Clothing Materials

A totally (or near-totally) subjective analysis of newer clothing materials for outdoor clothing

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Putting my Money Where my Mouth Is

People sometimes ask me what I really wear in cold weather, and to name manufacturers and models. For the winters of 2014-17, my go-to clothing for aerobic cold weather activities around the freezing point – hiking, climbing, search and rescue tasks, or disaster team tasks – is mostly wool instead of synthetics, at least above the waist. Why? Stretchier so I can move better, doesn’t smell as bad after a week or so of wear, and ventilates better. From inside to out:

- **Ibex Pulse bike jersey**: this short-sleeve stretch wool garment fits well, wicks, is warm when wet, and doesn’t smell bad for 5 days of continuous use. I like to have a short sleeve baselayer, so I can strip down if I go into a warm building. Quite comfortable against the skin. (See the section on wool, far below, for more about wool clothing.)

- **Ibex Shak** full-zip non-hoody long sleeve wool top. I find the full-zip version better than the pullover. I can ventilate better by pulling the zipper way down, and it’s easier to get on and off. The zipper causes no problems when I tuck the Shak into my pants. Very stretchy.

- **Ibex Scout** full-zip wool sweater. It’s cut well enough and stretchy enough that I can do twist in any direction without it binding, whether reaching for a handhold or putting up a Disaster Medical Assistance Team Western Shelter tent.

- **Ibex Guide** wool sweater. This is thick but very, very stretchy, and easily fits over the other tops without any difficulty. For really cold weather, I add a second Guide sweater; I have a small and a medium for layering like this.

- **A North Face Nimble softshell** made of Apex Aerobic. It’s only mildly to moderately wind- and rain-resistant but very breathable, and the stretchiest softshell I’ve found.

- Only if needed for wind or cold, an **Arcteryx Squamish** ultralight hooded windshirt. It stuffs into its own pocket and easily and completely fits into a side pocket of my butt pack. The only drawback is that it’s hard to fit gloves, hat and facemask into the one chest pocket available on the Squamish hoody.

- And for when I stop for lunch, or to take care of an emergency, and I need extra warmth, I throw a hooded **Feathered Friends Helios Down Jacket** over it all. If you want a high-quality down jacket, Feathered Friends in Seattle has long been my go-to place. Europeans call such a garment as a “duvet” and it’s standard practice to always have a duvet in your pack for emergencies. For less-cold weather, a Feathered Friends down vest goes in my pack.

I always keep the same things in the same packets in my softshell:

- **Right zip “handwarmer” pocket**: Gloves, and when it’s cold enough, mitten shells for over them, and for when it’s really cold, mittens to go between the gloves and the mitten shells.

- **Left zip “handwarmer” pocket**: hat. I’ve played with many different hats over the years, and my current favorite is the Outdoor Research Rando Cap. Its Gore-Tex, so it’s waterproof. It has a small brim that keeps the sun out of your eyes, and it’s stiff enough to work as a brim yet foldable enough that you can easily fold up the hat and stick it in your pocket. It’s lined with comfy wicking fuzzy fairly thin fleece. There are ear flaps that actually stay over your ears. If you’re warm enough you don’t need the ear flaps you can fold them up inside the cap and still wear it to keep the sun out of your eyes or the rain off your head.

- **Chest zip pocket**: a thin neoprene facemask, or for when it’s colder, one that’s wider, with fleece on the sides and back, and if you pull it down off your face, serves as a fleece neck gaiter. This is needed on windy cold frostbite-prone days. But it also adds a fair bit of warmth by insulating your nose and acting as a little bit of a “rebreathe flap” to use your exhaled warmth and moisture to warm and humidify air even before it gets to your nose. For such a light item, it adds an amazing amount of warmth on a cold day.
This is a good time to opine on upper-body clothing. I like a zip turtleneck short sleeve baselayer; long sleeves on my baselayer don’t add much warmth, and get in the way when I push up the sleeves of the next-outer layer. I’ve even cut the sleeves off a Capilene Thermal Weight zip t-neck top to create such a top. Also, for my baselayer and the next layer out, I like having pockets where I can get to them with a pack on, pockets that work even with the hipbelt and sternum strap fastened. High handwarmer pockets, or very low ones, or “Napoleon” pockets right next to the central zipper, or chest pockets all work for this.

Below the waist, I wear Capilene Daily briefs, and two layers of Capilene 4 = Expedition Weight = Thermal Weight, size medium over size small. Over this I wear a pair of REI Mistral or Acme or similar stretchy softshell paints. Why not wool below the waist? It would certainly smell better after a week. I’ve yet to find wool long underpants that provide the warmth-without-weight of Capilene. The die-cut fuzz on the inside of Capilene provides a level of warmth with sturdiness that none of the wool long underwear can match. Unfortunately, Ibex never made an equivalent of the Shak, Scout or Guide sweater for your legs. If they did, I’d buy one. And I’ve yet to find a pair of wool-lined softshell pants that actually fit me properly; and, the wool lining is very thin.

I expect that at some point I will switch to wool below the waist, but not yet. And I just love all those funny bumps on my legs after taking off Capilene 4 underwear.

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**Names and Fabrics: A Rose is a Rose, but Polyester isn’t just Polyester!**

There are zillions of fabric materials out there. For example, Malden Mills, which is the Polartec people, has only about 12-15 brand names. But each of these comes in slightly different flavors – they actually make more than 150 different fabrics! Only some are suitable for the outdoors, and I’ve tried to limit the table to outdoor or travel clothing materials.

Here’s just one example. Eastern Mountain Sports (EMS) sells a lot of outdoor clothing in the northeast. They had a brand name called Bergelene (though I haven’t seen it in recent years). I’d seen mention that Bergelene was nylon, that Bergelene was polyester, that Bergelene was Malden Power Dry, and then I bought a pair of men’s Bergelene briefs at the local EMS store, and the label says “CoolMax.” What gives? Well, I talked with Patricia at EMS, and she told an interesting story. Back when Patagonia came out with Capilene treated polyester underwear (which has evolved over the years, but always continues to be a favorite), EMS came out with their own trade name for similar clothing, Bergelene. I’d heard it was bought from a Norwegian company that makes clothing with a somewhat similar name, but Patricia poo-pooed this, saying it was named after a guy who worked for EMS named Berge. And, she told me, the fabric used in “Bergelene” products did indeed change over the years. The lightweight Bergelene I bought back about 2006 was indeed CoolMax. But of interest, the CoolMax that they used was knit in a way that makes it very, very stretchy, much more so than most CoolMax items. But the mid- and heavy-weight Bergelene was actually Malden’s Power Dry. And, to make things more complicated still, EMS switched to the TechWick brand name (which it has used for the past decade or two), which includes something similar to silkweight Capilene: very silky, feeling somewhat like the Intera DryForce mentioned below.

Another problem is that the same material may appear under different brand names. For example, Malden Mills’ Power Stretch line of stretch fleece appears in a number of guises and brand names. The original Power Stretch is still one of my favorite fabrics – I have a vest and sweater made of it that I wear all the time – but Malden Mills has continued to develop the fabric in new directions. Over the years, they’ve made it more stretchy. They’ve also experimented with cutting away bits of the fleece on the inside, making the fabric lighter but still preserving the insulating and wicking properties. The early versions, some of which were called “high void grid” by Malden Mills, weren’t as stretchy as the original, and a bit more itchy against the skin. Gradually they got more stretchy and less itchy. It seems as though Malden Mills and Patagonia cut a deal, because in about 2001, Patagonia started offering this stuff, not with Malden Mills’ Power Stretch brand name on it, but Patagonia’s own Regulator brand name (“R 0.5” was the initial name). Even though the material hadn’t changed in any major way, in 2006 Patagonia decided to rebrand it as Capilene 4. Capilene 1 is very thin, for summer wear, and Capilene 4 is the thickest marketed as “underwear” (expedition weight). Capilene 2 and 3 are intermediate thicknesses. Both Capilene 3 and 4 for many years had the bumpy, grid-cut fleece inside (the successor-variant of Malden Polartec Power Stretch). Capilene 1 and 2 were the successors to the original Polartec Power Dry, but not quite as stretchy and not quite as fuzzy on the inside. Even if it’s marketed as underwear I think a Capilene 4 zip-turtleneck top makes a great shirt, it’s my default cold-weather top.

The “original” (non-grid) Power Stretch has gradually become softer and stretchier. When I got a new (2012) hooded full-zip Cloudveil Run Don’t Walk top of Power Stretch, it was so soft and stretchy that my 12-year daughter grabbed it and ran away with it. I only got it back after getting her one of her own. It now stretches 1.75x, making it very easy to push the sleeves above the elbow.

The 2006/7 version of the Capilene 4 zip mock turtleneck was much better than previous years’ versions. Not only was the material softer, less itchy and more stretchy, Patagonia also added a “draft flap” behind the zipper; it doesn’t really protect from drafts, but it does protect the thin skin over your sternal notch (at the base of the neck) from being abraded by the edge of the zipper pull, which was a bit of a problem with the previous versions. As I type this in 2011, I’m wearing one right now. Still great stuff, and my four zip mock turtlenecks of it are my favorite winter shirts. In 2011, there was no more Patagonia R 0.5, and Patagonia R1 was also branded as Polartec Power Dry, though it’s got a grid inside of it; R2 and
Fleece is like pile, but with two fuzzy faces, and has mostly replaced older styles of pile. Malden Mills makes most of this although it is marketed under a variety of names. Malden called their earliest efforts (~1981) Polartec, and Patagonia also sold it as Synchilla. In 1991, Malden Mills introduced the original Polartec 100 and 200 and 300, which were three increasing thicknesses of fleece, slightly stretchy, very soft and comfortable, and like pile, virtually no wind resistance. They are now known as “Polartec Classic.” There was an early version with a wind-resistant layer between the two faces of the pile, called Polartec 1000, but I never even heard of it being made into a commercial garment; later versions became known as WindBlok. I was initially skeptical of the idea: putting a wind-resistant layer in the middle, so that the outer layer of fleece is useless when the wind blows? And, the earlier
versions didn’t breathe that well. There is even a variant known as Survivor Windbloc Fleece that uses a waterproof-breathable membrane. Again, seems to me that your shell should be on top of your fleece, not in the middle of it.

And then they came out with Wind Pro, which is “4x more wind-resistant than standard fleece” (that is to say, not all that wind-resistant, but better than none at all). The Wind Pro has a woven layer that resists wind, rather than a laminate. Both fabrics are available, for example, from retailers such as rockywoods.com. My REI Wind Pro fleece has just the right balance of breathability (as good as regular fleece, perhaps due to the panels of Power Stretch incorporated into the jacket) and wind resistance (mild, but notably better than plain fleece). See also Windproofness, below.

In 1994, Malden came out with Power Stretch and Power Dry, two of my most favorite fabrics, which are discussed elsewhere.

In 1999, Malden started selling Polartec Thermal Pro, and then in 2000 die-cut versions marketed as Regulator (“R”) by Patagonia. These were in a way a step back to pile: the material had a woven outer layer and a fuzzy inner layer. But the inner fuzz was shaved into a grid of little squares to lessen weight but still allow wicking and warmth. The early versions didn’t work all that well and weren’t very stretchy, but later versions improved quite a bit: softer, stretchier, closer grids so less itchy. In 2015, they came up with a new name for their latest die-cut fabric: Power Grid. Despite the silly name, the material’s impressive: still very light, comfortable against the skin, and the stretch is up to about 20%, which is amazingly more than the earlier versions of their similar thin fleece (though still much less than my Ibex Guide Sweater). Along about this time, Malden also started using hollow fibers to lessen weight.

### Batting

No, not baseball or cricket. Batting is fluffy stuff that you cram into pillows, mattresses, and… clothing. It can be as crude as a pile of leaves stuffed into your plastic leaf bag that you carry for shelter. *(You do* carry a couple of plastic leaf bags for a survival shelter, right? It’s a good enough idea that the Appalachian Search and Rescue Conference requires it of all members.)*

Duck and goose down (the short, soft, fluffiest of their winter feathers) have been used as batting for millennia, and still in some ways are the best batting. Goose down is better – lighter per unit warmth – than duck down. In fact it’s fluffier than any artificial batting to date – though artificial batting is working hard on catching up.

Down is rated in terms of its fill power. Higher fill powers mean fluffier down. Fill power ranges from about 300 in³/oz (175 cm³/g “300 fill”) for feathers to around 1500 in³/oz (900 cm³/g) for the highest quality down. Medium-range down clothing has a fill power of about 500. High-end down-clothing suppliers such as Feathered Friends and Western Mountaineering offer clothing with 850+ fill down. Such clothing is not only lighter but due to the higher-quality down but lasts longer. High-quality down sleeping bags are generally half the weight and packed bulk of their artificial-insulation competitors. Down clothing is the same, and this means that it’s easy to compress a down jacket or down vest and keep it in the bottom of your pack. When it’s lunchtime, or if someone gets injured and needs insulation right away, you pull it out, shake it out and fluff it, and voilà: instant warmth.

Down makes the lightest, warmest clothing, but unfortunately, down mats down and loses most of its insulation value when wet. Most down sleeping bags these days have a water-resistant outer layer that helps somewhat. To preserve loft (fluffiness) and prolong the life of down bags and clothing, store only slightly if at all compressed. So, store all your fluffy clothing and sleeping bags uncompressed. Once it’s time to throw them in your pack, and only then, you can make them tiny with a compression stuffsack. Interestingly, down bags and clothing last longer with intermittent compression than artificial-fiber bags and clothing, maybe three times longer; up to 30-40 years with careful care.

