

Dressing Smart for Winter

Here are some tips on proper dress on cold weather hikes.

One of the most important things to do is to layer. What is layering? Basically, it's wearing a number of light- or medium-weight articles of clothing when you hike, preferably topped by a breathable windproof or waterproof shell. For those times when you stop long enough for the body to cool, you can pull a heavier layer out of your pack to stay warm. If you get warm while hiking, just peel off a layer. In time, you'll discover how much insulation you need to stay warm when hiking, and when resting.

If you want to give yourself the largest margin of safety, you should stick with synthetics. Fortunately, in recent years, an extraordinary range of excellent synthetic equipment has appeared on the market. It either wicks perspiration from your body to outer layers, or keeps you reasonably warm when wet.

The first layer is not always long johns, as you might suspect. There are a number of excellent high-wicking briefs for men and women that work well during the not so cold months. Patagonia makes an excellent polyester Capaline brief that they claim wicks better than wool. Duofold makes a brief from polyester called "Thermax". An excellent performing and comfortable brief is the "Microclimate" manufactured by Early Winters (1-800-458-4438). "MicroClimate" briefs are made from 92% polyester and 8% Lycra and perform as advertised. They wick well, they are warm, and exceptionally comfortable.

As temperatures get colder, many will want to consider long johns and a matching top. Once again, there are an incredible variety of fabrics to choose from. One to stay away from is cotton. When cotton gets wet, it chills the body and dries slowly. It's not a fabric you want to wear in the colder months where the potential exists to wet the fabric. The cotton, waffle-weave long johns you see in your local K-Mart are therefore out as a candidate. Concentrate on long johns made from polyester, which are sold under a variety of trade names such as Capaline, Thermax, MicroClimate, REI's "M.T.S." fabric, CoolMax, ThermaStat, and others. The large variety of trade names represent variations and refinements on the polyester thread extrusion to increase the ability of the fabric to transfer moisture. .

The next layer is your main layer in cold weather - probably the layer that will see the most use when you're hiking or backpacking. When the temperature dips into the thirties, it's best to add a light polyester fleece pants and a fleece top. The fabric most commonly found on the shelves these days is "Polartec" manufactured by Maulden Mills in New England. They make three fabric weights, from light "100", to medium weight "200", to dead of winter "300". You might be able to find inexpensive polyester fleece at some of the large sporting good stores at a price much lower than "name" brands.

For a top layer, consider something that is windproof and waterproof. A windproof layer can noticeably increase your warmth on the trail. And you need to keep out the elements -

namely, rain, snow and sleet, so you want your outer layer to be impervious to wet conditions. If you're willing to put up with moist insulation, you can always consider inexpensive waterproof, non-breathable nylon rainwear - or even waterproof, non-breathable vinyl rainwear. It will work, but your insulation will start to get wet from perspiration - something to avoid, since perspiration cools the body. The best alternative seems to be the more expensive breathable waterproof rainwear. Gore-tex is still considered by many to be the best, but there are other variations available that perform adequately.

For hats and gloves, stick with polyester fleece

A number of new boot styles specifically designed for winter use are starting to show on the market. Trukke makes one of the newer models, but there are many hunting boot styles available, as well as the Canadian Sorrel boots which are rated to extremely low temperatures.