

Dressing for Successful Cold-Weather Angling



by Darl Black

My fishing friends who live in more southern states have a difficult time getting their minds around northern snow, ice or even open-water temperatures in the low 40s. “What do you do during the three or four winter months when you can’t fish?” They ask.

I tell them, “Who says I don’t go fishing? I dress for cold and hit the water—either open water or hard water depending on the severity of the winter.”

Several decades ago my answer would have been, “I sit around a warm fire and dream of spring,” or, “I become chilled if outside for very long.” Those days are pretty much a thing of the past, if you dress for success with the latest winter wear. If you’re still trying to stay warm and dry with poor choices in clothing, you’ll continue to suffer.

Proper layering

The idea of layering clothing for cold weather outside activities goes back to earlier times. But few individuals understood proper layering, and the clothing industry certainly lacked the technology to produce the needed garments.

In my youth, layering simply meant piling on lots of clothes. I would pull on cotton thermal top and bottom undergarments, heavyweight cotton bluejeans, cotton flannel shirt, a scratchy wool sweater and a flannel-lined coat with a rubberized coating. An hour or so later I was damp and shivering.

My clothing was largely to blame for my misery. Cotton is a poor cold-weather clothing choice because it retains moisture. Putting on a rubberized outer shell creates a waterproof barrier for sure, but at the same time it doesn’t let moisture escape.



Don’t let winter’s weather keep you from fishing. Dress for success in layers with the latest in today’s clothing.

photos by the author

Staying warm and dry in winter weather involves three considerations: (a) insulation that holds warm air but doesn’t absorb water; (b) preventing rain, snow or wind from penetrating your insulation; and (c) allowing the water vapor generated by body heat to escape through all layers. Today’s high-tech materials address all three considerations in an incredibly comfortable way with a three-layer cold-weather clothing system.

Base layer

First is the base layer next to your skin. Its main purpose is to wick perspiration away from the body so it passes to the next layer.

The single most important step you can take toward being comfortable is to lose those inexpensive cotton thermal long johns. With the exception of natural silk, manmade fibers do a better job. The polypropylene base-layer garments of a few years ago have been replaced with improved material like Thermastat™ and the newest compression garments that fit like a second skin.

I’m a fan of a silk base layer. Silk is form-fitting without the tightness of compression garments, which I find uncomfortable.

Insulation layer

The insulation layer must create space to trap warm air from escaping but allow perspiration in the form of water vapor to pass to the next layer.

Goose down has long been an outstanding insulator in outdoor clothing, but it doesn’t let perspiration escape easily, so you can become overheated if you’re involved in even moderate activity. Furthermore, down is bulky and



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doesn't dry quickly. Natural wool remains an effective insulator, but all-wool garments retain moisture and don't dry quickly.

Today's best insulation materials are Polar Fleece or Thinsulate™—warmth without weight or bulk. Quality fleece is relatively inexpensive, it readily allows water vapor to pass through, it retains insulating abilities when wet, and it dries very quickly. Vests, hats, neck gators, long pants and pull-over/zippered tops are all available in fleece.

Shell layer

The outermost shell layer must be windproof and waterproof, yet breathable so all that perspiration can escape—otherwise inner layers will become damp and you'll end up shivering. The proper outer shell material will prevent rain (large water molecules) from passing through while allowing water vapor (smaller molecules) to pass to the outside.

There are several high-tech materials that can do this. Gore-Tex® is likely the most recognizable name, but other shell materials include Dry-Plus®, Tech H2O™, Foul Tech™ and textured nylon. The key is to purchase waterproof shell clothing for which the manufacturer states that the actual material is breathable, instead of claiming that the garment breathes through vents or inner mesh lining. Rubberized or PVC material never breathes.

To be comfortable, layering must extend to the entire body. You must include long-sleeve tops and long bottoms. And don't forget the appropriate liner sock and insulating sock before slipping your foot into a shoe or boot.

