

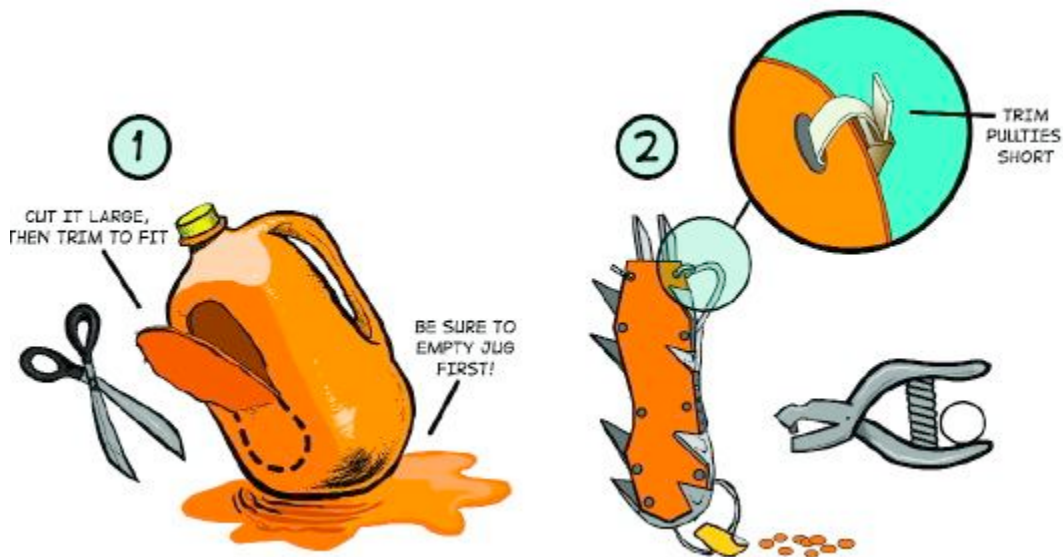
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Snow be gone!

Keeping crampons clog-free

By Michael Silitch



It's 8 a.m., you're on the summit under clear, blue skies. Your rope team traveled well together, the crevasses were easy to negotiate, and the snow was firm. Hallelujah. Now all you have to do is descend.

On the way down, though, the slopes get softer and your crampons become snow magnets. Pretty soon you feel like Big Foot tromping down the glacier, with six inches of packed snow clinging to each crampon. Heck, your points aren't even touching the ground anymore ...

The lazy solution is simply to knock the side of the crampons with the shaft of your ice axe. But be aware that if you have a rubber grip on your axe, this will quickly trash it. Want some real solutions? The following tips will help.

WEAR HORIZONTAL-FRAME CRAMPONS Crampons with a horizontal frame collect less snow than rigid models with vertical rails. Plus, these alpine crampons are often lighter than fully rigid, steep-ice designs. I also find that newer crampons tend to ball up less than those with scratched-up paint.

ADD ANTI-BALLING PLATES Several companies make latex or polyethylene plates that mate under the base of the crampon frame and help keep snow from collecting. They're invaluable -- but most commercially made models are heavy because they're designed for endless days of use.

BETTER YET, MAKE YOUR OWN I prefer homemade anti-balling plates because they're lighter and cheaper. When they break down, I just replace them. Here's how to do it:

The quickest method is to simply wrap the bottom of the frame with duct tape, shiny-side down. This works pretty darn well! If the tape deteriorates, just replace it with more.

A more durable option is to make anti-balling plates from a plastic orange-juice jug. Cut the plates out of a three-quart or one-gallon container, shaped to fit the inside perimeter of your crampons. Depending on the size and shape of your crampons, you can make the plates a one-piece or two-piece design (i.e. separate heel and forefoot plates). A one-piece design tends to be more durable and snow-resistant. Then, use a hole punch or awl to poke holes along the sides and corners of the plates; finally, secure the plates to the bottom of your crampons with pull ties (also called zip ties) and clip off any excess length. Carry extra pull ties and duct tape for field repairs.

WHEN NOT TO USE PLATES There are times when anti-balling plates do more harm than good. On steep névé or snow with surface hoar, the plates create some slipping. Also, on routes where you need maximum crampon depth, such as in cold, wintry snow or glacial ice, be sure to remove the plates.

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