Helly Hansen of Norway, long-famous for making high-tech clothing for Norwegian weather, is now making clothing of a material from labtex.com.tw that, like Power Grid is textured to trap air, though not so deeply 3-D as Power Grid, and not as stretchy, but apparently cheaper.

Polartec is Malden Mill’s trademark, and almost every fabric they make is preceded with “Polartec” so it’s not a very useful name, is it? Their website even says Polartec manufactures over 300 different fabrics under the brand Polartec. There are many, many types of Polartec; they do have a variety other trade names added to the Polartec moniker, but even within each of the sub-tradenames (e.g., Malden Polartec Thermal Pro) there are many different fabrics.

In 2010 or thereabouts, Patagonia started marketing their “Better Sweaters”: things that, on the outside, looked like a knit sweater, but were knit out of polyester, and had an inside of brushed fleece. As far as I can tell, the main attraction is appearance: you can wear this with nice clothing and it looks like a sweater. It has some advantages of fleece over wool: it doesn’t smell like a sheep, it isn’t at all scratchy, it’s a bit lighter, and it dries more quickly. However, it has one big disadvantage compared with an equivalent wool sweater: it pills more easily. And, unlike newer wind-resistant fleece, it doesn’t break the wind as well. I don’t own one of these, but I’ve tried them on. But I decided to stick with my merino wool Ibex Scout Vest and Guide Sweater. I wear the Scout Vest at work over a nice shirt and often a tie, and the Guide Sweater goes to dinner at nice restaurants as well as being worn on winter day-hikes all the time. No, it’s not as wind-resistant as my old REI wind-resistant fleece, but when I want to open up my shell and ventilate as I’m going uphill and overheating, that wind permeability is a definite plus.
Many outdoorspeople own down sleeping bags and clothing, and treasure them, but they also pamper them. My 3-season and winter sleeping bags are down, and I have a down vest, a down jacket, and for standing around at search and rescue operations in really cold weather, down pants and parka.

One thing about down: if you put a pack on over a down jacket or parka, the down compresses to almost zero thickness under your packstraps, hipbelt and sternum strap, so no insulation there at all. That’s one of the reasons I like multiple thick wool sweaters for hiking in the winter, as opposed to those thin down jackets that are all the rage on the street now:

no cold spots under the straps. And wool ventilates better.

Speaking of those street-ish down jackets: down experts like those at Feathered Friends laugh at down jackets with lots of tiny down compartments. They say that those little compartments don’t give the down a chance to loft fully, so you lose much of the warmth-to-weight benefits of down.

Here is a table of clo/ounce (a measure of warmth/weight) provided by Richard Nisely, who posts a lot of very detailed information about clothing for the outdoors at http://backpackinglight.com:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Material</th>
<th>Clo/ounce</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cotton</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merino wool</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polartec 100,200, 300</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polarguard 3D</td>
<td>0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exceloft</td>
<td>0.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polarguard Delta</td>
<td>0.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Climashield HL</td>
<td>0.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Down (550 fill)</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primaloft Sport</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Climashield Combat</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Climashield XP</td>
<td>0.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primaloft One</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Down (850+ fill)</td>
<td>2.53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Which means if you buy an expensive down garment or sleeping bag from Feathered Friends or Western Mountaineering, you will be getting your money’s worth.

The big news in 2011-12 was “waterproof down.” A couple of manufacturers have come out with garments stuffed with this putative waterproof down. The ones I’ve seen have are thin jackets and vests, with only a little down in them, which is a poor way to maximize the benefits of down’s lightweight loft. Despite the claims, I worry about how this stuff will last after stuffing and re-fluffing; I suspect that the treated down won’t be as durable. It reminds me of what Dr. William Osler said in 1901: “One should treat as many patients as possible with a new drug while it still has the power to heal.” Or the computer aphorism of “never buy release 1.0 of any software.” Actually, neither DownTek nor DriDown, two water-resistant downs, are touted as being waterproof. They are just water-resistant, and keep lofting more when they get damp compared with standard down. Apparently the down has a hydrophobic coating applied to it during processing. I talked with the people at Feathered Friends in Seattle last time I was there, who opine that (1) this stuff may not last nearly as long as standard down, (2) it doesn’t loft as well as “real” down, and thus the garment manufacturers are creating garments with lots of little pockets for the down, as opposed to the large pockets in Feathered Friends’ and other high-end down clothing. Thus, the warmth-to-weight ratio for these garments, regardless of the fill power of the down, is poor. I will hang onto my Feathered Friends Helios Vest and Helios Jacket, which even after many years of use, still loft fully, are toasty warm, only weigh a few ounces, and compress into a small stuffsack.

So, for “waterproof down: caveat emptor.” Keep tuned.

Artificial-fiber sleeping bags and clothing have one great advantage over down: they don’t mat down as much when they get wet. Well, maybe they have a second advantage: they’re cheaper. Used to be that artificial-fiber batting was really quite a bit heavier than down, and not nearly as compressible. In the beginning, the term Fiberfill was used for the first such artificial-fiber bags and clothing, but that seems to have become generic over the years.

Later, Dacron Hollofil was a significant advance in that the fibers were hollow, which decreased weight. Even later, its successor Quallofil was even better; if you looked at a cross-section of the fiber, had four separate holes in it — lighter, but better insulation. Quallofil has mutated over the years; now it has seven holes in the fiber! But Quallofil is a bit bulkier and heavier than newer batting, so is used mostly in low-end sleeping bags and comforters. Climashield and Primaloft are now common fills for sleeping bags, as is SL90. Even more common, even in high-end garments, is generic noname “polyester fiber.”

Thinsulate boasted that it insulated even with thin layers, as it insulated better than an equivalent layer of down. It did, but it also was pretty stiff and didn’t drape well; the vest of Thinsulate I got back when it first came out got used very little compared with my trusty old down vest, back from when the only place to get down clothing was from LL Bean. Over the years, Thinsulate has become specialized primarily for hat, glove and shoe applications.

The name probably doesn’t matter very much, they’re just tradenames from the various manufacturers and indeed, today’s Quallofil, to pick an example, is nothing like the original Hollofil or even first-generation Quallofil. Manufacturers do things like crimp fibers, mix fibers of different diameters, and use continuous-fiber batting instead of cut bits of fiber, all in an attempt to make a lighter, more compressible, warmer when wet and longer-lasting insulation. And, to a degree, all of these things have worked. All brands of fiber batting are far better than they were a decade or two ago. In 2013, the makers of Primaloft entered an exclusive deal to market their latest fluff insulation, Thermoball. As with other artificial fibers, compared to down, it retains more of its warmth when wet – but is still not nearly as warm when wet! As far as I can tell from the
marketese available, it lofts as well as 600-fill down (though good down gets up to the 800-900-fill range), but apparently has to be sewn in an overlapping-V-tube construction for some reason, which increases the weight of the garments. All of the Thermoball garments I’ve seen are fairly thin compared with my down vest, jacket and parka. It’s also not clear how long it will last compared to well-cared-for down.

There are many manufacturers and brands: Polarguard, Thermolite, LiteLoft, Thermaaloft, and many others. Each one of the brand names may have sub-brands as well (e.g., Thermolite Extreme, Thermolite Extra, Thermolite Micro, Thermolite Plus, and Thermolite Active.) Each brand claims it’s better than the others, because of blah, blah, blah. Please disbelieve all the marketing hype.

There are standards for a bag’s temperature rating, for example, EN 13537 used throughout Europe and beyond since 2005. Most reputable manufacturers use this test method, and you may therefore use the comfort temperature. Mark Verber also has a page that provides a table of loft (thickness) vs. sleeping temperature, as well as much more detailed information about sleeping bags.

Even though a bag is only rated to, say, 20°F, you can sometimes extend this a bit. Being inside your tent allows your bag to work down an additional 10°F below its rated temperature. American-style bivouac sacks can add about 10°F. (American style bivouac sacks are basically sleeping bag covers, sometimes with a mini-tent at the head. European-style bivy sacs are tiny, poleless and stakeless tents, that when out on the mountain and hit by sudden bad weather, that you pull out of your pack and throw over the whole party so you can huddle for warmth. Very handy, and indeed I carry and use them, but quite different from something for a single individual’s sleeping bag.) Sleeping bag liners can add about 5°F (and keep your sleeping bag cleaner, and keep you from screaming when your skin encounters the cold nylon of the sleeping bag). Wearing clothing – or sleeping on your clothing if your sleeping pad is a bit skimpy, or even spreading it on top of your sleeping bag – can add a lot.

For a sleeping bag, figure out what temperature rating you want in a bag – most people will go for a three-season bag, something rated to perhaps 10 to 20°F (-12°C to -7°C). Then find the lightest, most compressible bag that meets your budget.

When selecting clothing (or a sleeping bag) filled with artificial fiber, it’s probably better to go with a reputable brand, and the latest year’s model, rather than worrying too much about what precise brand of fiberfill is in the garment. If I had to pick the most reputable brands, I would include Feathered Friends and Western Mountaineering for down, ArcTeryx, Clouveal, Patagonia, Outdoor Research, and The North Face for artificial-fiber bags and clothing.

One thing about garments made with batting, such as down jackets, is that they just don’t stretch. The more reputable manufacturers, such as Feathered Friends, design their garments so that you can easily reach above yourself, important when climbing, but you still need to make sure that you get one sized large enough so that you can move.

But Patagonia is trying to change this, at least a little bit. In fall 2014, they introduced the Nano-Air line, insulated with their FullRange batting. There were two new features of these garments. First, despite being filled with batting, they have four-way stretch. Second, the shell material is also breathable (pretty much required if you’re going to have significant stretch).

Matthew Timothy Bradley emailed me about his experience with the Nano-Air Hoody, running and snowshoeing:

I wore a baselayer + Patagonia Nano-Air Hoody for most of my outside time this winter. For this season’s conditions in western Massachusetts (frequent fresh snow with temperatures between the lower teens and lower 20s with moderate to minimal wind) it’s been very good. Caveat emptor: I run warm, and with all the powder this season and the hilly terrain I’ve found I have to pair it with a minimal baselayer to keep from overheating. The jacket doesn’t incorporate any mesh — perhaps mesh pairs poorly with the FullRange insulation, maybe hampering the stretchiness and/or the seams would be likely to fail? — and truth be told I wouldn’t mind some venting at the armpits like with the Marmot DrClim Windshirt. The back of the Nano-Air that is against my pack has ended up noticeably wet on all but the coldest days. It’s an awfully nifty product, though, the kind of thing I wouldn’t have imagined five years ago. https://db.tt/FSL19vow

I too have a Marmot DrClim windshirt that I’ve worn in the winter, and the open mesh inserts in the armpits are nice for aerobic winter activities. However, this windshirt doesn’t stretch at all. And I found the mesh simply not enough ventilation, so I added pit zips to really open up the underarms for when I’m moving uphill.

I asked Matthew how stretchy the NanoAir really is, and in particular, my rough-and-ready way to assess this: can you comfortably push it up above your elbow? The answer was no. But he noted he got a size to fit pretty tightly over a baselayer, and the cuff is tapered and has elastic to keep snow out, so maybe someone else could push it above his or her elbow.

Email me if you have one and can (or can’t) get it above your elbow.

In late 2018, batting had improved enough that I finally broke down and got a replacement for my old artificial-fiber-batting Clouveal jacket that was 20-30 years old. I went to the Patagonia store in Pittsburgh and paid an arm and two legs, but got something far superior. Let me back up a bit.

In the 2010s, companies got closer to the holy grail of an artificial fiber that acting a lot like down but retained most of its warmth when wet.

The Thinsulate brand added Thinsulate Featherless, the PrimaLoft brand added PrimaLoft ThermoPlume, and Patagonia, after reportedly ten years of development, added Plumafill, which supposedly is the equivalent of 800-fill down, and supposedly retains 98% of its warmth when wet. You can get garments with all three types of batting. Although I take
Patagonia’s claims with a grain of salt, PlumaFill seems the best of the three, at least according to a review in the January 22, 2018 Outside magazine at https://www.outsideonline.com/2276386/lowdown-different-feather.

I ended up getting a Patagonia Micro Puff Hoody and a Micro Puff vest. Even though I usually wear a medium jacket I got both in large to put over other layers. Why did I get both a jacket and a vest?

If you look closely at these garments, the PlumaFill batting is sewn to the inner and outer shell material (very thin, supple and fine Pertex Quantum). This means that, unless it’s got multiple layers to which to attach the batting (which Patagonia has not done yet), it’s thin compared with, say, my Feathered Friends Helios down jacket.

I got the caliper from my shop downstairs and measured. The 18-ounce (510 g) Helios jacket is 1-1/8” (3 cm) thick in the middle of the tubes, and basically no thickness at all at the sewing lines between the tubes of down. Whereas the Micro 9.3 ounce (264 g) Puff Hoody and 5.7 ounce (162 g) vest are pretty much ¼” (1 cm) thick except where the sewing is, which again is basically no thickness at all. So the Patagonia vest and hoody together are lighter, more flexible, warm when wet, but not quite as warm as the Helios hooded jacket as there aren’t two layers on my arms or under the hood. There are other differences: the Helios jacket has a hood drawstring, whereas the Micro Puff just has elastic, though I can get around this easily by putting my ultralight Arcteryx Squamish windshirt over it, which has a hood drawstring. Also, the Helios has sturdier material on the outside, and its hood is cut to fit over a helmet, so to some degree I’m comparing apples and oranges, but only to a degree.

