around ecstatically in snow, ice, sleet, slush or whatever god-awful combination of the four is on the ground. Plus, you meet other frozen people and their ecstatic dogs, and if you can still move your lips, you can congratulate each other on being outside at 6 in the morning in the dead of winter.” That, she adds, “is extremely virtuous and character-building.”

### **Consult the Experts**

John Malan, veteran TMJ4 anchor, knows all about winter weather and the adjustments that must sometimes be made. Over his 24-year meteorological career, Malan has chronicled the most brutal winters (January 1982) and the mildest Christmas days (also 1982, 61 degrees). “During January of 1982, we were living in a Wauwatosa duplex, and after 30 inches of snow, two weekends with record cold temperatures to 26 degrees below zero, and wind chills down to 70 below zero, it felt like Anchorage for a few weeks.”

The weather had some interesting side effects: “The heavy snow and cold forced animals inside seeking warmth, and my wife happened upon a *very* large rat on the back porch. Well, that was it ... I got home from doing the 10 o’clock newscast and was told we were going to Chicago to her mom’s house until I found a place without rats.”

If you think giant rats are bad, meet Jeff Gollner, arborist for Milwaukee County Parks and a champion at adjusting to the cold. “What I do in the winter are the same things I do in the summer. I climb trees and prune them. I can do the job as easy in the winter as in the summer.” But the cold does take a toll. “We work out of a truck,” he notes. “It’s our office and break room. We don’t have a microwave and our lunch will often freeze in the truck, so about 10 a.m., we will put our lunches in the crevice of the engine block, and by 12 p.m. our lunches will be hot.

“We deal with the cold weather by wearing layers,” Gollner continues, “but it’s tricky because you can’t dress bulky when you climb trees. I don’t wear a coat so I got to keep moving and never stop. Sometimes my boots don’t dry by the next day, so I do the bread bag trick. I cover my feet in plastic bread bags and stick them in my wet boots.”

Not everyone is wearing layers for the cold, as Gotter found one year while doing a live TMJ broadcast at Pewaukee Lake: “The wind chill was below zero. It was just nasty outside, and this kid watching me on TV noticed I was doing the weather forecast near his home. He ran out of his house wearing nothing but shorts and a T-shirt and runs across the lake behind me jumping and waving during my entire segment, and trying to get noticed. ... He was.”

Some of the town’s cold weather experts have had to adjust to challenges that your average winter civilian never faces. Frank Chandek is a Milwaukee sanitation worker, snow plower and bandleader of Dr. Chow’s Love Medicine. Chandek was between two 12-hour snow-plowing shifts when interviewed for this story. “Plowing can be fun, but there is only one problem,” he says. “People wave and are so glad to see you clear their streets, but by the second or third pass they get irate because you covered their driveway and sidewalks. We have had people throw snow shovels and pelt snow balls at us.”

And the challenges don’t end there. “One day there was so much snow I almost plowed away what I thought was a large snow mound, but turned out to be a snow-covered car,” he recalls.

Milwaukee Third District Police Capt. James Harpole has been on the force for 22 years. Winter, he says, is an unusual time to be patrolling. It may be cabin fever, or perhaps winter makes people think more slowly, but Harpole has seen some really weird stuff. He received one anonymous tip that a person was conducting a strange ritual and sacrificing a chicken, but all he found when he got to the house was a large frozen fish on the front lawn with a cigarette in its mouth.

Harpole has chased burglars down alleyways covered in sheets of ice that send police and suspects onto their butts and equipment flying. It's not what you normally see on TV cop shows. Harpole had one burglar jump out an apartment window without knowing he was on top of a snow-covered bluff above the Menomonee Valley. The burglar went sliding down the bluff and Harpole, trying to follow, did the same. "And when I got to the bottom it was pitch dark. I had to avoid the river and dodge the train while chasing the burglar for 25 minutes in deep snow until he finally gave up," says Harpole.

Despite these scrapes, Harpole says he loves policing in cold weather. "The police profession slows down in the winter, and you get a break from the hectic pace of the summer," he notes.