Adjusting the thermostat

Some people can withstand cold better than others. You may require more or less insulation than your buddy to maintain the same comfort level. For example, to stay warm I generally need a fleece pull-over and Thinsulate



Wind Chill Chart

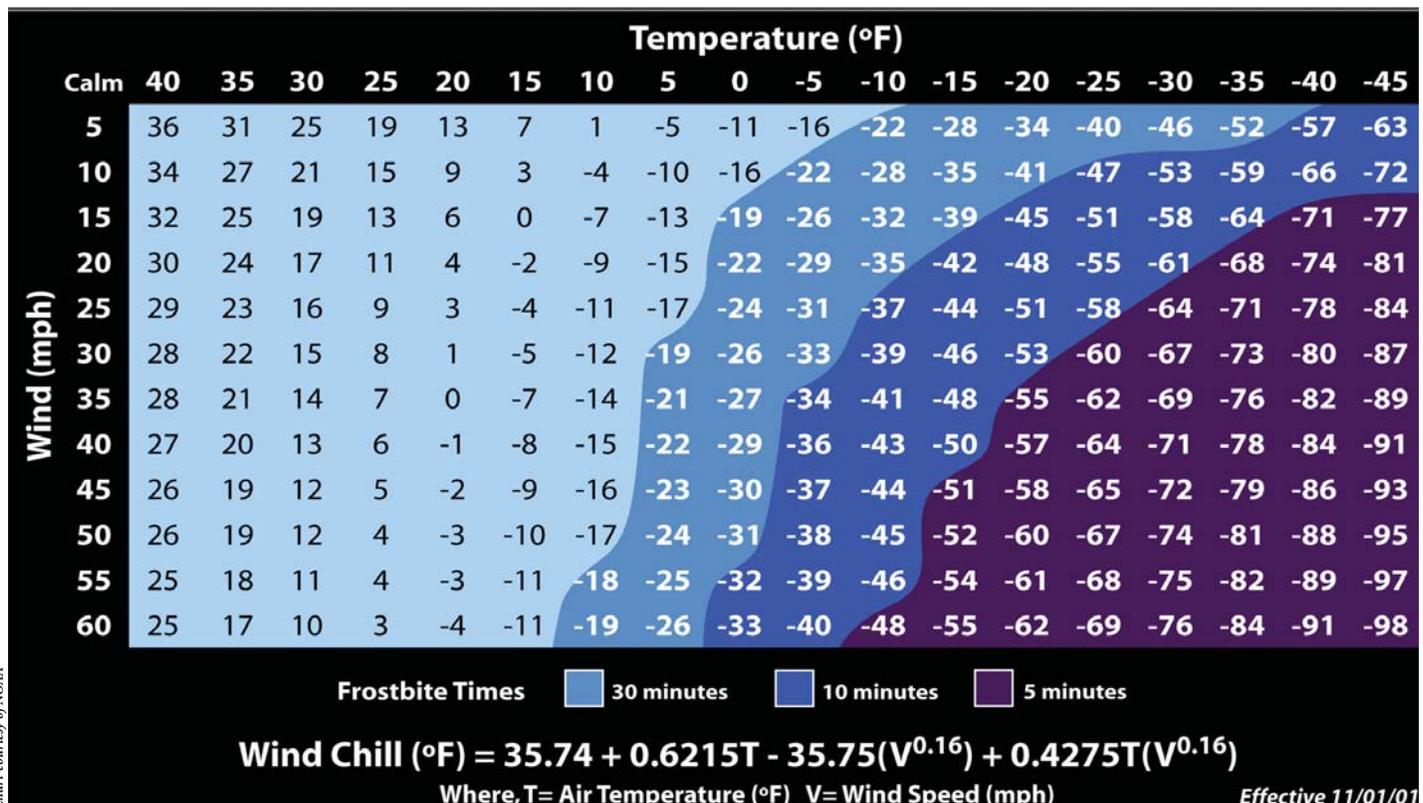


Chart courtesy of NOAA

vest while my fishing buddy Dave wears only a pullover. During extreme cold periods, I replace my raingear shell with a Thinsulate insulated coat in addition to a fleece pullover.