Sleeping Pads

This is a new section for 2012. This table and essay is about clothing materials, but sleeping bags are just clothing for nighttime. But experienced outdoorspeople will tell you to put your extra money into a better sleeping pad than a better sleeping bag. And you can now spend a lot of money on your sleeping pad.

When I first started backpacking, when I was just a small kid in the 1950s and 1960s, I was taught how to make a pine-bough bed. You would find a pine – preferably a white pine, as the needles were nice and soft – and hack off some of the lower live branches. The larger parts of the branches you would form into a grid, to support you a couple of inches above the ground. You would then cover this with the thinner ends of the branches, which, along with their attached needles, would provide some padding and insulation. You then throw your sleeping bag on top of this. A bit lumpy, but it kept you warm. Of course, this was back when only a few people enjoyed backpacking: you could do a prolonged hike along the Appalachian Trail and always be able to find a place to sleep in a three-sided Adirondack-style shelter hut. With the number of backpackers today, though, pine-bough beds would deforest entire mountain ranges.

The trouble with this is that you needed pine trees. No good above timberline.

There were air mattresses designed for camping that you could use... but they were made of early vinyl, were quite fragile, didn’t work in the cold (you couldn’t unfold them until you warmed them up) and weighed many pounds. Though they were fairly comfortable, they also didn’t insulate well. The big tubes developed convection that sucked heat right out of your butt. A pine bough bed was both more comfortable and warmer.

The first high-tech solution to this problem was Ensolite. The original Ensolite was (and in my basement box labeled “old sleeping pads” still is) a closed-cell foam. “Closed-cell” is important: it doesn’t absorb water. Much. That is, as opposed to open-cell foam pads, which are basically large, soft sponges, only appropriate for deserts where it never rains. The original Ensolite had some open cells on the surface, which absorbed a bit of water. Subsequent designs got rid of these open cells on the surface, leaving a flat surface that doesn’t absorb much water. The original Ensolite also got stiff in the cold, making it a challenge to flatten out your pad to sleep on it. Newer Ensolite is much more flexible in the cold.

Ensolite was originally developed by NASA as shielding for pressure vessels, first manufactured by Uniroyal in about 1967. It’s made of PVC (polyvinyl chloride) and NBR (nitrile butadiene rubber).

It’s still made, in 20-odd different types, and used as padding in head-strike zones in aircraft, on roll bars in off-road vehicles, and as soundproofing in cars, as well as sleeping pads. There are many other brands of closed-cell padding, some of which are usable as sleeping pads.

Ensolite was a big advance in sleeping technology. It had (and still has) the great advantage that it is warm. Ensolite isn’t all that comfortable... it’s pretty heavy, and if you took a pad thick enough to be comfy, it would weigh and bulk as much as the rest of your pack. Sleeping on a concrete floor on Ensolite, as in some Appalachian Trail shelters, requires some ingenuity, with some padding under the lumbar area and the neck. But it keeps your butt from freezing in the cold, which other pads and air mattresses didn’t. Some still swear by Ensolite as a sleeping pad in the winter, or use a thin Ensolite pad under a more comfortable but less-insulating mattress. And if you’re sleeping on soft snow, and you can hollow out little dips for your butt and hips and shoulder, resulting in a little lumbar support, it’s not too uncomfortable. There are many similar pads available now, with the corrugated Thermarest RidgeRest pads currently the most popular, and inexpensive, in the $30 range, and weighing about 14 ounces and with an R value (insulation rating) of ~2.8.
Some people started using blue foam pads because they were so cheap (currently $10-25). These generic closed-cell ethylene-vinyl acetate (EVA) foam pads are very light (10 ounces), yet bulky, and have an R value of only 1.4. Given a RidgeRest is only slightly more expensive, and slightly heavier, but much more comfortable and warmer, I can’t see why anyone uses blue EVA foam pads any more.

In the late 1960s and into the 70s, backpacking exploded in popularity. New and innovative designs abounded. Probably the most famous is Cascade Designs’ ThermaRest line, starting in 1971, designed by aerospace engineers. It used open-cell foam, which is much lighter than closed-cell foam such as Ensolite. To avoid the problem of the foam getting wet, which was a problem with prior open-cell pads, it was enclosed in a waterproof cover. Some prior open-cell pads were covered in waterproof covers, but the difference with the ThermaRest pad cover was that it was totally sealed. Not only that, but the cover was air-proof as well, with an inflation valve on one corner. So, you could deflate it and roll it up like an air mattress. But, when you unrolled it and opened the valve, the foam expanded and it sucked in air and reinflated. Well, most of the way. You could think of it as an air mattress filled with open-cell foam; this meant that there was no convection, so, unlike air mattresses, it actually kept you warm. Well, somewhat warm. Your butt and shoulders sunk in a bit, which decreased the insulation there.

By 1977, Backpacker Magazine was able to compare 38 different brands of sleeping pads, including air mattresses with down-filled tubes (warm, but couldn’t blow them up with your mouth as the moisture would make the down rot). By now, there have been hundreds of different models of sleeping pads. Closed-cell pads evolved by developing small egg-crate wiggles in them, and then by developing hinges so they folded up in a Z pattern to make packing easier (ThermaRest Z-rest is an example). ThermaRest foam pads have continued evolving, with innovations to make them lighter (mummy shapes instead of rectangles, die-cut holes in the open-cell foam). warmer, and more comfortable. They have an R value of about 2, which is suitable for all but deep winter or high altitude.

Through a process of Darwinian selection, certain subspecies of ThermaRest and other whole brands went extinct. For example, I once had a mummy-shaped ThermaRest with a zipper around the edge, so you could zip a bottomless sleeping bag to it. Nice in theory, failure in practice. Despite a draft flap on the sleeping bag, cold air crept in, and the sleeping bag wouldn’t conform to my body because it was stretched out to the size of the ThermaRest, so I froze. After a couple of uses, I cut off the zipper to make the pad lighter, continued using it, and donated the bottomless sleeping bag to my mountain rescue group to use in the Stokes litter as a fancy blanket.

More recently, Klymit makes lightweight air mattresses with major bits missing. They look like a moth-eaten sweater, or perhaps an air mattress designed by Klingons. Supposedly you can use them inside your sleeping bag. Some of the reviews at REI are positive. I’m not impressed.

Over the years roughly 2005-2012, there has been intensive competition and innovation in sleeping pad design, with new and truly better designs coming out at a rapid pace. I’m concentrating on ThermaRest as they are the market leader, but many other manufacturers also make high-quality pads. There was the ThermaRest NeoAir, which was basically a better and lighter air mattress, without foam, and not self-inflating, but very light, with multiple overlapping V shaped tubes, providing much improved insulation (R ~2) compared to prior air mattresses, while still remaining quite light. Then there were mummy-shaped NeoAir pads with more tiny overlapping tubes (R=3.2). Most recently is the ThermaRest NeoAir XTherm, which has even more overlapping tubes, aluminized, with an R value of 5.7, which is very impressive. I have one; it’s very comfortable, while still small and light (15 ounces). The only problem is the price ($190).

But, as they say, put money into your pad, not your bag.
Wicking baselayer and fleece polyester material have improved in recent years. If you read the manufacturer’s fluff, there are hundreds of various kinds of treated polyester, each better than the others. But cutting through the marketese, you can see several major changes, which seem to apply regardless of brand name.

1. **Smell:** most fabrics now have a coating or treatment that discourages the bacterial growth that makes clothing smell bad. (Too bad we can’t spray this on ourselves before we go out for a week in the mountains.) While not as good as wool for resisting bacterial growth and smell, they are really quite good. There are different treatments; one repulses body oils, another prevents bacterial growth by embedding silver (which is a strong antibacterial) in the fibers, and – I just (11/23/14) discovered this – Capilene, at least some of it, has iodine in it. I pulled out a pile of Capilene 4 now that it’s time to wear it again, and when I pulled out one of the pieces in the middle and opened it up and got a very strong whiff of iodine. Hard to mistake this smell. Interestingly, a colloidal silver solution (Silver Zone) is marketed for you to use on your own clothing. Probably effective, but you’ll have to keep treating your clothing on a regular basis. Rab, a British outdoor gear manufacturer, uses a treatment called Polygiene Stay Fresh.

2. **Wicking Persistence:** Used to be that polyester lost its wicking after a certain number of washings. The number of washings is now very much higher than it used to be. There are proprietary names for the different treatments (e.g., NanoTex, Acclimate, Motiv) but they are all basically do the same thing. Some are better than others, but there’s very little hard data, so you’re better off going with brand-name wicking material, specifically from major mountaineering clothing companies.

3. **Stretch:** Most polyester now is knit in a manner to allow it to be relatively stretchy, and sometimes Lycra or other stretch fibers are added to make the material even more stretchy. What is stretchy “enough”? Stretchy enough that you can push the sleeves of a long-sleeved top above your elbow, and it (a) won’t compress your arm so much as to hurt after a long day of climbing, and (b) when you pull it back down, it’ll recover enough to fit properly at your wrist. Malden Power Stretch meets this requirement, as does the thin 2004 Malden Power Dry used in the Patagonia R.5 fabric. (Doing a quick stretch-test, I found that Power Stretch stretches 1.5x its original length; by comparison, Malden WindPro only stretches 1.25x, and doesn’t quite meet this test.) The 2001-2002 thicker Malden Power Dry isn’t quite stretchy enough to meet this criterion, though the thinner Power Dry of this vintage does. With a skin-tight Power Stretch union suit (used under coveralls for caving) I can contort into any position and it doesn’t bind. Knit wool stretches even better than the polyester microfiber materials used for most artificial-fiber baselayers. Some of the stretchiness in my “above-the-elbow” test relates to the sewing used in the cuffs. Neither I nor my tailor have the fancy sewing machine that will do a 2x/stretch of the cuff, but some manufacturers do this. Which means if the sleeves are too long and you tailor them, you might not be able to push them above your elbow.

4. **Bumps and Holes:** Many companies now offer fabrics of fleece, or sometimes very thin fleece that works as a thin baselayer, which allows the material to preserve much of its warmth but make it a lot lighter. Early examples of this include revisions of Aleutian fleece from Lowe, Polartec 100 Lattice, and the Patagonia R1 and (now-extinct) R .5. R stands for “Regulator,” though the R .5 is was later known as Capelene 4 (see above). Originally, I thought this was a mixed blessing – the original lumpy-bumpy fabrics didn’t feel quite as nice against the skin as something smoother, and since there is less contact with your skin, I’d expected the material to be not quite as good at sucking sweat off your skin. Patagonia came out with R.5/Capilene 4 with smaller bumps (2003), and made it stretchier (2004), and so I got two Patagonia R .5 men’s zipneck tops (2005 vintage) which are stretchy enough that I can wear a size small (usually I wear a medium) and they fit pretty well – stretchy enough that they don’t bind. This material is very, very light, wicks very well, better than I expected, and slightly itchy compared with, say, the original thin Malden Power Dry, which is as comfortable as a well-used cotton T-shirt (my Cloudveil Teewinot short-sleeve T-shirts of the original Power Dry circa 2000, before Ibex made something better, used to be my favorite everyday three-season shirts). The original Malden Mills Polartec Patagonia Capilene 4 (follow that?) wicks about as well or maybe a little bit better than the original Malden Power Dry, despite the lumps. And at the tail-end of 2006, I got two more of these – a bit stretchier, not at all itchy, a bit softer on the inside, a bit better wicking, and now each has a tiny breast pocket. And stretchy enough to pass the “push up over your elbow” test. REI offers garments made of the same type of material, though it’s called Polartec Power Dry; soft and stretchy, relatively cheap, though the tailoring isn’t quite up to Patagonia standards. October 2011: do you want that same material in a zip turtleneck? Well, first off, you can never actually get the same material twice in a row because it changes so often. But if you want something quite similar, get an REI expedition-weight underwear top in zip turtleneck; the material is now called Polartec.
Power Dry (though it’s not really like the original Power Dry), or a Patagonia Capilene 4 (now also branded as Polartec Power Dry) top. Unfortunately, neither has a small chest pocket like my originals. The tailoring’s a bit different, too. I also got zip T-necks of Capilene 3 and the equivalent midweight REI underwear. The REI is Polartec Power Dry with a thin square grid on the inside, the Patagonia one is their own proprietary material, with a more complicated mesh-type pattern. The Patagonia one is more comfortable, and stretches enough to push the sleeve up over my elbow, which I can’t quite do with the REI midweight. The 2012 version of Patagonia Capilene 4 (branded Polartec Powerdry) – I got some bottoms of it (early 2013) – is interestingly different than its predecessors. There is a line of square fuzzy bumps. and then a line with nothing but the stretchy very thin base material, alternating up and down the legs. And within each line, there are two square fuzzy bumps, a space, and then two more square bumps, and so on. This seems to have several effects. First, it’s not as quite as warm as the original Patagonia Capilene 4/R2. But it’s much, much lighter, and less bulky, and stretchier, and more flexible, with less binding behind the knees. Overall, a big win, and now looking and working in some ways like the wool fishnet underwear I used to wear in the 1960s and 70s. Gor really cold weather (near zero F), I’m going to try a pair of a medium Capilene 4 pants over a pair of small Capilene 4 pants, all covered by my REI/Schoeller Dryskin stretchy shell pants. This will approximate the warmth of a pair of winter bibs, but much less bulky and awkward. I’ll let you know how it goes.

