

## Boot UP!

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No, this is not about laptops. It's about what we put on our feet when we hike. I volunteer at a fire tower in the Catskills, and it amazes me what people wear on their feet when they go hiking. I've seen everything from flip flops, sandals, sneakers, boots, rain boots, and even one 'gentleman' wearing dress shoes (along with full formal attire) in the middle of winter!

Good boots are essential for hiking. There was an old tire commercial that said your tires are the only thing on your car that touches the road. Well, your boots are the only thing on your body that actually touch the trail, so you should be willing to get a good pair. I'm not doing a commercial for any brand, but here are a few things that you should look for when buying boots. A good hiking boot should be waterproof. If your feet get wet, you can get blisters. You might need to buy a waterproofing product for your boots, so ask the sales person what they suggest. Make sure they fit comfortably with a liner sock and a heavier sock over the liner. Your normal size might not be the same as for hiking, especially if you are buying winter boots, where you might need multiple pairs of socks. I have 2 sets of boots, one that is light but sturdy for summer, and a larger size for winter, which is also taller, insulated and rubberized.

Boots come in a range of materials, each of which has advantages and disadvantages. Though all can be used for hiking, not all are intended or ideal for this purpose.

[ **Classic leather boots.** Generally with uppers made of top-grain tanned cowhide, these will usually have an aggressively lugged sole, either Vibram or proprietary. Frequently they will be lined with leather. This category includes some of the most expensive boots available, some which will last almost indefinitely. However, these are not the best choice for hiking. They tend to be heavy (an extra pound on the foot translates to a substantial added load, when the number of steps taken per hour is considered). The best can be expensive (for custom-made boots, alarmingly so), and those not custom-made can take a long time to adjust to your foot (or break in); indeed, some may never do so properly, and then the wearer runs a real risk of permanent foot problems. The ankle support, stiffness and rugged soles are far better suited for backpacking or mountaineering. Additionally, once a leather boot gets wet, it is extremely slow to dry (the careful application of specialty dressings can help in this regard, but is time-consuming).

[ **Workboots.** These are generally inappropriate for hiking, for many of the same reasons as leather boots. Often, the fit is poor for hiking, better suited for an active, flat workplace. Though a good toe box is a vital ingredient in any boot, overly reinforced examples are uncomfortable, adversely affecting the way the boot flexes under trail stresses. Not recommended.

[ **Composite hiking boots.** Generally made of suede, nylon and other synthetics, with either lighter Vibram or proprietary soles, these are frequently found with Gore-Tex or similar water-resistant linings. They are far lighter in weight than all-leather boots, and often require little in the way of breaking-in (though this should not be assumed—always use boots for short walks initially, gradually building up distance as they start to adjust to your foot). These are very well suited for three-season hiking and light backpacking. The downside is that they can be less durable, with stitching failing after a season or two. Typically, they are uninsulated, and generally not that well suited to winter use.

[ **Trail-runners.** Trail-running shoes are the lightest reasonable option. In construction, they are similar to composite hiking boots, but are low cut, closer to a sneaker. Toe protection is generally good, but they do not offer ankle support, although the claim has been made that by eliminating this the wearer develops stronger ankles. However, way against this the fact that support may prevent a sprain or even a broken ankle. Nor are they good for keeping out the kind of debris that tends to accumulate in off-trail hiking. Worn by the nimble-footed on trail, they are a perfectly acceptable choice, but this is not a style that is ideal for beginning hikers.

[ **Winter footwear.** This runs a vast gamut. At one end, there are heavily insulated plastic mountaineering boots with detachable liners. While these can be a godsend for multi-day winter backpacks in demanding terrain, they are overkill for all other purposes, at least in the Catskills. They are also heavy. A variety of insulated boots are available, and for snowshoe trips in the Catskills, Sorels, mukluks or similar boots will work, but these do not accept crampons with grace, should these be needed, an important caveat. Generally, for that reason, a fairly stiff boot sole is recommended. In cold temperatures where moisture is not a concern, this is one arena in which a good heavy leather boot can come into its own, if worn with adequate insulation, but these are best for tricky trips with a lot of vertical gain and heavy snow and ice, where the ability to plant a crampon or kick a step is handy. For average Catskill winter conditions, a lightly insulated boot worn with good insulating socks will suffice. **Always** bring a pair of dry, insulating (ideally waterproof) socks on winter hikes. A wet foot at the wrong time can lead to frostbitten feet.

There are people who are wearing so-called 'minimalist footwear', for hiking these days. Everyone is entitled to their choices, but I do not recommend any footwear with so little protection. A stubbed toe in boots could be a broken toe in sandals. They also offer very little ankle support. On the plus side, they are the lightest choice on the market, but certainly not the cheapest.

My wife's advice for lady hikers: Beware of woman's boots that offer 1000 grams (or more) of insulation. If you intend to move around in them in the winter, you could find your feet getting wet with sweat, and then cold and clammy. And if you take your kids (or in our case, grand kids) hiking, make sure they have good footwear as well. You don't want to turn them off with a bad experience.