

# 5 Tips for Winter Trail Running

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Winter Trail  
Running*

As arctic blasts and blizzards dump snow across the northern states, Carolina trail runners can't help but smile as they suit up and step outside to 60 degrees and sunshine. Mild winters and trails close to downtown Charlotte make it easy to train outside in all four seasons. Sure, there's the occasional cold and soggy day, but cold snaps don't last long. Even when rain or snow persists, you can count on the thermometer climbing back into the comfort zone within a couple of days.

Whether you're just starting, or you run ultras, winter's hard packed dirt and low humidity make for excellent conditions to run on natural surface trails. Take your pick from the top trails in the Queen City and incorporate these training tips into your routine to stay in top form all winter long.

## **1. START CLOSE TO HOME**

Two parks that are easy to get to in any weather are [McDowell](#) and [Reedy Creek](#). While both are only minutes outside of Charlotte's uptown area, you can lose yourself in nature on miles of forested trails. At Reedy Creek, the 10-mile circuit takes you along the park's ponds and streams and past ruins of a late 18th-century homestead. At McDowell, more than seven miles of trails weave through mixed hardwood forest and Piedmont prairie habitat to the shores of Lake Wylie.

During winter you have less daylight to play with, so take along a headlamp and your cell for emergencies. You may not feel as thirsty as you do in summer, but you need just as much water, if not more, to stay hydrated. Wear a backpack or waist pack to carry water and a trail snack with you.

## **2. SNOW DAY OPTIONS**

One of the most magical times to go trail running is when snow is falling and everything is blanketed in a fluffy dusting of white. Two nature preserves with

smooth, non-technical trails, good drainage, and plenty of level terrain are [Latta Plantation](#) and [Ribbonwalk](#). Close to the city center, Ribbonwalk's four miles of trails follow Irwin Creek past the park's two ponds and pass through a covered bridge. At Latta, you can run more than 12 miles through stands of hardwoods and open meadows to the shores of Mountain Island Lake.

### **3. WATCH YOUR FORM**

More than 40 miles of technical trails hug the banks of the Catawba River under the thick cover of hardwoods at the [U.S. National Whitewater Center](#). Rocks, roots, and constant ups and downs can be a challenge in dry conditions. Add icy or muddy patches, and your run becomes a total body workout. Keep core muscles engaged, flex at the knee and hip joints, and keep your eyes on the trail ahead to maintain balance and find secure footing. Warm up with three flat miles on the Lake Trail, and then tackle the tight climbs and descents along North and South Main for scenic river views. If trails are closed due to rain or snow, you can always run the Parkway Trail and finish with a loop around the whitewater channels.

If you're running early or late in the day when temperatures may hover around freezing, make sure your trail runners have a rugged outsole and sturdy lugs for grip. Look for lightweight and flexible shoes with waterproofing to keep your feet warm and dry.

### **4. CHANGE IT UP**

With more than a dozen [nature preserves](#) all over Charlotte, it's easy to vary your routes all winter long. Beginners will love the short distances and easy trails at Clarks Creek, Flat Branch, and Evergreen. Another beginner run at Big Rock Nature Preserve passes by granite rock formations that you can't find anywhere else in the city.

Intermediate runners will enjoy more distance and elevation change at Stephens Road Nature Preserve on the west side of the city. Portions of the trail border the Catawba River and its tributaries through river marsh and wetland habitats, making it one of the best spots in the city for wildlife viewing. Trail running experts will want to work the 11-mile trail network at Sherman Branch into their training schedule. Trails on the east side of town are shared with mountain bikers, and the singletrack running through dense forest features some tough climbs. Because there are three connected loops, you can easily vary your distance. Just be sure to stay alert for approaching bikers, and be ready to yield the right of way.

## **5. LAYER UP FOR THE CLIMB**

For the biggest vertical challenge, Charlotte has to offer, head southwest of the city to [Crowders Mountain State Park](#). It has more than 25 miles of trails that scale Crowders Mountain and Pinnacles Mountain for views of the Charlotte skyline. The quickest way to get your cardio fix is on the Backside Trail, a steep and unrelenting 1.6-mile climb to the summit of Crowders Mountain that includes a 336-step staircase just before the top. Run the 4-mile, out-and-back Pinnacle Trail for a more gradual ascent, or combine Crowders and Pinnacle trails to hit both peaks for a total of eight miles. Endurance runners can add a 12.4-mile, out-and-back run on the mostly flat Ridgeline Trail.

Expect temperatures and wind to fluctuate as you climb and descend. Start cold for a quick warm up as you climb and be prepared to shed layers as the terrain gets steeper. Layers work best, with a wicking base layer, fleece or wool for warmth, a wind-resistant outer shell, hat, and gloves.