The old original PolyPro baselayer had disadvantages: it melted in the dryer or in front of a fire, smelled bad, and after a while was nothing but a mass of pills (those little wads of fuzz that form on the surface of some fabrics). Things have improved a lot since then, but there are still some companies marketing substandard baselayer materials. A few years ago, Cheng Hu emailed me that he tried Medalist Skinetics and didn’t find it wicked very well. You’re generally better off with a well-known brand name – you’re more likely to get better pill-resistance, odor-resistance, and wicking.

Back in the days before modern high-tech fabrics, we used fishnet T-shirts. Originally, these were actual bits of old fishnets sewn into T-shirts, and they were worn under other clothing to provide some airspace for ventilation, to keep you less sweaty. In the summer you wore cotton fishnets, and in the winter, wool. I used to use these all the time. For a while you could get very thin fishnet CoolMax T-shirts (I got mine from Brigade Quartermasters), but they don’t carry them anymore. Too bad – they were great when I responded with a disaster team to the Gulfcoast during and right after Hurricane Katrina in fall 2005. We were supposed to wear cotton T-shirts as part of our uniforms, and it was very, very hot and humid. Wearing a CoolMax fishnet under the T-shirt didn’t make me significantly hotter, and wicked even better than the T-shirt, particularly as it had “DMAT PA-I” in big, waterproof and vapor impermeable letters on the back. I could then wash the CoolMax fishnet, wring it out, and put it back on under the same T-shirt, making me feel a lot cleaner. And, when I travel long distances, I always put on one of these CoolMax fishnets on under a nylon shirt. Even when stuck in an airplane for 12 hours, you can go to the head, wash the fishnet, wring it out, dry it a bit with a few paper towels, and put it back on – you feel a lot less greasy this way. Searching the Web for “CoolMax mesh shirt” I did find http://www.pinnaclearmor.com/body-armor/accessories.php (dead link 2018) which offered mesh (or fishnet to us oldtimers) CoolMax T-shirts. I also found some sales on Calvin Klein Lycra-CoolMax mesh T-shirts. Caveat emptor.

A similar concept is CoolMax RVU (ribbed, ventilated underwear) designed for use under armor – you can get this for example at http://www.rvuultracool.com/rvu.html. (Dead link 2018). But I’ve tried it, and it’s a lot like wearing a flak vest in itself – the ribs don’t really bend at all. I would only consider this as an alternative if you spend a lot of time in a bulletproof vest. And, in 2018, the only place to find them was on eBay. However, that same dead website also listed what looked like my old CoolMax mesh t-shirts – only you can’t buy them online, and there are only a few retailers across the country. When I searched the Web to try to find them online, I found a lot of technical (there’s that word again) baby suits but no shirts. I think that ribs and mesh have died because people (purchasers and manufacturers) think that plain old wicking fabric works well enough. They might be right, but I used my CoolMax mesh T-shirts under my Disaster Medical Assistance Team (DMAT) T-shirts in Puerto Rico after the 2017 hurricanes, and I think they kept me cooler and drier than a non-mesh undershirt.

There is one more thing to say about baselayers, and it is really more a design feature than specifically to do with materials. And that is zip turtlenecks. You can get baselayer tops with crew necks, turtlenecks, or zip turtlenecks. Zip turtlenecks certainly offer the most flexibility, and I’m a big fan of flexibility. When you get warm, you can pull up the sleeves and unzip – and most zip turtlenecks have zippers that unzip halfway to your navel, allowing some significant ventilation.

The only problem with zip turtlenecks is that the zipper can be irritating. I still have faint scars over my sternum (breastbone) and under my chin from the zipper on one of the early zip turtlenecks that I wore on a long trip. No lie, I had significant bleeding abrasions in both places.

However, there are a variety of changes over the years that have made me rethink my rejection of zip t-necks. Zippers are much more flexible and less abrasive now, which helps. Some manufacturers offset their zip t-neck zippers, so they don’t link up with jacket and parka zippers, which decreases the force pressing on your skin. Patagonia’s baselayer zip t-necks first offered a “storm flap” at the top that (somewhat) prevented abrasion under the chin, and later added a storm flap along the entire zipper that also protected the sternum (which certainly helps) and also cleverly looped over the top of the zipper to
protect your chin. Current versions offer tiny flap on either side of the zipper that meet precisely over the middle of the zipper, which works quite well.

There is a draft flap behind the zipper on the current REI zip turtleneck, but it doesn’t come over the top like the old REI turtleneck, but it doesn’t come over the top like the old Patagonia zip turtlenecks. The Patagonia tops have better tailoring than the REI ones. The REI top is $50 and the Patagonia one is $100.

Wicking vs. Bipolar Construction

There is no argument that, in cold/wet conditions, one wants something against the skin that is warm when wet. And one wants something that doesn’t hold water against the skin. The traditional material was fine wool — reasonably warm when wet, doesn’t hold much water against the skin, lasts a long time, and if made from high-quality wool (cashmere, or north coast Australian wool like the old Sears wool underwear), not all thatitchy. (Actually, I used to go caving in the Sears underwear all the time.)

But wool, unless you got the really good stuff, was itchy. And when wet you smelled like a wet sheep. And though it was much, much better than cotton, it still held a significant amount of water against the skin – wet wool is still heavy and cold when you put it on. But compared to cotton, the water would drain out the bottom of the wool underwear a lot quicker.

Well, next was PolyPro underwear. Polypropylene was used because it was very hydrophobic (“water-hating”) — compared to wool, it wouldn’t hold hardly any water at all, and by staying drier it was warmer (and lighter) when wet. And, since it was made into a loose weave, it was pretty porous, so sweat could pass through fairly easily. But polypro absorbed body odor, “pilled” (developed lots of little fuzzy balls on its surface), and melted in the drier or near a fire, resulting in an ugly, smelly lump of melted plastic. So polyester, with less pilling, and better heat resistance, replaced polypro.

But even polyester didn’t really feel all that comfortable against the skin in warm weather compared to dry cotton. Why? Well, cotton fibers, unlike polyester fibers, are made up of many, many smaller microfibers, which makes it softer against the skin, and allows it to drape a bit better. Cotton’s microfiber construction, along with its hydrophilic nature (“water-loving”), means that it wicks water away from the skin — that is, until the cotton is soaked through and through. When soaked, cotton holds water near the skin, and allows it to circulate from the skin to the surface of the cotton and back again, making a pretty good heat pump. Good in warm weather, bad in cold weather.

So people thought “Can’t we find something that is as comfortable as cotton in warm weather AND in cold weather? And is comfortable even when soaked?” One way is to make polyester fibers made up of tiny microfibers, just like cotton — this should make it more comfortable against the skin, drape better, and look better, but with polyester’s hydrophilic nature, it shouldn’t hold as much water or act like a heat pump. Indeed, as I types this, I was wearing a pair of polyester microfiber dress pants at work, and they’re extremely comfortable against the skin. Nice stuff. You can also “brush” materials made out of microfibers so that they are all fuzzy on one side, and wear that against your skin. The older (pre 2004?) Malden Power Dry is a great example of this kind of construction (and the most comfortable stuff against the skin I’ve every worn, it’s even better than cotton).

But there was still the problem of sweat. Even though polyester knits could pass sweat, they still weren’t as good as dry cotton at sucking up sweat. So what can we do? If we make material as hydrophilic as cotton, and with as small of a microfiber size, it’ll end up acting just like cotton. It turns out that you can coat polyester fibers with a variety of materials, you can make the surface hydrophilic enough to wick water — but since the fibers aren’t as small or as hydrophilic as cotton, it still won’t hold much water. You can also roughen the surface of the fibers, or make them with cross-sections not like a circle, but like a cross or asterisk or other shapes, which improves wicking.

But, compared with cotton, this wicking effect isn’t great, so what else can we do? Well, some clever people realized that if you combine two different types of fibers, in just the right yarn and with just the right construction, you can put a hydrophilic material on the outside and hydrophobic on the inside. The first such fabric I saw was called DriClime, and I was impressed. The outdoor store had a swatch, and the owner wadded it up, put it in a cup of water, and then wrung it out. He handed it to me, and I could feel that one side was wet and cold, and the other side felt warm and dry. I’ve had a Marmot Shelled DriClime windshirt since then and been very happy with it. Some prominent versions are Malden PowerDry and PowerStretch, Paramo Parameta-S and Intera DryForce.

Some companies insist that artificial fibers don’t wick at all, moisture just passes through them via vapor diffusion and bipolar fabrics are the only things that seem to move moisture away from your skin. Well, we know that cotton wicks – you can demonstrate this by taking a cotton towel, and hanging it up so that one end is in a bucket of water. Half an hour later a lot of the water will be drawn up into the towel, and it will be soggy. You can do the same thing with artificial “wicking” fibers, too – there is little moisture in them after the bucket experiment, but enough to show that there is indeed wicking. Certainly polyester microfiber seems to do this more than other artificial fibers with which I’ve tried this, perhaps due to the enhanced wicking of the microfibers, and the best I’ve seen so far for wicking is Malden PowerDry, although PowerStretch comes close, mostly because you can buy it small and wear it so it’s tight against your skin (improves wicking a lot). Power Dry seems best as a summer T-shirt or as a base layer in colder weather.
Two days before version 1.7 of this document, I was hiking fast on a warm day, relatively level trail, with a heavy pack (20 lbs. gear + 30 lbs. of 2-year-old) and was wearing a Power Dry shirt. Admittedly it was a fairly dry day for the Appalachians, but even though my entire shirt would get soaked in sweat going uphill — showing it spread out the sweat quite well — a 15’ rest stop would find it almost entirely dry at the end.

So don’t believe that artificial fibers don’t wick. As far as the relative contribution of wicking vs. bipolar construction for moving water away from your body, though, the jury is still out. One thing I’ve found is that wicking layers only work if they’re right up against your skin. So stretch materials are important, another reason to like Malden Power Dry or Power Stretch. (No, I don’t own stock in Malden Mills or work for them.)

Malden WindPro is stretchy, too — but unlike Power Stretch, which stretches 1.5x, WindPro only stretches 1.25x. The difference is enough that REI, when making my favorite fleece jacket out of WindPro, used small inserts of Power Stretch under the armpits and on the shoulders to improve stretch.

I have a top of Interia DryForce from Cloudveil (April 2003). Think “thin bicycle jersey” and you get an idea of what this material is like. It’s constructed like Power Stretch, in that it is fuzzy on the inside and less fuzzy on the outside. But DryForce is very slick on the outside, so clothing will go over it easily. However, it really doesn’t stretch as well as Power Stretch, so it’s not as comfortable. And the outside, while slick, doesn’t seem all that tough, certainly not shell-like. DryForce seems a bit like Schoeller Dynamic, and is about the same thickness, and is considerably more stretchy, but not nearly as tough on the outside. It wicks very well, about as well as I’ve ever experienced, similar to Marmot’s DryClime. But overall, I think I like T-shirts of the original Malden Power Dry better as a base layer. Power Dry is more stretchy, more porous, and overall more comfortable.

One development along this line is the idea espoused by the European company Paramo in the Parameta-S fleece garments that they used to sell. These are reversible bipolar garments, wear one way for hot weather and inside out for cold weather. Interesting idea! However, this material isn’t really stretchy, so it loses out to Malden Mills’ otherwise-similar Power Stretch fabric in my book. I got that fleece shirt about 2000.

In the summer of 2018, I was hill-walking with my family in England’s Lake District. Yes, it is a beautiful country as they say, and, although a friend of mine says that’s just because it’s close to Scotland. I went into the Paramo store in Keswick (locally pronounced “Kezzik.”) The guy working there says I was lucky to have gotten that fleece shirt when I did, as the company found that the thicker fleece material was just too expensive to sell and make a profit, so they don’t make it any more. I did pick up a thin reversible T-shirt of the Paramo fabric, and just tested it out today doing yard work on a very hot and extremely humid day. It wicked the sweat off my skin very well, spread the sweat quickly across the entire shirt, dried quickly, and felt relatively dry on the inside. It seems to handle the sweat better than any of the other wicking fabrics described above and below. I’m sold on their idea of bipolar fabric, at least for a T-shirt for warm weather.

In 2003, the big news was adding special coatings to fabrics to improve wicking and water resistance; for example, Schoeller added a 3dry coating to its Dryskin Extreme, found for example in the classic softshell Cloudveil (went out of business ~2016) Serendipity jacket, the first true softshell jacket; and in 2012 when I got some new Dryskin pants (not “Extreme,” meaning the nylon in the weave is not the thicker Cordura; this means the pants might not be quite as tough, and is a bit thinner, so not quite as warm) I found they were now using something called NanoSphere which as far as I can tell does the same thing as 3dry.

