

Winter

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But sometimes, we're not quite prepared for how cold it can truly be.

"A lot of the mistakes that I see are people using the wrong type of clothing," said registered Maine Guide Melissa Shea of Mountain Guide Service. "Sometimes it's not a Gore-tex shell, or it's the wrong kind of boots. ... We often see people underprepared, and we're thinking, what's going to happen if they have to sit outside all night?"

Shea guides snowshoeing and ice climbing trips all winter, and she knows from experience that the right clothing can mean the difference between a successful, comfortable outing and a miserable time. In fact, wearing the wrong clothing can be outright dangerous.

Which brings us back to Maine wildlife.

We aren't the only creatures out there in Maine's winter wonderland. A few of the state's native species have adapted so they can stay active year-round. And if we look to these animals — the bobcat and lynx, snowshoe hare and coyote, beaver and moose — they can teach us a thing or two about dressing for the cold.

Build layers of warmth

Many Maine mammals grow special winter coats that consist of an insulating layer and an outer layer that traps in the heat. Even bird feathers are constructed to trap in more heat during the winter, according to the 2008 book "Arctic and Alpine Biomes."

Similarly, multiple layers of clothing can trap in body heat, especially if the clothing is made of certain materials. In general, winter layers should consist of a wool or synthetic base layer of long underwear; an insulating midlayer such as fleece; and a windproof and waterproof outer layer that breathes.

"As long as you're not wearing cotton," said Matt Bishop, merchandise buyer at Epic Sports outfitter in Bangor. "Cotton absorbs water and doesn't wick moisture away from your body. It holds it there, and as the water gets cold, you get cold."

Base layers — or as we call them in Maine, long johns — are made of a variety of materials, which have different costs. Soft merino wool tends to be the priciest base layer material, but it's also extremely durable, warm, fast to dry and doesn't trap bad body odors. Less expensive base layers are made of synthetic materials such as polar fleece or other types of polyester, which have been developed over time to be extremely effective insulators. They aren't as durable as wool, but they're usually a bit softer.

"For [the outdoor brand] Patagonia, they call their base layers Capilene, and

they've gone ahead and redesigned and really improved upon them in a great way," said Kelly Cochrane, manager of the outfitter Cadillac Mountain Sports in Ellsworth. "It truly pulls moisture away from your body much faster but also retains heat."

To make this layering concept easier for customers, many outdoor clothing brands are offering a variety of multilayer jackets this year, Cochrane said. These jackets, which usually include a zip-out fleece and an outer layer that is both wind- and waterproof, aren't a new trend, but a re-emerging one from several years ago.

"Many of our customers like the fact that there's one less thing to think about," Cochrane said. "You put on your winter coat and that's it."

Repel moisture

With all the snow, slush, sleet and ice, a Maine winter can be a wet place. And it's important to keep that cold water away from your body. There's no animal that does this better than the beaver, which spends the winter grooming waterproof oils through its fur. This oil and outer fur keep the freezing water away from the beaver's insulating fur and skin.

People have to rely on waterproof clothing and footwear.

One of the most popular waterproof materials used in the outdoor clothing world is Gore-Tex, durable fabric that is both water- and windproof. But some companies use their own waterproofing technology.

Regardless of its name, the waterproof material needs to be kept clean to repel water efficiently, and you can't wash waterproof clothes with just any soap. Most outfitters carry special waterproof clothing wash, such as Nikwax Tech Wash, which can be used right in your washing machine.

Covering the digits

Snowshoe hares, Canada lynx and several other mammals that thrive in the winter have adapted to have large, heavily furred feet that allow them to walk on the surface of deep snow. Similarly, people can wear insulated boots and snowshoes, which makes winter travel more efficient and fun.

"If your feet get cold when you're walking through snow, it's going to send the shivers up your spine," Bishop said. "Good warm socks are important. Once you wear good quality socks, you won't go back."

Bishop suggests checking out socks made by Darn Tough, a Vermont company that stands behind their merino wool blend socks with a lifetime warranty.

Then we've got fingers to worry about. There are few things more painful than frozen fingers. At first, they're just painful. Then they become numb and useless. And



A coyote hunts in the snow during a Maine winter.

FOREST HART

what really hurts is warming them back up. Every nerve ending feels like it's on fire.

That's why it's important to choose warm mittens or gloves.

"We're selling a lot of leather gloves and mittens — elk-skin and deerskin," said Cabella's employee Will Arrington. "They're waterproof and lined, so they're warm,

and they're just kind of tougher than other types of gloves."

Another big trend in the glove department is E-Tip technology, glove fingers made of a material that registers on touch-screen devices.

"E-Tip technology is now mainstream, where you can wear gloves and be able to work your very important smartphone," Cochrane said.

"It's becoming a very normal thing for companies to do now."

Top it off

If you look at the mammals that thrive during the Maine winter, they all have one thing in common — lots of fur.

Exposed skin is the most vulnerable to frostbite, when

your skin literally freezes. First your skin becomes cold and red, then numb, then hard and pale. And if untreated, frostbite can actually lead to infection and nerve damage, according to the Mayo Clinic.

Frostbite is most common on the fingers, toes, nose, ears, cheeks and chin. Most of those locations are on your head, which can be protected with a good, warm hat.

"I'm seeing a lot of Mad Bomber hats [being purchased]," said Arrington. "I'm assuming it's for the warmth, but I think it's also for the looks."

Bomber hats are often lined with fur (real or fake) and have ear flaps that secure under the chin, protecting your ears, cheeks and chin in the process.

Wool and fleece-lined hats are also popular for active outdoorspeople. And if you're looking to purchase a hat made in Maine, check out Northern Solstice Alpaca Farm in Unity — they knit hats out of soft, warm alpaca fleece.



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