
Padding in the "Cool Months"

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Clothing for cold-weather paddling can be most anything, with the exception of what you put on the feet and the hands. Some people wear the same clothes they would wear on a cold-weather hike. They wear just enough to keep warm in the expected temperatures, with some form of waterproof shoes that would be okay for a wet day on the trail. Think about it; you probably already have that type of clothing in your closet. Add a windbreaker, hat, and gloves. Simple!

There are all sorts of specialty cold-weather paddling clothes available if you want them. However, if you make sure your cold-weather paddling is on days of good weather, you probably won't need them. On the other hand, you may just "WANT" them, like I do.



Ice Falls On Deer Creek
Trip #45 February 29th 2004



Drying Out After Cold-Water Rescue
Trip #97 March 5th 2005

Some cold-weather paddlers, like myself, wear completely waterproof outer-layers for two reasons:

- 1) If someone has trouble on the creek, I want to be able to go in after them without putting myself in danger because of cold water exposure. From the waist down, I wear dry-suit pants with knee-high, waterproof boots (Chota Mukluks). Under those, I wear insulating layers; again, just enough for the expected temperatures. This setup gives me the ability to go into super-cold water, up to 3 feet or so, for short periods of time.

Note: On Trip #97—March 5th 2005, Doug McKnight and I spent nearly 30 minutes waist deep in 37-degree swift flowing water to extract a pair of paddlers and their canoe from a logjam that had cap-sized and trapped them on the Wildcat's South Fork. When finished, we were cold, wet, and glad to run into the woods and change into dry clothes. Without the extra clothing described above, our situation could have been perilous. The two rescued paddlers were wearing normal cold-weather clothing, not the high-tech gear worn by Doug and me. After only a few minutes in the water, they were shivering beyond control and needed aid from the rest of the group. Doug and I had worked in the frigid water for nearly half an hour and then laughed at each other as we stripped naked in the woods.

- 2) I don't want to be too particular about where I get in and out of the boat. The knee-high waterproof boots allow me to step out of the boat in 18" of water at any time. If your boots are not completely waterproof or not tall enough, you must search for the perfect spot before you get out of the boat. That is not always easy, and sometimes impossible.

My Chota Mukluks are totally waterproof, 18" tall, with a cinch-strap at the top that seals tightly against the Dry Pants and allow me to step into water deeper than the boots. The seal is not perfect, but will suffice for a short while.



Are Your Boots Tall Enough?

Trip #43 February 15th 2004



Many Times The River Will Decide Where Your Feet Will Go.

Trip #37 November 23rd 2003

The "feet and hands" are the crux of the entire situation. You must keep your feet and hands warm and dry, or even a nice weather day in the "Cool Months" can be miserable.

Footwear: There are four things to consider about footwear:

- 1) Waterproof—There are no exceptions if you want to be comfortable and safe. Otherwise, you must carry a dry pair of shoes and socks.
- 2) As tall as possible—Mine are knee-high. This allows you more variables when it comes time to step out of the boat.
- 3) Oversize—This makes room for plenty of insulating socks without constricting blood flow in the feet. My boots are one-size larger than my normal size.
- 4) Socks—These should be thick and fluffy; wool, fleece, etc. I wear thin polypro liner socks against the skin. Always carry an extra pair of socks, or 2, or.....

Gloves: Gloves should be waterproof ("must be" for kayakers), with enough insulation for the temperatures you have, and loose enough so they won't constrict blood flow. If the gloves are big enough to allow thin liner gloves, they will be much easier to get on and off, and even warmer. Some people prefer mittens.

The big deal for both gloves and boots is "Oversize". Make sure they are big enough to allow plenty of insulating layers and "still not fit tight". A tight fit with boots or gloves causes a blood-flow restriction and is a guarantee of cool feet and fingers even though you have plenty of insulation. Cold feet and fingers can turn a great day into a bad day.

Next is a waterproof gear bag, but you need that for summer trips, too, right? Into it, for cold-weather trips, go a complete change of equally warm clothes with socks, a rain jacket (or waterproof windbreaker), a very warm and cozy sock hat, very warm gloves (again, big enough that they won't constrict blood flow), and some high-carb snacks for lunch. Remember, all this stuff is **EXTRA** clothes. These are in addition to what you are wearing. That means "extra" gloves, "extra" hats—a double of everything.

How About A Fire Kit? A little fire at a lunch stop has taken the chill away from many paddlers on our trips. Usually just a fun and casual idea, but a few were a functional part of cold water rescues. Can you build a fire under any conditions? You can, if you have the right stuff packed into your dry bag. Someday, when you get wet and cold, are you going to be wondering if anyone else has a Fire Kit?

Eventually, you will need all of that gear. We are just now entering our 4th "Cool Months" season since the Expedition Team began. During that time, a total of 17 paddlers have been forced to change into their spare clothes while on the Creek in cold weather.

Next, (and many paddlers don't do this), you need a set of warm street clothes "left in your vehicle" to change into when you get to the end of the trip. I change out of the river-duds ASAP after the boats are loaded. It's just a thing I do that most folks don't bother with. I do it year round, even in fair weather. For me, this is a



refreshing and fulfilling way to end a great trip, or a satisfying way to finish a trip that had some problems. If someday you arrive at the takeout cold and wet, those dry duds may just make your day.

That's about it for paddling the "Cool Months". Take care of your feet and hands and you'll be comfortable. Add to that a "don't get wet at any cost" attitude and you'll have an enjoyable day.



Trip #91.....December 18th 2004

Wet Suits versus Dry Suits

Excerpted from Muskrat's Wildcat Creek Expeditions Newsletter by permission of Garry Hill

Back in the early days of my whitewater paddling, the "Farmer John" wet suit was the top dog. We would wear them so much that they would become like a second skin. There are all kinds of jokes and stories about the Farmer John. LOL.

Anyway, they work simply by insulating and forming a barrier between cold water and skin. The material is waterproof but it's not designed to keep you "dry". Since the material is not "breathable", you perspire inside it. The wet suit takes advantage of this and the insulation keeps that moisture layer warm against the skin, while the waterproof part keeps the cold water away from the skin.

This is a good system and it works as well today as it did then. It works best when you are in a situation where you are "for sure" going to be wet (i.e., diving, whitewater paddling, etc.). In these situations, you are producing copious amounts of body heat from activity, much more so than the quiet water paddling the Expedition Team does. Sitting quietly in the canoe while paddling Wildcat and similar streams just does not generate the kind of body heat necessary to make the wet suit work well. In addition, you are exposed to the wind which can diminish the insulation ability of the wetsuit material.

"Dry Suits", coupled with insulating layers underneath, accomplish the exact same thing but have some advantages. They are waterproof, unlike the wet suit which is designed to work best when it is wet. In addition, the dry suit is windproof. The wet suit will give you a chill in the wind. Under the dry suit, you can add as many layers of insulation as needed for the temperatures of the day. You wear nothing under the wet suit and usually nothing over it below the waist.

The wet suit comes in one unit. The dry suit has the option of a full body suit or a split style, like I use; dry pants with dry top. I can wear just the dry pants (like I normally choose) with normal insulation layers on top. Or, I can wear both the pant and the dry top for complete protection. Even when wearing the full suit, upper body mobility is equal to the Farmer John, but much warmer.

In summary, wet suits and dry suits both work well for cold weather paddling. However, the dry suit has some advantages and options that would, to me, seem like the better of the choices, worth consideration and a few dollars more in the buying price. I even opt for the dry suit for whitewater paddling nowadays; I no longer own any wet suits.