Wicking fabrics have been getting thinner and more stretchy. In spring 2015, I got some Park Tee shirts from Salomon, made from Advancedskin Extradyr (companies seem to be running out of trademarks for this stuff). The t-shirts are very thin and light, but still provide excellent sun protection (UPF 50). They are very, very, stretchy. They wick very, very well. They are not warm when wet, but I used them for a week of summer hiking in Shenandoah National Park next week. Given that even thin wool is still warm when wet from sweat, these are my go-to tops for variable but mostly hot weather. Results of this, and my daughter’s similar North Face Reactor T-shirts: rather than sweat dripping off, these materials spread out the sweat over a large area. Even when quite humid, the slightest breeze gives a cooling effect over a wide area. It moves sweat from your armpits and where your back is covered by your pack to other areas where it evaporates and cools you. Significantly better than cotton T-shirts. I got the shorts that paired with these T-shirts, and also wore them all week. They also claim to be made out of Advancedskin Extradyr [sic] but the material is a bit thicker, harder, sturdier, and not as stretchy. This is appropriate in a pair of shorts rather than a T-shirt, but just goes to show that you can’t trust material names to represent the same material either over time or even at the same time; see the next section for more on this topic. I also got an AdvancedSkin Extradyr Salomon T-shirt that is fuzzy rather than slick, even though the material is about the same weight and slickness. The slick material feels cool against the skin, and in warm, sweaty conditions I found that the slick material did a much better job of sucking up and spreading out and evaporating my sweat than the fuzzy material. I also felt that the slick material did a much better job of cooling me off than the fuzzy material; I guess that’s why we have the phrase “warm and fuzzy.”

In 2018, whilst spending a week hill-walking in England’s Lake District, in George Fisher’s outdoor store in Keswick (pronounced KEZ-zik), I found what I think is the best hot-weather T-shirt made. It’s a half-zip, thin and wicking and very fast-drying shortsleeve T-shirt. It dries at least as fast as the Salomon shirts I like so much for hot weather. The half zip means you can ventilate even more when really hot, and the relatively high collar means you can zip all the way up when a cool breeze comes through and chills you. And you know how, when hiking (or hill-walking as the case may be), the middle of your upper back and the area under your hipbelt in the back
stay wet and sweaty? Well, in those areas it has an open mesh for better cooling and evaporation. (And when the cool breeze blows, these areas are covered by your pack so unwanted evaporation doesn’t occur there.) It’s the North Face Shareta II shirt, and it seems to be marketed primarily in Europe, but you can order it online from [https://www.cotswoldoutdoor.us/](https://www.cotswoldoutdoor.us/), the US site of this very reputable UK outdoor store chain.

One question that sometimes arises: if cotton wicks, and artificial fibers wick, what’s the difference? Why is cotton so bad? Why are Mountain Rescue Association teams famous for teaching that “cotton kills”?

Seems to me there are two parts to this. First, though cotton wicks, it’s also absorbent. That means it sucks up lots of water and holds onto it. In a towel, at home where it will have plenty of time to dry, that’s good. But if you’re out in cold weather, and not interested in having a lot of cold water held right against your skin, then it’s bad. Artificial fibers wick but don’t hold much water. That’s why those “pack towels” of polyester microfiber, no matter how good they are, will never beat a good cotton towel for sucking up water. But they dry so much faster that microfiber pack towels still make sense.

There is also another effect that makes cotton bad in cold, wet weather: loss of insulating value. Wet cotton allows water to circulate, and it’s just like a little heat pump sucking the heat from your skin and sending it to the outside of the cotton garment to radiate away. Good in summer, bad in cold-wet conditions.

### Fabric by the Yard, Fabric by the Number

Although you won’t find it on the informational pages at [www.polartec.com](http://www.polartec.com) (Malden Mills’ site), they have started numbering their fabrics. A phrase from their website (copied and pasted here) says Polartec Thermal Pro is our most diverse family of fabrics. So don’t think that “Polartec Thermal Pro” means a specific fabric!

Lowe Alpine made clothing of a variety of Malden Mills (and other) fabrics, sold through retailers but not through their website. Some of the fleece jointly designed by Malden Mills and Lowe was called Aleutian (some may be from other suppliers, Aleutian was just Lowe’s trade name) and there were several varieties, mostly lumpy-bumpy type things similar to the R1 and R.5 fabrics used by Patagonia. Lowe’s webmaster was nice enough, at one point, to include the numbers of the fabrics on the [glossary page](http://www.polartec.com) of their website, which, if others did the same thing, would be a great way to make sure the fabric you’re buying is (more or less) what you’ve bought in the past.

- **Polartec Special Edition with Power Dry Technology (7347)**
  Technical inner layer insulation. Innovative 'pillar' interior traps warm air, improves breathability, reduces weight and increases packability. Power Dry wicking performance allows next-to-skin use or as an intermediate layer.

- **Polartec Special Edition with Thermal Pro Technology (4060)**
  Versatile mid-layer insulation. The deep pile face is open-stitched to the interior velour, giving a high-loft fabric with low density. Maximum warmth with excellent airflow, low weight and packability. Top warmth-to-weight ratio.

- **Polartec Special Edition with Thermal Pro Technology (40810)**
  The fleece that thinks it’s down insulation. The deep pile face is open-stitched to the interior velour, giving a high-loft fabric with low density. Maximum warmth with excellent airflow, low weight and packability. Standard and marled versions.

There was also a “Special Edition” version of Power Stretch: Special Edition Power Stretch (9400), see below. If you find this all very confusing, don’t worry, the fact that you’re confused is clear evidence that you know more than most people, who don’t yet know enough to be confused!

Arcteryx, in addition to having some of the best (and most expensive) outdoor clothing, has a very confusing set of clothing names. They used to have a page that describes their naming system, but they have apparently taken it down.

There is usually a phonetically-spelled Greek letter (alpha, theta…) and then two capital letters, and then sometimes a combination of letters and numbers. Marketers have edited these descriptions into marketese (never any negatives or tradeoffs; nothing about "this is not as durable" or "this is heavier"). I’m not sure these descriptions help. I want to know what features the garment has and what material the garment’s made of. But just for amusement (confusion?) value, here’s a summary of what I’ve scraped from information that Arcteryx has provided in the past:

- **Beta:** All around mountain use garments: moderate length; hand pockets; interior pockets; moderate articulation; room for layers; helmet compatible hoods; drop hem.

- **Theta:** All around mountain use garments: longest length; chest pockets; interior pockets; moderate – expedition articulation and room for layers; helmet compatible hoods; drop hem.

- **SL:** Super Light
  SL products are designed with the lightest materials possible and prioritize a lighter weight. They provide exceptional weather protection, performance and are highly packable.

- **FL:** Fast & Light
  FL: indicates minimalist products are created to be exceptionally lightweight while still providing a high level of performance. They are designed for those looking to travel fast
and light in an assortment of weather conditions including rain, sleet, snow and wind.

**LT: Light Weight**

LT products are designed with a streamlined set of features that make them exceptionally light and robust while still providing ample weather protection. The materials used in their designs are durable, and built for the highest performance on the toughest outdoor pursuits, from summit scrambles to granite multi-pitches.

**MX: Mixed Weather**

MX products are rugged, breathable, and mobile, making them ideal for a variety of activities in extremely diverse weather conditions. Choose MX products for a hike in the rain, or layer them up for a windy day on the ski hill.

**AR: All Around**

AR products are ideal for multiple activities thanks to the range of features that each product has. AR products are designed with more of a focus on weatherproof technology rather than on shedding grams, which makes them perfect all around gear for activities that demand protection and performance.

**SV: Severe Weather**

SV products are designed to be worn for prolonged periods in the harshest weather conditions imaginable. They use the warmest, most durable, and most weather-resistant materials to keep you warm, dry and performing your best in the most severe environments on earth.

Jans.com has their own take on these codes, more extensive and with no detectable marketese, which I excerpt here:

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**Arcteryx Product Name Modifiers**

SV is for severe weather.

AR stands for all 'round, with a focus on versatility.

MX is for mixed usage and changing conditions, focusing on breathability, durability, and mobility.

LT is lightweight with minimalist design (such as no pockets), but still highly durable.

SL is even lighter, sacrificing a bit of durability.

SK is specifically designed for ski touring, with articulation for mobility, and room for layers.

FL stands for fast and light; minimalist garments for high performance in varying weather.

The only problem with this listing is that Arcteryx keeps coming up with other names, such as Sabre and Zeta and Tecto and Sidewinder, and I bet even their marketers can't come up with different verbiage to describe their intended uses.

**Shell Codes**

For Gore-Tex, Arcteryx uses three different types: "plain" Gore-Tex is the cheapest and is OK for continuous activities of low to medium intensity such as hiking. Gore-Tex Active is more breathable and comfortable against the skin, probable less durable, and is OK for high-intensity activities such as running or XC skiing. Gore-Tex Pro is the most expensive but the most breathable and if you can spare the extra cash is more breathable and more durable than the other two. (This is my take, not Arcteryx or Gore's marketese.)

More informative than the Greek names and the two-letter codes are the letter/number combinations that Arcteryx provides to describe the fabric to which the Gore-Tex laminate is applied. The first letter, in capitals, is either N for nylon, or P for polyester. The number after this is the denier, which means the thickness of the yarn; bigger numbers means coarser but tougher material. The second letter, lower-case, is the weave: p for plain weave, r from rip-stop (interspersed thicker yarns to prevent rips, resulting in a subtle square pattern), mr for mini-rip-stop (thicker interspersed fibers not as thick), f for faille weave (a crossgrain ribbed weave), and s for stretch. An X at the end of the code is for “exceptional durability” (made with a tougher yarn), which means a stiffer material without the soft and flexible “hand” (feel) of less durable materials.

So, N30p-X means

N = Nylon

30 = 30-denier

p = plain weave

X = tough and stiff yarn.

Unlike Arcteryx’s other names and code, this system of codes makes perfect sense and helps us get a feel for the material.
Windproofness

One of the trends over the past few years is for new materials that have the warmth of fleece but with improved resistance to wind (traditional fleece has basically no wind resistance). Here are some figures that Katherine at Malden Mills emailed to me in February 2002 as far as wind resistance of newer Malden Mills Polartec fabrics. Wind resistance is cubic feet per square foot per minute (ft³/ft²/min):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Material</th>
<th>Wind Resistance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Polartec Windbloc</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polartec Power Shield</td>
<td>6.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polartec Windbloc ACT</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polartec Wind Pro</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polartec 200</td>
<td>325</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I find this very useful information, because the marketing information really doesn’t give you much quantitative information about wind resistance. The way I read the figures:

- **Windbloc** (and the Gore equivalent, WindStopper) basically stop all wind but don’t ventilate moisture all that well; Windbloc isn’t very stretchy.
- **Wind Pro** is about as stretchy as old-style fleece – i.e., it doesn’t quite meet the “push above the elbow” test mentioned above. So Wind Pro is just fleece that’s a bit better against wind, without losing too much vapor permeability or softness.
- **Power Shield** makes a pretty good (though heavy) wind shell. BTW, both North Face and Mountain Equipment Coop offer garments made of PowerShield.

I have a 2005-era REI jacket that’s mostly WindPro, and with panels of Power Stretch here and there for better stretch. Although I always have reservations about garments made from two different materials, this jacket has become my favorite fleece – I wear it all the time.

Waterproof-Breathable: Gore-Tex et al.

Waterproof and Breathable? Really?

Back in the day, we had to climb in either wind-resistant but not at all shells, cotton until nylon came along, or when it was wet, coated cotton or later nylon, which didn’t breathe at all. But then, in 1969, Wilbert and Robert Gore found that if they took a soft sheet of polytetrafluoroethylene (Teflon) and stretched it just right, it developed lots of tiny little holes. They found that it would pass water vapor (at least under certain conditions) but not liquid water. They bound it to a stronger nylon fabric. Voilà! Gore-Tex waterproof “breathable” shells were born. Touted as a replacement for one breathable non-waterproof shell jacket and a separate non-breathable waterproof shell, Gore-Tex and its competitors became the standard outdoor shell parka (and pants) material.

In the decades since, Gore-Tex and its competitors have become better and better, more “breathable” while just as waterproof. However, they never got as breathable as a non-coated wind shell jacket. However, the basic paradigm of the “breathable” remained with what’s called solid-state diffusion. Basically, when you’re sweating and there is more moisture inside your parka than outside, some of the water vapor will diffuse through the waterproof membrane. Which means you have to get sweaty before your waterproof “breathable” membrane will breathe, and even then it doesn’t breathe that much. Which is why all of my waterproof “breathable” jackets have pit zips for ventilation.

Air-Permeable

Round about 2010, fabric manufacturers started playing around with new fabrics that were not quite as waterproof as original Gore-Tex and similar membranes but breathed better. As Sam Shaheen says at blistergearreview.com in his article Outerwear 201 these new air-permeable fabrics are waterproof enough for all practical purposes. While not as windproof as those fabrics, they are still highly windproof. However, the fact that they aren’t entirely windproof means that a little bit of air can get through, and that little bit of air can carry a lot of moisture through the membrane.

In his article, Shaheen goes into the science in much more detail. He points out that:

- a 10,000 mm hydrostatic water column rating equates to about 14 psi
- the hardest wind-driven rain only exerts about 2 psi (1,400 mm)

**Conclusion:**

- you don’t need a 20,000 mm membrane to stay dry.

He goes on to note that falling and the snow and pressure from straps on a heavy pack are unlikely to exceed 14psi. And that the amount of air passing through air-permeable fabric is undetectable by you, even in high winds.

How do you make such a membrane? There are different ways, but a simple one is to stretch a PTFE (polytetrafluoroethylene, Teflon) membrane, just like the original Gore-Tex, but stretch it more so the holes are bigger. There are also ways to “spin” material sort of like cotton candy that results in similar-size holes.