The head is an area of significant heat loss, so it's important to keep it covered. For some individuals that might be a simple ball cap. For others, it may require a neck gaiter and tightly knit watch cap or a Thinsulate/Gore-Tex ballcap. If you wear a watch cap, consider adding a headband visor to reduce glare for improved sight on the water or on the ice.

Hands, fingers

Depending on the activity, there are several options to consider when it comes to hands and fingers. If you're fishing with a rod and reel where feel is important, fingerless gloves in either ragg wool or fleece are popular. Take two or three pairs along in case one gets wet. When you're running an outboard, hauling a sled onto the ice or paddling a kayak, you need the protection of full-finger lined, waterproof gloves.

For added warmth of toes and fingers, look to the magic of self-contained chemical heat packs. Stick "toe warmers" with adhesive strips to the bottom of your socks, and slip "hand warmers" into your jacket pockets to bring feeling back to your pinkies.

Fine-tuning

- **Wading:** Winter steelhead or inland trout anglers have wader requirements. Many opt for extra-thick neoprene chest waders. However, if you walk any distance on dry land, more than likely you'll work up a sweat because neoprene doesn't breathe. I am much more comfortable with insulating fleece pants and a pair of Gore-Tex waders.
- **Boat fishing:** When jet boating during winter on one of the state's major rivers, any exposed skin on your face will take a beating from wind burn and cold air. I've tried balaclavas, but these hooded slip-on head protectors aren't sufficiently windproof at boat speeds. However, there is a relatively new item called a sport utility mask with interchangeable lenses. These masks are lightweight and considerably cheaper than the motorcycle helmets worn by tournament bass anglers during the spring and fall.
- **Ice fishing:** Ice anglers can exert a lot of heat-producing energy when pulling a sled or drilling holes. Therefore, be sure you can shed some of your insulating layers during strenuous activity. In addition, be sure your bibs have reinforced Cordura® knee pads for crawling around the holes on the ice. Because set-up is easy and prices are falling, every ice angler should have a pop-up shelter, which can be easily heated with a lantern or small portable heater.

Don't let winter's miserable weather keep you from fishing. Simply dress for success in layers with the latest in today's clothing. ☐

Apparel for Winter Kayaking

I'm not into winter kayaking, but I have friends who live for it, and it's becoming more popular every season. As kayaker Ryan Wiegel explains, "Boaters have very special requirements in garments. You cannot wear your typical cold-weather fishing clothing.

"When kayaking in the winter, you work up more of a sweat than when fishing. The name of the game is to stay cool so that you don't perspire. We use a layering system, but we do not over do it. Plus, since our upper torso is very active paddling, it is vital to have flexible clothing.

"Our base layer serves to wick away sweat, but it also acts as a rash guard due to all the paddle movements. The base layer and thin insulating layer must stretch. Everything is designed with "MVT" in mind—Moisture Vapor Transmission."

The outer shells specifically made for cold-water kayaking are exceptional performance garments. Not only must the outer layer be wind-resistant, waterproof and breathable, but the shell must also be flexible and durable. Cordura nylon fabric covers all critical rub points. On a full dry suit the wrist and neck openings have special latex gaskets to keep water out.

"I wear a water sport helmet with ear protection. It provides some insulation but also allows heat to escape. We wear thick neoprene boots with felt soles instead of shoes. Our gloves have a waterproof nylon outer shell with gripper dots to hold a paddle better, and special removable inner gloves for warmth.

"With all the technical clothing we use, I am more comfortable kayaking than walking down the street in the winter," Wiegel says.

And, of course, don't even think about boarding a kayak without wearing a life jacket—DB.

