

WINTER CLOTHING FOR BIRDING

What (Not) to Wear!!

There's no such thing as bad weather, just the wrong clothing (Billy Connelly)

Birding in bad weather has its rewards. Unusual species typically turn up in harsh conditions when they get blown off course by strong winds and 'falls' of migrants can occur when birds are forced to land by the rain. Showery weather also has its compensations: activity tends to be concentrated during the dry spells, making birds easier to spot. On the coast, spectacular movements of birds can take place during an onshore gale; freezing weather produces influxes of birds from the continent. Warm weather, by contrast, is often accompanied by heat haze which can make viewing difficult and bird activity generally decreases as the temperature increases.

Wearing the right clothes is every bit as important as choosing the right optical equipment. Being cold and or wet not only affects comfort and enjoyment but also the ability to concentrate. Generally speaking, birding requires greater levels of insulation and protection from the elements than simply going for a walk in the countryside because there will be periods of standing still when less heat is generated through movement.

The best advice for staying warm and dry is as follows:

1. Adopt the 'Layering' or 'Onion Skin' Principle. This is fundamentally important. **It is better to wear several thin – medium weight layers than one thick garment** because warm air is trapped between each layer. It also makes it easier to regulate your temperature by adding or removing layers as required. The layers should be *loose fitting* to avoid restricting blood circulation and to increase the quantity of trapped air. Modern materials such as fleece, which is basically fluffy polyester, are very light making it possible to do this without seriously affecting movement. Wearing a thin thermal *base layer* is particularly important and in colder weather should consist of both leggings and a top.

2. Cover the Extremities. Wearing gloves, scarves, hats (preferably those which cover the ears) and warm socks will dramatically reduce heat loss. In extreme conditions (not often encountered in the UK these days), a balaclava is preferable to a hat because it covers more of the head. The less skin is exposed to the air the warmer you will be, especially if there is a cold wind blowing. The layering principle also applies – wear two or even three pairs of socks and gloves if necessary. Outdoor clothing shops sell thin *liners* to go under socks and gloves.

3. Choose 'High Wicking' (Breathable) Fabrics to Avoid Overheating. When purchasing a garment, make sure that it possesses good 'wicking' properties i.e. it will transport perspiration away from the skin effectively. This is particularly relevant to the base layer. It may seem paradoxical to talk about overheating in winter but the body still perspires even when it's cold and perspiration left on the skin can cause rapid chilling which is very uncomfortable indeed! If you feel yourself overheating, slow down, open or remove a layer of clothing. Taking off your hat and or gloves is an efficient way of dissipating heat.

4. Avoid the following materials – cotton, denim / jeans and corduroy.

Generally speaking, artificial materials designed specifically for outdoor pursuits offer better performance than natural fibres. There are exceptions, however. *Ventile*, a densely woven cotton, is highly waterproof and breathable (see below) and some combinations of natural and man-made fibres work well. Merino wool is highly rated for base layers, hats and socks for example. Duck/goose down is unrivalled for its insulating properties although there are artificial alternatives such as Insuloft. Down 'puffer style' jackets are very popular but beware they are not waterproof and once wet down is difficult to dry out. Some companies use *hydrophobic down* which has been treated to help repel water and reduce waterlogging. In wet weather it is still advisable to wear down jackets as part of a layering system with a waterproof outer shell.

5. Wear a Waterproof, Windproof, Breathable *Outer Shell* and Boots. An outer shell (consisting of a jacket and if necessary, over-trousers), will keep you both warm and dry by providing protection against the wind and the rain. Wind proofing is often more important than insulation due to the *wind chill factor*. The wind can make it feel colder than the actual air temperature suggests. The outer shell should also be *breathable* (see above) to be effective.

Waterproof over-trousers are desirable not only in wet weather but also as an extra layer in cold and or windy weather. Those with a long-zipped seam along the legs have the great advantage of being easy to put on or remove as conditions dictate.

Non-breathable waterproofs such as nylon may keep the rain out, but they also trap moisture underneath. Beware levels of the breathability vary enormously, and manufacturers' claims can be misleading in this respect. As always, you generally get what you pay for.

Gore-tex is the best known waterproof, windproof and breathable material and is widely used for outdoor clothing and footwear. There are numerous Gore-tex substitutes on the market, but their performance varies greatly. *Ventile* is a particular favourite with birders because it is softer than Gore-tex and does not rustle. Jackets with insulated linings are less versatile and may interfere with the layering principle. Fleece, whilst it has excellent wicking and insulating properties, by itself is neither waterproof nor windproof and is not therefore suitable as an outer shell. Certain types of fleeces, however, such as Gore Windstopper, are laminated to make them windproof and others are treated to make them shower resistant (but not completely waterproof).

Walking boots with a breathable waterproof lining such as Gore-tex are ideal for birding. Gaiters are also a good idea, especially if you are walking on boggy ground or through tall wet vegetation. 'Trainer-style' walking shoes with a waterproof membrane are light and comfortable to wear and are fine for less demanding conditions. Beware of so-called 'waterproof' Gore-tex substitutes: a few work well but others are almost totally useless. Wellingtons are the last resort if it is exceptionally wet but bear in mind they suffer from zero breathability and, unless they are lined, have poor insulating properties (with the possible exception of those manufactured from *Purofort*, a modern material made by Dunlop). They are not as comfortable to wear as walking boots and are not therefore recommended for walking long distances.