Examples of “air-perm” fabrics include Malden Polartec NeoShell, eVent, Mountain Hardwear Dry.Q Elite.
More on Gore-Tex et al

The original Gore-Tex fabric was a true revolution in outdoor fabrics. By allowing water vapor to pass (at least when dry), yet preventing liquid water from penetrating, this fabric was a wonderful replacement for the other fabrics we outdoor people used prior to Gore-Tex. Before Gore-Tex, we had Ventile, which was a special, long-staple Egyptian cotton, the fibers all being very tightly wound. When wet, the fibers swelled, becoming (mostly) waterproof, although when wet and frozen, it was like cast iron (not great for climbing). I started mountaineering using a Ventile cotton parka. 60/40 cloth, which mixed polyester fibers with the long-fiber cotton for better durability and flexibility when frozen, was “the thing” for a while – my wife and I still have our original “sixty-forties” – I use mine as a durable jacket for working on my truck. I think I threw my ventile anorak away years ago (it had big holes in it, ventile wasn’t that durable).

Gore-Tex is a trade name for something known generically as “expanded polytetrafluoroethylene” or PTFE for short – basically Teflon plastic that had been “expanded” in a proprietary manner to make zillions of tiny pores, small enough to prevent liquid water from penetrating, yet small enough for water vapor to get through. How so? Well, when water is liquid, it’s not just individual molecules of H₂O, it’s actually a clump of H₂O molecules bound together with hydrogen bonds, so the clumps are pretty big. But as water vapor, H₂O exists as individual molecules, i.e., much smaller.

Gore-Tex I (“one”) worked, mostly, but broke down quickly. I was lucky enough to have an early North Face pullover made from Gore-Tex I, which was nice, but the waterproofness only lasted about a year. However, Gore had a money-back lifetime guarantee, so I ended up with a free brand new pullover (which still hangs in my closet) made of Gore-Tex II, which was much sturdier. Gore-Tex I and II, however, really didn’t breathe all that well, and none of these fabrics breathe at all when they’re wet on the outside (a layer of water doesn’t “breath”) which is why they also have a DWR (durable water-repellent) coating that makes the water on the surface bead up, covering less surface area. And so, especially for those like me who sweat a lot, pit zips (underarm zippers) are essential. I’ve even added pit zips to some of my old Gore-Tex jackets.

There are dozens of waterproof and breathable fabrics, including Pertex, Cloudeil Dermizax, Bibler ToddTex, Marmot MemBrain and PreCip, Patagonia H2No, Mountain Hardwear Conduit, Sympatex, eVENT, Hydroflex, Ultxe, Omni-Tech, H2No Storm HB, Nikwax Analogy, Cloudburst, HyVent, Triple Point Ceramic, Aquafoil, Hydro/dry P2 and Hydro/dry P3, Aqua Dry and Aqua Dry Pro, and Aqua Fail. Just to mention a few. All of these (including current Gore-Tex) are better than Gore-Tex I, and as far as which is best, I doubt that anyone, anywhere, can give you a good answer. Some are more breathable than the original Gore-Tex, some both more breathable and more waterproof, and all pretty much more durable. Sympatex is pretty much just for shoes, as it’s very durable but not very flexible. Gore-Tex XCR (“extended comfort range”) = ProShell, is about as waterproof as Gore-Tex Performance Shell but much more breathable – but I still say that Gore-Tex XCR jackets need pit zips. Round about 2011 or so Gore-Tex XCR was renamed Proshell, though the XCR name was retained for a version of Gore-Tex used in footwear. There is also a Gore-Tex PacLite (debuted about 1995) that is very thin, and used in ultralight equipment, but I have a Patagonia Specter Pullover (ultralight at 6.5 ounces) of their H2No PTFE laminate which seems similar to PacLite; the 2006 version of this ultralight waterproof jacket had an innovation, which was welded rather than sewn seams, decreasing weight even further and eliminating the ridges of sewn seams that are targets for rips and abrasion. After destroying this, I later got a NorthFace Triumph jacket that was similar, even to the welded seams, but even lighter – since Patagonia didn’t make a similar jacket when I wanted a bigger one.

Here is a good time to insert a primer on waterproof-breathable materials, as in 2014, after a period of stagnation (despite what manufacturer’s marketers said) things started changing again.

Shells have Layers… Like an Onion?

There are 3-layer “waterproof-breathable” fabrics (tough outer fabric, middle waterproof layer, and inner liner). There are 2-layer fabrics, which skip the bonded liner, and instead use a separate, non-bonded inner liner. Then, there are 2.5-layer fabrics, which, instead of a bonded fabric liner or separate fabric liner, have a pattern printed on the inside that (a) keeps the inside from feeling like the inside of a balloon against your skin, and (b) provides a little (very little) separation between the fabric and your skin so it doesn’t stick.

Air and Water

Standard Gore-Tex is a membrane made of expanded polytetrafluoroethylene (Teflon) that looks, under a microscope, like a bunch of spider webs stuck together, or perhaps one of those scrubber-sponges for cleaning your dishes. Well, not just that, there is also an outer woven fabric layer that the ePTFE is bonded to. And inside that is layer of polyurethane (PU) that is sprayed on or painted onto the inside of the ePTFE membrane, and it turns out that the PU layer is just as important as the ePTFE membrane. There may or may not be an woven fabric bonded to the inside of the fabric to serve as a liner.

Turns out that the way that this combination “breathes” is that it will transmit water vapor, but only if there is more water vapor on the inside than the outside. That means that it won’t breathe if the inside is covered in rain, but then that’s going to be true no matter what fabric you’re wearing, which is why I always get jackets with pit zips.

But with these original Gore-Tex laminate sandwiches, you have to start sweating and build up some water vapor inside the jacket before it will start “breathing.” Which means that when you exert yourself you will always be sweaty inside one of these waterproof-breathable shells. Which is why I like to
take a very light non-waterproof but very breathable windshell jacket with me instead of just a waterproof-“breathable” shell jacket.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Waterproof Rating (mm)</th>
<th>Water Resistance Provided</th>
<th>Conditions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0 – 5,000 mm</td>
<td>No resistance to moisture.</td>
<td>Light rain, dry snow, no pressure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 – 7 psi</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6,000 – 10,000 mm</td>
<td>Rainproof and waterproof under light pressure.</td>
<td>Moderate rain, average snow, light pressure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.5 – 14 psi</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11,000-15,000 mm</td>
<td>Rainproof and waterproof except under high pressure.</td>
<td>Moderate rain, average snow, light pressure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 – 21 psi</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16,000-20,000 mm</td>
<td>Rainproof and waterproof under high pressure.</td>
<td>Heavy rain, wet snow, some pressure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 – 28 psi</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20,000 mm+</td>
<td>Rainproof and waterproof under very high pressure.</td>
<td>Heavy rain, wet snow, high pressure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 psi +</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The mm rating is how high a column of water has to be to be forced through the fabric.

Pertex seems to be singled out as being very light and breathable. I have a couple of European style bivouac sacs made of Pertex. These sacs are basically a tiny tent without any provision for stakes or poles – you pull it over yourself and others when hit by a storm; handy to have a dry lunch in a downpour (which I’ve done several times). I have one for two people, and one that fits four. The four-person is big enough for two people and packs eating lunch comfortably, or three with packs eating lunch but quite crowded. The two-person was big enough for me and my daughter (she was five years old at the time) and our packs while eating lunch, but she was in my lap most of the time. I recently got new ones made out of sil-nylon (silicone-coated nylon) from Integral designs which are about half the weight and half the bulk.

But to give Pertex its due, in about 2014 they started marketing a very-light-waterproof-breathable variant called Pertex Shield+ (later they dropped the “+”). It reportedly has specs of Waterproof 20,000 g/m/24 hours and 25,000 MVTR which is pretty good. It’s slick on the inside, no fuzzy wicking layer to make it comfortable on the skin. But the Outdoor Research Helium II HD jacket only weighs 9.1 ounces and folds up to fit in a pocket. It’s now my everyday rain jacket, though I will probably wear something thicker and more durable if I’m worried about abrasion on rocks. I sweat a lot, so I insist on pit zips on all raingear, which the HD jacket does have. It’s not as breathable as my Arcteryx Squamish Hoodie ultralight windshirt, which will still travel with me pretty much all the time. The non-HD Helium II jacket is lighter at 6.4 ounces but lacks a hood wire, handwarmer pockets, and pit zips.

**Gore-Tex** (W.L. Gore) has Gore-Tex Windstopper N2S (“next to skin”) which is a wicking layer directly bonded to Gore-Tex XCR. This makes a nice pair of thin gloves, and I like the pair I have. However, I hate the feel of the original Windstopper (it is the feel-equivalent of the fingernails-on-a-blackboard sound).

Waterproofness can be measured precisely. The European standard for “waterproof” is that the material will not pass water if you pile 1,500 mm of water on top of it – a column of water 1.5 meters high. But this isn’t quite waterproof enough if you figure you don’t want water to seep through under your packstraps, where the pressure may easily exceed this. It’s generally accepted that outdoor clothing needs to have a rating of 10,000 mm (10 meters). Classic Gore-Tex II has a rating of 28,000, though this decreases with age and with contamination by body oils (which, however, can be counteracted with proper washing agents, such as those offered by [NikWax](https://www.nikwax.com)). Gore-Tex XCR was rated at 45,000 mm.

Breathability is hard to assess, as it varies so much with the temperature, humidity, amount you sweat, and perhaps the phase of the moon. Breathability however may be measured. A standard rating is grams of water vapor passed by a square metre of fabric in 24 hours (gm/m²/24h); a standard minimum for outdoor clothing is 10,000gm/m²/24h, but this is clearly not enough for me, which is why I put pit zips in most of my parkas. W.L. Gore rates their fabrics in RET units (Resistance to Evaporative Transfer, AKA the sweating hot plate test), smaller being better. You can see how Gore-Tex has improved over the years:

- Classic Gore-Tex II: Waterproof 28,000 mm (>40 PSI), RET <90
- Gore-Tex XCR 2-layer: Waterproof 28,000 mm (>40 PSI), RET <45
- Gore-Tex XCR 3-layer: Waterproof 45,000 mm (>40 PSI), RET <60
- Gore-Tex PacLite: Waterproof ? mm (>40 PSI), RET <60 (<40 for most garments)
- Gore-Tex Active Shell: Waterproof: nobody knows, they won’t publish the figures, but RET reportedly ~3

Unfortunately, it’s hard if not impossible to get these numbers for competing fabrics. I do have some for Mountain Hardwear’s Conduit line, and Marmot’s MemBrain and PreCip:

- Conduit 3-layer: Waterproof 15,000 mm, RET <90
- Conduit 2-layer: Waterproof 12,000 mm, RET <95
- Conduit Silk: Waterproof 15,000 mm, RET <120
- MemBrain 2-layer: Waterproof ? mm (25,000 g/m²/24 hours), RET <50
- MemBrain 3-layer: Waterproof ? mm (20,000 g/m²/24 hours), RET <60
- PreCip: Waterproof 15,000 mm (~25 PSI), RET <70
• **PreCip Plus:** Waterproof 25,000 mm (~40 PSI), RET <60

You will likely see more and more of these figures as manufacturers start to compete on their numbers. The RET is performed by soaking the fabric in water, then placing it over a porous hot plate, and the volume of evaporated water is measured. A related test, the MVT (moisture vapor transfer) test, is performed by stretching the material over a cup full of water, and the volume of evaporated water is measured. But the MVT is not yet standardized, some test with the cup upright, others with it upside down with the water actually on the material, so you can’t really compare MVT results yet. There is also a DMPC (dynamic moisture permeation cell test) that measures water vapor transmission at different humidity levels. The fabric is placed as a barrier between two cells, one with humid air and one with dry air, and the moisture transmission is measured at different levels of humidity.

The problem with such testing is that it’s hard to relate to real-world conditions. The DMPC is probably the closest to real-world conditions, but the RET is a more common test. It’s also true that there are many factors other than the membrane that affect real-world breathability: the fabric itself.

Of interest, the membrane used in Marmot MemBrain is the same as that used in Cloudvill and others’ Demizax clothing. This material is claimed to become more vapor-permeable as it gets warmer. However, after testing, the US Army concluded that *Shape Memory Polymer films show no special increase in permeability as compared to other waterproof breathable materials*. The SMP [Shape Memory Polymers] laminates are comparable to standard Gore-Tex, so they are fairly functional in terms of being “breathable”, but they don’t have any unique behavior with regard to permeability at different temperatures.

Phil Gibson, of the Materials Science Team at the U.S. Army Soldier Systems Center in Natick, MA has performed a number of tests on commercially available fabrics. A PDF with some of the results has been posted by Mark Verber at [www.verber.com/mark/outdoors/gear/breathability.pdf](http://www.verber.com/mark/outdoors/gear/breathability.pdf).

Though the Army does a lot of testing of clothing materials, they often have to promise the companies not release the test results — so if you hear something unofficially from someone who knows someone in the Army test labs, what they say is probably true.

Some scholarly papers on the science of Gore-Tex and similar materials may be found at:

- [www.emeraldinsight.com/Insight/ViewContentServlet?Filename=Published/EmeraldFullTextArticle/Pdf/0580150306.pdf](http://www.emeraldinsight.com/Insight/ViewContentServlet?Filename=Published/EmeraldFullTextArticle/Pdf/0580150306.pdf)
- [jit.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/32/3/165](http://jit.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/32/3/165)
- [jit.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/34/4/223](http://jit.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/34/4/223)

In 2011, Gore introduced Gore-Tex Active Shell, which is much more breathable than prior versions; an RET of around 3, which is much more breathable than prior Gore-Tex editions and comparable to a woven softshell. Waterproofness? Don’t know. Gore doesn’t post it on their site and I haven’t seen it anywhere else.