### **Warm, Cheery Places**

Jean Piller immigrated to this country from England in 1974. She says that when her family comes to visit for Christmas holidays, they feel like they died and went to heaven because the winters are so lovely in Milwaukee, and in England it's so damp and dreary. The snow is always whiter on the other side, perhaps. But for Piller, she loves nothing more than holing up in a Harry W. Schwartz Bookshop to escape the cold. "It's so warm and cheerful; people are always happy in bookstores."

It's the opposite approach to embracing the cold: finding all the warm and cozy ways to rest up from it. Count weatherman Malan as one practitioner.

"Frankly, my family and I are more winter hibernators than winter enthusiasts," he says. "We make sure there is plenty of firewood for roaring fires, and our best way of beating the long, cold winter season was to take one trip each season to Florida. We have vacationed from Marco Island to Naples and Panama City and Destin."

But if lush, tropical locales are slightly out of your budget, you can find a suitable oasis just off I-94. "I have always thought it was great to walk through the Mitchell Park Domes on a winter's day," says Maxwell. "It feels like a whole other place, especially in the desert dome. I think they should build a few more of those and let kids play baseball in there."

But for Michael Horne, columnist for *MilwaukeeWorld.com*, there is truly no place like home. "I keep the thermostat low, lounge in my house wearing a stocking cap, and cover my legs with a lap blanket," he says. "It is easy to confuse me with *Whistler's Mother* in this getup."

Somewhat in the same vein is *Shepherd Express* columnist Art Kumbalek's recipe for survival: "What me and my crowd do to get through the winter is very simple – crank up the thermostat and mix another hot fucking toddy. Survival guaranteed."

### **Mind Over Matter**

Like so much in life, sometimes beating the winter blues requires nothing more than perspective, and leave it to Kumbalek to itemize the problems of warm weather you are spared: "[There are] no insects to bug the bejesus out of you just because you stepped outdoors, and no jagamuffins driving around town with the windows rolled down so as to blare and share their particularly poor taste in music," he notes. "If only we could make it be winter each and every day of the year."

If you can't see the bright side, then revel in the bad side. That, at least, is the approach of Weintraub when she's not taking her dog for a walk. She loves to complain "freely and loudly" about the cold. When she moved here from New York, she thought Wisconsin would be full of annoyingly hardy people who said, "Don't you just love this weather?" when it was 2 degrees out. Instead, she was pleased to find lots of folks who truly hate the cold.

"I enjoy complaining with them," she says. "It's very companionable, even cozy, like hot buttered rum or something. Not that I've ever actually had hot buttered rum, but I like thinking about it."

For some, it takes a more involved mental strategy to overcome the season. “Winter in Wisconsin is like a vicious dog,” advises *Journal Sentinel* columnist Jim Stingl. “You can’t show it fear or it will slowly turn you into a wuss.”

Denial is his strategy. “Keep thinking it’s autumn until after the Christmas holidays,” he says. “And consider winter as being over – more or less – on March 1. This way you’ve shortened it to a manageable eight weeks. It takes a fair amount of self-delusion, but you get better with practice.”

Other tricks: “I never turn my car heater fan all the way to the highest position. Unless it’s the coldest day of the year, you want to have something in reserve,” Stingl notes. And: “I try not to wear sweaters until December 1. Same with gloves and a hat. That toughens you up. And I have one heavy sweater that I call my ‘coldest day of the year sweater.’” Stingl often waits until February to wear it.

But in the end, the proper disposition for handling the cold often just comes down to genetics. “I am Norwegian,” says Horne. “It never occurred to me to ‘fight’ the blues. I let them win every time.”

Comedian, songwriter and performer Pat McCurdy is very familiar with how the cold can work on you mentally and physically. In college, McCurdy recalls, he was required to take physical education. After taking a swim class one very cold winter day, he rushed to his next class, and by the time he reached the classroom, his hair had turned into an ice helmet. Brrr.

