



# Are you warm enough?

**Dave Slade gives advice on how to keep the cold at bay**

A wise man once said: “There is no such thing as bad weather, just bad equipment.” Perhaps at some point that was true, but surely those days have passed? We now have jackets that ‘breathe’, layering systems that ‘wick’ and gloves that promise to keep you dry all day. Yet walking across a wet Scottish mountain, feeling the water trickle down my legs knowing today would be another ‘wet pants’ day, I wondered again, is it just bad equipment or is it that the equipment has met its match in the Scottish weather?

Scottish winter climbing is the best in the world. However, with freezing levels at the base of the route, this can mean two hours of walking in the cold rain, only to stand still in the sleet while your mate inches up the first pitch. Your rucksack straps force water through your jacket, knees press against the melting snow, and all the while the wind blows slushy snow down your top. Are you warm enough?

While running a winter skills course, the weather was typically Scottish: wind and sleet with occasional snow. I vividly remember

sitting down and eating my lunch, enjoying the feeling of being warm and comfortable in fairly horrible weather. Yet as I watched my group I noticed they were suffering: snow was blowing into open rucksacks, hoods were filling with snow, drinks bottles were frozen and a box of chicken salad was slowly turning to green slush.

A few winters ago, I had set off to climb a ridge line, with the freezing level just at the base of the route. It was raining heavily for the walk-in and the wind was wet. At the base of the route all three of us were soaked through and beginning to shiver. Enjoyment had departed and we were no longer warm enough, and I heard my own words coming back to me: “Any fool can be cold.”

I spend a lot of time on the hills in poor weather and have developed strategies to allow me to not just survive but sometimes even enjoy it. There’s a lot of things you can do to make sure you are warm enough; the following are some of the key principles for me when working with others on the hills or cliffs.

## Layers

Everyone has their view on which waterproof is the best and, yes, there is a difference between a £15 and a £150 jacket. However, if you are walking or climbing in the pouring rain for hours do not expect your outer layer (no matter how good it is) to keep the rain out indefinitely, especially if it’s that ‘wet rain’ we get in Scotland.

So what you wear under your waterproof, it can be argued, is even more important. Wicking base layers combined with a fleece or synthetic insulated jacket are fairly common and work well even when wet. What is often missed is what you wear on your legs. Standard walking trousers have very poor insulation properties once they are wet. Your waterproof outer layer, once saturated sticks to the now wet trousers and your thighs are then exposed almost directly to the wind. Instead of wearing standard cotton walking trousers try thick ‘wicking’ base layers or fleece trousers which are still warm even once they get wet. (Note: for most of us they don’t look great while walking to the café or pub.)



### Two coats

Carry a lightweight synthetic insulated jacket that you expect to put on once you're at the base of the climb, near the summit of the hill, or as soon as you begin to get cold. Think of this more as your second coat, most wet Scottish days are a two coat day. This is in addition to what you may carry as an emergency or spare layer.

### Food

Sitting out for lunch is often not on the cards in poor weather, but don't forget to eat. Chicken salads don't make the best wet weather food, so instead try some high energy fast-to-eat foods. If you are stopping for food then never sit on the ground, it is a "heat thief". Stay standing or sit on your rucksack, put your back to the wind and put your hood up.

So are you warm enough?

### Try it out

Go out on low-level walks in really poor weather and try out your systems/clothing and equipment before you test it for real on the high hills. It only takes two to three hours to see if your new idea/equipment really works and this still leaves plenty of time to get to the gear shops or the cafe.

### Wait it out

If you have to wait on the emergency services getting to you, will you be warm enough? Are you carrying enough equipment to make the wait not enjoyable, but at the very least survivable? Don't go on the hills without: emergency survival bag/group shelter, extra insulated layer, sit mat, head torch, whistle, fully charged phone and extra food

### Don't go out

"Why would anyone go out in that?" The words come from my wife as I head out the door in responding to a MRT call out. Some days are just café days. We go to the hills because we like it. Yes, sometimes optimism, the challenge of the weather or your last day off, drives you out on days when it is just horrible, but on these days strive to enjoy your day out by ensuring you are 'warm enough'. Remember: "Any fool can be cold."



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**Dave Slade** is a Winter Mountaineering and Climbing Instructor based on the east coast of Scotland. He is forever optimistic about the weather and conditions, hence has had many 'wet pants days'. Dave is married to Lisa and they have three children. He is a member of Tayside Mountain Rescue Team, works for the Ancrum Outdoor Centre and freelances throughout the UK.

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### Feet

If your feet get wet and cold you will get grumpy. There is a lot of information on which types of boots to use, but if you are getting wet through your boots then they are no longer up to the task you have set them. Even the right boot is no good if water goes down the top. In wet or snowy days a good fitting gaiter makes for a happier day. If you are walking in snow without wearing gaiters, the tops of your boots will fill with snow, which then melts and runs into your socks, and many of the integrated gaiters don't cut it when 'post holing' into snow: a stand-alone gaiter is better. While walking in the 'wet' rain, or through wet heather, your over trousers will leak at the bottom then proceed to trickle water into your socks, so wearing a gaiter can keep your feet much dryer.

How to seal it: Tuck your base trousers into your socks gaiters on next over your base trousers before you put your waterproof trousers on top of your gaiters. Water outside, smells inside.

### Hands

Not being able to do up your own zipper up because your hands are too cold is never a good look. Again there is plenty of information when it comes to gloves: read reviews, ask friends, try them out and carry extra pairs. The way you use your gloves is also important.

Firstly, if you don't need your hands then tuck them away up your cuffs, and keep your gloves for when you need your hands. Once wearing gloves, seal them to your jacket (jacket over the top) and don't keep taking them on and off, instead find ways to keep them on: wear your watch on your rucksack, use a stylus to work your phone and eat food that you don't need to lick your fingers after.