Anything Polartec comes out with sounds interesting, although the marketese on their new NeoShell website makes me nauseated; not a figure of speech, literally. I guess I have a low tolerance for marketing hype.

There seem to be at least three different fabrics that share the NeoShell name. Some are thin, some are thick, so they are quite different. But unlike most of Malden Mills’ Polartec textiles, NeoShell is a direct competitor to Gore-Tex: highly waterproof. It’s also mildly stretchy, but don’t expect stretch like Polartec Power Stretch or its new successor, the fuzzy Power Dry (as opposed to the slick Power Dry which is quite different).

Malden Mills seems to be pushing the idea that NeoShell is more breathable than competitors. There is some support; Popular Science in their May 2011 edition compared NeoShell with Gore-Tex Active Shell, and found NeoShell to breathe better, even though a bit lighter. Four testers used the shell jackets skiing for a month. However, this was a test skiing; is NeoShell as waterproof as Gore-Tex Active Shell? I just don’t know, but I suspect it is not as waterproof.

eVent publishes (accessed 2018) information some of their fabrics:

- **DVexpedition:**
  - Waterproof: 30,000 mm (43 psi)
  - Breathability: 10,000 g/m²
  - Air Permeability: 0.06 cfm
- **DValpine**
  - Waterproof: 20,000 mm (28 psi)
  - Breathability: 20,000 g/m²
  - Air Permeability: 0.1 cfm
- **DVstorm**
  - Waterproof: 10,000 mm
  - Breathability: 30,000 g/m²
  - Air Permeability: 0.2 cfm

So as you see, “eVent” means three very different fabrics DVexpedition is very waterproof but not very breathable, with low air permeability. DVstorm is waterproof enough for almost all uses, but more air permeable and more breathable, and would be my choice even at high altitudes “expeditions.”

Since I have parkas of Gossameria and Cyclone (see below), I feel no urge to go out and buy a NeoShell or Gore-Tex Active Shell parka.

Back in 2004, Gore-Tex came out with Gore-Tex Soft Shell. It’s a shell, and it’s soft, so I guess the name is apt. But it’s **very different** than all other soft shells. Other soft shells are stretchy, as they are woven materials. Gore-Tex Soft Shell is not...
stretchy. It’s a Gore-Tex membrane, with fuzzy but tough fabric laminated to the outside, and fleece laminated to the inside. There are versions with thin fleece (“lo-loft”) and thicker fleece (“high loft”). So it’s soft against the skin. And warmer than a straight Gore-Tex shell. That may be good in the winter but worse in the summer: Gore-Tex Soft Shell is clearly cold-weather rather than all-weather gear. They say “greater freedom of movement” as less layers are needed, but it seems to me the freedom of movement in a real, stretchy soft-shell is a lot better, especially if it’s something quite stretchy like Schoeller Dryskin. Gore-Tex Soft Shell seems to be used primarily for fly-fishing and snow skiing/snowboarding clothing.

Waterproof-breathable membranes for boots are very important but get no respect. My feet sweat much more in boots with waterproof-breathable laminates in them. I’ve had such boots ever since the first boot with a Gore-Tex lining, by Danner. I hiked a couple hundred miles of the Appalachian Trail in them, and then they started leaking. Since then, manufacturers of waterproof linings for boots have engineered them to be much longer-lasting, and more recently a bit more breathable, but they’re really not breathable by the usual definition of breathable. And the materials used in boots, despite similar names such as Gore-Tex, are very different from those used in clothing, and to my mind, doesn’t get enough attention in the outdoor press. I’ve had generally good luck with some 10-15 pairs of Gore-Tex boots since that first pair of Danners. However, my most recent lightweight boots, which I love dearly, are the Salomon XA Pro Mid GTX “Hiking Shoe.” It’s sort of strange to call this a “hiking shoe” as it provides a modicum of ankle support, and a fairly solid sole. It’s very light and comfortable, and with the cordlock and Spectra laces they’re on and off in a second or so. I had the predecessor to this boot, and loved it. I was sad when the sole wore out and that model wasn’t available. But this newer model is even better. Except that after a year and a half of just moderate use, the Gore-Tex broke down and started leaking like a sieve. I discovered this on a search task occasionally wading through three (3) inches of water whereupon my feet were totally soaked.

Once home, just to check, I loaded the boots with heavy objects (water bottles) and had them “stand” in about 3” of water for about 5 minutes. When I pulled out the heavy objects and then used my hand to hold the boots under water, I could feel the Gore-Tex lining moving inwards from the outside of the boot, and then start leaking. Delamination is the problem, probably thence stretching and ripping the inner Gore-Tex liner. I contacted W.L. Gore, and they accepted the boots for their testing, and agreed that the Gore-Tex had failed. They then sent me a new pair of the same boots. Hope the new pair’s Gore-Tex liner lasts longer.

Emergency Shelter

It’s not strictly “clothing” but it definitely involves “materials.” This won’t be a discussion of tents, which is a whole ‘nuther discipline. But I do think a brief discussion of shell material for an emergency bivouac fits in nicely here.

In the very old days (think: ancient Greece and since), there was waxed canvas. It was quite heavy, and you had to re-wax it from time to time, but it resisted wind and rain pretty well. Back in the 1960s, though, came the tube tent. A tube tent about three-foot diameter by eight-foot long cylinder of very thin (2.5-3.5 mm) plastic. You ran a length of parachute cord (or Type 3 paracord, or shroud line, if you prefer one of those names for 550-pound test 3-4 mm kernmantel nylon cord) through the tube, tied each end to a tree, and you had a tent. Sort of. The ends don’t close, which is bad when it rains in either end. Or the wind blows through one end. But since there is no ventilation, and you can get lots of condensation inside, having the ends open helps prevent this. A bit.

One advantage of a tube tent is that it’s cheap. Under $10, even including a length of shroud line or twine. Another advantage is that it’s light and compact. It weighs less than a pound. And even if you

I would say the great advantage of spending a night in a tube tent, however, is persuading you to think more about proper shelter in the backcountry. First, it starts you thinking about saving up for a real tent. But if you’re using it as an emergency bivouac shelter, it also make you start thinking about alternative ultralight bivouac shelters.

Back in the 1960s or maybe late 1950s, Tacoma Mountain Rescue Unit, as a fundraiser, started selling survival kits, which they still do to this day. One of the components is an ultralight disposable tube tent, not really intended for use as a tent so much as an emergency bivouac shelter; sit on one end to keep it closed, pull the other end over your head, and you’re sheltered from wind and rain, ready for an uncomfortable but more likely survivable night out.

Ev Lasher and Gene Fear (who helped design the TMRU survival kit) also popularized the idea of leaf bags as a survival/bivouac shelter. They also popularized this standard survival teaching:

- Without food you can survive for 3 weeks.
- Without water you can survive for 3 days.
- Without shelter in a cold environment you can survive for 3 hours.
- Without air you can survive for 3 minutes.

In the North American backcountry, it’s uncommon for someone to die of starvation or lack of water. But it’s quite common for people to die of hypothermia, or from the injuries caused by hypothermia’s effects on the body and mind. So, survival teachers have been enamored of the idea of teaching about leaf bags as the #1 component of a survival kit. We’re talking about the large plastic bags you can get in the grocery store, usually called “lawn and leaf bags.”
I'm the faculty advisor for the Wilderness Medical Society Student Interest Section at the University of Pittsburgh Medical School, and once they asked me to give a talk about survival kits. I gave them the standard lecture about how the contents of your survival kit depends on where you are going: you might want different gear for the Kalahari Desert, or the Amazon jungle, or Mars... I then wrote the above “Without... you can survive” on the blackboard and talked about shelter from cold being the most important part of a survival kit. I then suggested that we think about what would be a good survival kit to bring if you’re going to lead a bunch of neophytes on a spring or fall day hike, in the nearby Laurel Highlands.

And then I reached into the bag of goodies I brought and threw (hard enough to make a loud bang; nothing wrong with a bit of showmanship) a box of leaf bags on the table. “This is it.” Enough leaf bags to give at least one to each of the hikers.

But things change. First let’s talk about the two major subdivisions of bivouac shelters: bothy bags vs. bivy bags (sleeping bag style shelters).

But most North Americans think of a “bivouac sac” as basically a sleeping bag cover, albeit sometimes usable without a sleeping bag inside it. As with bothy bags, you can get both coated nylon and silnylon sleeping bag covers/bivouac sacs. But you can get more expensive ones that have a thicker, coated waterproof bottom and a Gore-Tex top that breathes a bit, preventing moisture buildup. Unless it’s raining, in which case the wet Gore-Tex top doesn’t let the water vapor out, and you get condensation inside. Of course, you pay extra for this. You can even get bivouac sacs with a Gore-Tex top and little poles that keep the top off of your face at night, and have mosquito netting. I have one of these, an Outdoor Research Advanced Bivy Bag. It’s good for when you just have to throw it out on the ground, throw in your sleeping bag and pad, and crawl in to get a few hours’ sleep. Of interest, it and quite a few other similar bivy bags have a special kind of waterproof/breathable membrane on top, different from that found in most waterproof/breathable membranes. Mine has Gore Respiration Positive, which omits the inner lining used in clothing. That inner lining prevents the wet raingear from sticking to your skin, and allows some wicking, at the expense of some breathability. But Gore Respiration Positive

Lairig Leacach Bothy, Lochaber, Scotland

Chris Eilbeck [CC BY-SA 2.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0)], via Wikimedia Commons

“Bothy” is the Scottish term for a small unlocked hut in the mountains, used as a temporary foul-weather shelter by shepherds and hill-walkers. “Bothy bag” refers to something you can carry with you that provides the same temporary shelter. If the weather closes in, with wind and rain (“hypothermia weather”), your group can huddle together and throw the shelter over the entire group. There are bits that you sit on to take the place of tent stakes, and your heads serve as the tent poles. Most bothy bags also have a small tube vent with some mesh on the end, which also serves as an attached stuffsack. They can also be homemade, often from parachute material. While not entirely waterproof, parachute material is very light and cuts the wind and helps contain people’s body warmth. It’s amazing how quickly the warmth will build up inside even in deep winter.

Commercial bothy bags have traditionally been made from waterproof coated nylon, or nylon with a DWR (durable water repellent) finish. I’ve used one of these on day hikes, not only as shelter from cold-wet conditions, but also as a snug place to wait out a brief summer thunderstorm. I’ve also used larger ones to throw over the patient and a few rescuers during real and simulated wilderness search and rescue situations.

I have recently gotten 2- and 4-person “SilBothy” bags, made by Terra Nova, made out of silicone-treated (silnylon). They are half the size and weight of the regular waterproof “regular” waterproof nylon bothy bags, also made by Terra Nova. That makes me much more likely to carry them, which can have happy consequences.

A week ago as I write this in May 2015, we had the annual general membership meeting of the Appalachian Search and Rescue Conference (the ASRC), in Pennsylvania’s Ohiopyle State Park. Part of the festivities was a “Search and Rescue Games” where teams made of members of the ASRC’s 10 component Groups, mixed and matched, had to navigate to various backcountry locations to accomplish various secret SAR-related tasks. One of the stations was on bivouac skills. We were to be graded on how quickly and how well we could set up a bivouac shelter for one person, using only what we had with us our could find in the surrounding open (but quite rainy) woodland. The five of us put down our packs, with the padded sides up, which became a place for our bivouacker to lay herself down, then I pulled a SilBothy 2 out of my pack (just happened to be in there, we had no idea there was a bivouac station), shook it out, and placed it over our bivouacker, and said “done!” in less than two minutes. It actually would be a pretty comfy bivouac for the night. We did go on after that to set up a hammock with a tarp rainfly to use up the rest of the allotted time for the station, but just goes to show how handy one of these bothy bags can be. It only takes a few seconds to pull it out and deploy it, and only a bit longer to pack up again.

Bothy bags are all the rage in Europe, and after spending some time teaching wilderness EMS I’ve picked up the habit. But “done!” in less than two minutes. It actually would be a pretty comfy bivouac for the night. We did go on after that to set up a hammock with a tarp rainfly to use up the rest of the allotted time for the station, but just goes to show how handy one of these bothy bags can be. It only takes a few seconds to pull it out and deploy it, and only a bit longer to pack up again.

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membrane has no inner lining – doesn’t need it as it should
never be right against your skin – so, as long as it’s not wet, it’s
more breathable than Gore-Tex clothing.

When she was in her teens, my daughter went to some nearby
Quaker summer camps, which were delightful… except that
they had backpacking trips and my daughter found herself
teaching the other kids and occasionally the staff things about
the outdoors. They would sleep just under a tarp, and after her
first wet experience with that, she took my OR Advanced Bivy
Sac with her not as a tent but just as a “sleeping bag cover” and
had much drier nights as a result. Laurel says “One one rainy
night, I was the only dry person in the camp, including the staff!
And you can quote me on that.”