Yet McCurdy wouldn’t trade a Milwaukee winter for anything, and he has itemized, lyrically, its vital importance in a song called “Too Much Sun.” It’s the perfect blues-beater:

*Surrounded by palm trees I lie in the sand*

*Filled with dread I just can’t understand*

*Take me back to Milwaukee to the cold and the snow*

*I’ve been to Florida – I ought to know*

*And maybe it’s time that you knew too*

*Too much sun makes you stupid*

*Too much sun makes you dumb*

*Too much time in a tropical climate*

*Turns you into a moron...*

*Too many days too many ultraviolet rays*

*With a bikini thong jammed up your butt*

*Too much sun will drive you insane*

*Too much sun makes you lazy*

*Too much sun makes you slow*

*Too much sweat*

*Too much Jimmy Buffett*

*Makes you forget  
everything you should know*

## **Winterproofing Milwaukee**

With just a few changes, this city could *really* kick winter in the butt.

### **City in a Bubble**

“How about Beer Town thinks really big for once?” *Shepherd Express* columnist Art Kumbalek challenges. “I propose a grand project whose completion would make the Great Wall of China, the Great Pyramid of Giza and the Mausoleum of Maussollus at Halicarnassus look like a beanbag. I propose the construction and erection of a nice climate-controlled dome to envelop the entire city of Milwaukee proper. It would put a lot of people to work, be a destination point for tourists and retirees, and attract a lot of favorable press. The suburbs can build their own domes, screw ‘em.”

### **Snowball Run**

Instead of Spain’s Bull Run, WKLH radio personality Roz suggests Milwaukee host a “snowball run.” “Just line up all those old ‘bad kids’ who like to open up fire hydrants in the summer – you know, that flood people’s yards and streets – give them a head start, and let the tax-paying adults race behind them and pelt them with snowballs until they look like little powdered donuts with legs.”

### **Weather Blackout**

We can’t control the weather, but maybe we can control the media. Mayor Tom Barrett’s chief of staff Patrick Curley proposes that from Thanksgiving through mid-March, no local newscast should be allowed more than 60 seconds to report on the weather. Any station that violates this rule would be prohibited from airing any Britney Spears or Paris Hilton updates.

## **More Blues Busters**

Ten tips that are sure to cheer you up

- 1.** No electricity night. Shut off the lights, TVs and computers, and light some candles. Roast hot dogs and marshmallows in the fireplace, and you may even convince yourself you’re on a summer camping trip. No fireplace at home? Try a weekend getaway to a place that has one. There’s nothing like sipping a hot toddy in front of a roaring fire.
- 2.** Indoor beach party. Denial is your friend. Raise your heat to 80 degrees, put on a bathing suit and crank up the Beach Boys. Don’t forget the summer picnic foods and piña coladas to round out the fantasy.
- 3.** Irish Ceili dancing. With live music, this dance (similar to contra and square dancing) is fun and easy to learn. Plus, you can burn calories, *if* you don’t drink too much beer. First Friday and third Saturday of the month, Irish Cultural & Heritage Center, 2133 W. Wisconsin Ave.
- 4.** Visit an indoor water park. It’s always summer at these local paradises of fun: Puddle Jumper Lagoon Indoor Water Park (414-563-4000); Country Springs Water Park in Waukesha (262-547-0201 or 1-800-247-6640); Paradise Landing Indoor Water Park (414-390-8278).
- 5.** Kirtan with Ragani. Fill your winter night with music, song and weather-beating meditation with this yoga-chant, call-and-response singing event. The Milwaukee Kirtan scene is the largest in the country, and singer Ragani has gathered some of the best musicians in town to participate. Brookfield’s Unitarian Universalist Church West, first Friday of the month at 7:30 p.m. Come early; lines can stretch to 200 people long. \$5. 414-964-0690, [raganiworld.com/index.html](http://raganiworld.com/index.html).

6. Local nature centers. Activities include maple-tapping, owl-hunting, stargazing and indoor lectures next to cozy fires. At the Urban Ecology Center, annual memberships are only \$12-\$35 and include free rental of cross-country skis, snow shoes and bicycles. Located off the Oak Leaf Trail, 1500 E. Park Pl., 414-964-8505, [urbanecologycenter.org](http://urbanecologycenter.org).

7. Geocaching at Schlitz Audubon Nature Center. Get your kids off the Internet and bring their high-tech know-how outside with this new global positioning system treasure-hunting game. "Geocaching is one of our more popular programs. It's the only one where we actually see grown adults running through the woods laughing," says Schlitz Audubon's Jim Hyatt. "They get so into it they just can't help themselves." 1111 E. Brown Deer Rd., 414-352-2880, [schlitzauduboncenter.com](http://schlitzauduboncenter.com).

8. Visit a tropical climate close to home. Choose from the butterfly exhibit at the Milwaukee Public Museum, the Rain Forest Café in the Gurnee Mills Outlet, or the Tropical Dome at Mitchell Park Conservatory. It's a cheap way to travel to a warm, humid place complete (in some cases) with animal sound effects.

9. Winter sports. Try kayaking on Lake Michigan (yes, there's a group that does it year-round: [groups.yahoo.com/group/MilwaukeeSeaKayak/](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/MilwaukeeSeaKayak/)), cross-country skiing or snow-shoeing at Greenbush Ski Area in the Northern Kettle Moraine State Forest ([greenbushusa.com](http://greenbushusa.com)) or indoor rock climbing at Adventure Rock ([adventurerock.com](http://adventurerock.com)).

10. Get out of town. When the snowbanks reach eye level, drop your shovel and report to the nearest airport. Try the Carnival Sensation three-day cruise to Nassau in the Bahamas or another warm destination. Book your trip for March so you have something to look forward to in the winter, and so you don't return to town knowing you have much more snow and cold to endure.

### **feeling SAD? you're not alone.**

The lack of sunlight in winter can cause seasonal affective disorder (SAD), which affects half a million people between September and April, peaking in winter, reports Mental Health America, a national organization promoting mental wellness ([mentalhealthamerica.net/go/sad](http://mentalhealthamerica.net/go/sad), 414-276-3122, crisis line: 1-800-273-TALK). Symptoms include depression, anxiety, lethargy, overeating, sleep trouble, sexual problems and social problems. Yet SAD is treatable, most commonly with a light box, medication or even lifestyle changes, such as getting outside more.

Mequon-based marriage and family therapist Polly Drew reads the newspaper during her morning coffee with a light box. "It's like having a little spa for myself."

To combat SAD, she also recommends exercising five times a week, preferably outside, as well as reducing fat and simple carbs, and planning a trip somewhere warm for early spring.

If these suggestions don't work, warns Drew, then you need to be evaluated, and drug and talk therapy can help. "SAD is real; it's not a snap out of it and pull yourself up by your boot straps. It is most prevalent in women, but often underdiagnosed in children and teenagers. You need to be observant and proactive."

The Center for Environmental Therapeutics ([cet.org](http://cet.org)) offers online self assessments to determine if you have SAD and options for treatment. They also have an online store of light boxes, dawn simulation systems and negative ionizers. The book *Winter Blues: Everything You Need to Know to Beat Seasonal Affective Disorder*, by SAD guru Norman Rosenthal, was updated in 2006 and lists reputable light box companies (not all devices are equally effective). And the Society for Light Treatment and Biological Rhythms ([www.sltbr.org](http://www.sltbr.org)) is a great resource for the latest research on light therapy and biological rhythms.

### **How to Select and Use a Light Box**

Any light box you buy should have been tested successfully in peer-reviewed clinical trials.

The box should provide 10,000 lux of illumination at a comfortable sitting distance. Product specifications are often missing or unverified.

Fluorescent lamps should have a smooth diffusing screen that filters out ultraviolet (UV) rays. UV rays are harmful to the eyes and skin.

The lamps should specifically give off white light rather than colored light. "Full-spectrum" lamps and blue (or bluish) lamps provide no known therapeutic advantage.

The light should be projected downward toward the eyes at an angle to minimize aversive visual glare.

Smaller is not better: When using a compact light box, even small head movements will take the eyes out of the therapeutic range of the light.

The starting "dose" for light therapy is 10,000 lux for 30 minutes per day (2,500-lux lights require two hours per day).

Light therapy should be started in the early morning, upon awakening, to maximize treatment response.

Response to light therapy often occurs within one week, but some patients require up to four weeks.

Common side effects of light therapy include headache, eyestrain, nausea and agitation, but these are generally mild and transient, or disappear with reducing the dose of light.

Sources: Medscape Health for Consumers and Canadian Consensus Group on SAD.

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