The OR Advanced Bivy works pretty well overall, but it’s not
all that light or small (2 lbs 6 ounces = 1 kg, 4x16” = 10x40
cm), so it’s really more of a very small tent than an emergency
bivy sac. We won’t go further along this “sleeping bag cover
morphing into a small tent” direction. Except to say something
about the Hennessy Hammock, which weighs the same and
bulks the same as the OR Advanced Bivy. I think of myself as a
backpacker and not as any sort of “car-camper.” However, I
often have to set up a quick place to sleep during an extended
search or disaster operation. If I have the time and can find a
couple of trees the right distance apart, I will simply set up my
Hennessy Hammock (ultralight silnylon version) and use that
rather than three members hauled out these blankets to use for the
bivvy construction.

But SOL has gone on to make lighter and better bivvys. One is
the Thermal Bivvy, which is just a slightly improved version of
the Thermo-Lite 2 Bivvy.

An interesting variant is the SOL Emergency Bivvy
which weighs only 3.8 ounces (108 g), made of a material called
Heatsheets which is an improved version of the original Space
Blanket; tougher, not as crinkly, and in a bag form. I wouldn’t
expect it to last more than a few uses, and there is no side
ventilation or side opening. A good alternative to a pair of leaf
bags, though a bit more expensive at ~$15 each.

But the most interesting is the SOL Escape Bivvy. It’s a bit more
expensive at $50 (though with some searching you can find it
online for less than $40). It’s in mummy sleeping bag shape,
with a hood drawstring and a partial side zip. That adds a bit of
weight but cutting it down to mummy shape saves some
weight, so it’s actually slightly lighter than the Thermal Bivvy at
8.5 oz = 235 g). For the purists, there is the SOL Escape Lite,
which gets rid of the zipper which means it’s $10 cheaper and a
bit lighter at 5.5 oz = 156 g.

It’s made of a new, proprietary Escape fabric. (This is the real
reason I have to discuss bivvys in an article on clothing
materials.) It’s reflective silver on the inside, bright orange on
the outside, very thin, relatively soft compared with the Thermal Bivvy, and not particularly crinkly. It seems to have many tiny holes punched in it, but if you hold it up against your mouth and try to blow through it, no air comes through.

It’s made of spun-bonded olefin. A detailed analysis posted on the Backpacking Light website (thanks to Richard Nisley for posting his test results) provides information including microscopic views of the material showing that the holes go through the orange layer but not the silver inner layer. Here are some of the details:

- .0087 inches (.220 mm) thick
- basis weight of 83 g/m² (2.45 oz per square yard)
- hydrostatic head analysis: withstood 1,336 mm of water
- air permeability of .67 CFM
- reflective coating is coated and both more durable and more reflective than most alternatives

What does this mean? Well, “waterproof” is usually defined as withstanding 1,500 mm of water, so this is basically waterproof. In fact, it’s better than some “waterproof-breathable” shell clothing materials. And the air permeability of .67 CFM is excellent, in fact, better than the most breathable version of eVent at .5 CFM.

As far as durability, there are multiple reports online of people using this over extended periods for lightweight backpacking, either instead of a sleeping bag for summer, or over a sleeping bag for spring and fall.

It doesn’t have the mosquito netting and the poles to keep the top off of my face like the OR Advanced Bivvy. But it weighs about 2 pounds less, and costs about $200 less. Due to their innovative fabric design, I think that SOL has a winner here.

When spending a week hiking in Shenandoah National Park early summer 2015, my daughter and I ran into 25 of the 2000 Appalachian Trail through-hikers heading to Maine. Dan Kayser and his brother agreed to accept a gift of one of the SOL Lite and one of the SOL regular bivy bags for the last part of their trek, in New England in the fall. They liked the “regular” one considerably better; with the Lite version, you tend to pull your head inside it to stay warm, then you get condensation. It’s worth the extra weight and cost to get the full version. Dan says it truly does add another 5-10° of warmth, is good in the rain, and as long as your face isn’t inside, doesn’t get much condensation.

OK, I give up. (2015.) People have been bugging me to add something about Blizzard Bags. I have heard people refer to a Blizzard Bag as a freeze-dried compressed sleeping bag, and that’s not a bad metaphor.

Blizzard Bags are made of a “material” (using the term loosely) called ReflexCell. It’s made up of three layers of mylar-like material which are welded together so they form cells like those of an overlapping-V tube down sleeping bag. But instead of down to hold the cells open, little elastic strings “crinkle” the material so as to hold the cells open. A blizzard bag comes compressed, and you can never get it back to the same original size, so in one sense, it’s a single-use item. You can fold it up, but it ends up being about three times the original size. The early one I had was compressed, and in a small stuffsack that expanded to three times the size to accommodate the uncompressed size. Clever.

The company has inflated claims about how warm the bag is, but I’ve tried to sleep out in my backyard with it in winter (gave up after a few hours), and don’t think it meets its claims. It provides about a bit less than an inch of loft all around you, so it is considerably warmer than a non-insulated bivouac bag. But the cells are filled just with air, which allows convection currents, and doesn’t add any insulation value above air, as down or artificial-fiber batting does.

As a bit of survival gear, it might mean the difference between life or death. But as a regular sleeping bag? No way.

First, it crinkles. Loudly. A lot. It’s worse than a first-generation space bag as it has three layers crinkling all at once.

Secondly, it’s waterproof and not at all breathable. So you (and any insulation inside) gets wet. Now there are those who don’t mind such “vapor barrier” bags, and even wear leaf bags inside their sleeping bags to keep moisture out of the sleeping bag. There is good evidence that it will keep you warmer, at the risk of making you sweaty inside. Those who do this all the time tend to wear their leaf bags or a formal vapor barrier liner over a thin wicking baselayer to keep spread out their sweat and improve comfort. This tiny fanatic minority were likely encouraged by Stephenson’s Warmlite, who has been manufacturing vapor barrier sleeping bags since 1955, and still does. I will also note that in the 1950s and 60s many young male outdoor enthusiasts were encouraged to try his gear by the pictures of Jack Stephenson’s scantily-clad daughters in his gear.

I sweat a lot, and have never been able to sleep comfortably in a vapor barrier bag. That’s also maybe why I love parka pit zips so much. I reserve the vapor barrier idea as a survival technique for forced bivouacs. Your mileage may vary.

Blizzard has improved ReflexCell over the years by making tiny perforations in the two inner layers of foil so it’s a bit breathable. Sort of. I was so unimpressed with my initial experiences that I have not tried the newer version. I relegated my Blizzard Bag to the back of my truck, rather than considering adding it to my SAR or backpacking packs. I figure I can give it to someone else who is really cold and can feel good about that without having to actually use it again myself.

Softshell vs. Hardshell
No, I'm not talking about crabs.

For the past decade or more, people have been talking (cf the Mountain Gear 2003 catalog) about the “old” method of outdoor dressing, i.e., wearing a “hardshell” Gore-Tex parka (or, in earlier years, a completely waterproof parka or anorak or capoole) over middle and inner layers that really don’t resist wind or rain. They contrast this with the new “softshell” where the middle layers not only provide stretchy insulation but also shed wind and rain to a degree (as well as providing significant protection against abrasion, mud and dirt, which the older fleece didn’t). Having worn some of these “softshell” garments, I have to admit I’m impressed with the idea. With “softshell” dressing, you rarely take out your Gore-Tex parka, and can therefore have a relatively thinner and lighter shell which stays in your pack most of the time.

These relatively new fabrics, pioneered by Schoeller of Switzerland, are woven so that they have a tough nylon on the outside and a warm, fuzzy, wicking CoolMax (or similar) on the inside. The four defining characteristics of softshell fabric are:

1. **Shell**: they are at least moderately windproof and mildly waterproof exterior, which is moderately abrasion- and thorn-resistant
2. **Soft**: they have a soft, wicking inside face
3. **Soft**: they have a soft “hand” (they drape well, not stiff) and
4. **Soft**: they stretch, at least a bit

Of interest is the great breathability of Schoeller Dryskin, which is probably why I like my Cloudveil Serendipity jacket and Symmetry pants so much. I basically live in the Symmetry pants all winter, and have since I got them and the Serendipity jacket in 1999 or so, and I’m saying this in 2018, so they have stood the test of time. I would add that you should use the NikWax SoftShellProof DWR treatment on a regular basis on Dryskin to keep it as water-resistant as possible. While Dryskin is not waterproof enough to be your sole rain jacket, you can carry a lightweight Gore-Tex or similar shell to put on over it in really rainy weather – you’ll find that you don’t need this outer shell that much, so even if it’s not that abrasion resistant, it doesn’t get used that much anyway.

Malden Mill claims to have started the softshell movement in 1998 with their PowerShield, but I think the prize goes to Schoeller of Switzerland for their Dryskin, which was featured in the original CloudVeil Serendipity Jacket. I have one of those that I have used for many years primarily as an outer shell in the winter, so much so that it’s pretty worn out. More recently I’ve started using a windshell of Gossamer (see below) but I don’t use it in high-abrasion situations like I do the basically indestructible Schoeller material. On the other hand, my Gossamer windshell weighs and bulks a tenth as much...

Malden Mills’ Polartec PowerShield has been used in the well-known Arc’teryx Gamma jackets and pants, but in 2011, Arc’teryx switched to a fabric known as Fortius. Fortius comes in several versions; Fortius 1.0 is a thin woven stretch fabric, similar to Schoeller Dynamic (though it’s reputed to soak up more water, for example, in the Arcteryx Gamma LT pants); Fortius 2.0 is a laminate of a thin fleece inside a nylon shell, with the “glue” (laminate) being a membrane that is wind-resistant but vapor-permeable; Fortius 3.0 is similar to 2.0 but with a thicker lining.

Malden Polartec Power Stretch has a bit more of a “shell” on the outside, though nothing compared to Schoeller Dryskin Extreme. There was also a new (2011) Polartec 02 High Loft that was a grid-cut fleece similar to the old Patagonia R1: thicker than Polartec Power Dry. Reputedly the laminate is similar to that in PowerShield but more breathable (Polartec Power Shield O2). The newer Malden fabrics like PowerShield, as they mature, have given Schoeller a run for its money. Most of these softshell garments, especially the Schoeller, have moderate wind resistance but are extremely breathable. Even for heavy-sweating people like me, they may do OK without pit zips (unlike any kind of Gore-Tex equivalent).

Cloudveil also, in 2005, came out with Inertia Plus, which was a very thin, mildly stretchy, shell fabric like a thinner version of Dryskin. In my informal tests, it stretches about 1.15%, so not nearly as much as Power Stretch, but more than some other fabrics that claim to be stretchy. It has a soft outer finish, unlike Schoeller’s Dynamic or Cloudveil’s DryForce. As far as I can tell, it was more breathable than DrySkin, just as durable, significantly less windproof and waterproof, about as stretchy if not a bit more, about as wicking, a nice “hand” (feel to the touch) but less than half the thickness and half the weight. That means it’s not as warm, I supposed, but it seemed like great softshell material. Some people wear garments of this Inertia as a shirt. I’ve got a medium-size Cloudveil hooded Prospector jacket that makes a very nice softshell jacket (the only problem is that they designed it without a hood drawstring – I ended up adding one myself – it now lives in my bike panniers.) I also have a size small non-hooded jacket that works as a 3-season shirt/jacket – very nice – and a pair of shorts and pants in the same material which are now my favorite summertime pants and shorts. I did find that my Cloudveil Prospector jackets of the pre-2007 Inertia Plus were pretty good for wind, but in a thunderstorm with big droplets, the droplets just forced themselves through the weave – not very rain-resistant at all. The 2007 Inertia Plus fares a bit better in a storm.

But when I ordered some more pants and shorts in the spring of 2007, I found that Cloudveil had changed the cloth – the new Inertia Plus was twice the thickness and twice the weight. It’s now more than half the weight and thickness of Schoeller’s Dryskin. In fact, I found that the old Inertia Plus shorts weighed 6 ounces, and the new Inertia Plus shorts weighed 10 ounces. The finish on the newer Inertia Plus was quite a bit harder; the old Inertia Plus was very light and supple, and the new Inertia Plus was quite a bit harder and less supple. The outside of the material is like a hard-finished cotton twill; a bit like new, tight cotton denim. Initially, I wasn’t too pleased with it. But after a bit, it grew on me. It softened with use, and indeed it provides...
softshell fabrics are pretty much all double weave, which almost never gets used. Same basic idea, but a few minor thorn-pulls, they look like new. Indeed, the Cloudveil Inertia Plus pants are my favorite pants for three-season use, just like the Cloudveil Schoeller Dryskin pants are my favorite winter pants.

I will admit that I’m moving back towards the hard-shell idea – a non-breathable parka for bad rain. Well, I’m back at the same place, only now I’m carrying my ultralight Gossamer described below. Or, more accurately, moving back in time even before Gore-Tex. Back in the day, we used to hike and climb always with two parkas. One was a light windshell – at first cotton, later nylon as soon as it came out, that was quite breathable. Then there was your “waterproof” – a non-breathable parka for bad rain. Well, I’m back at the same place, only now I’m carrying my ultralight Gossamer for daily use, and an ultralight Gore-Tex with pit zips for my “hard shell”, which almost never gets used. Same basic idea, but a tenth of the weight. And now I’m wearing softshell garments for pants and shirt, so I guess the softshell has moved inwards.

There were some bits of softshell innovation in soft shells in 2011. (If you believe the marketing hype, they’re big innovations; they’re really not.)

There was a new soft-shell material, Cyclone, that, unlike prior soft shells, had a thicker inner fleece lining (about the same as 100-weight Polartec), and a less-porous outer layer. Cloudveil and Vaude offer jackets made of Cyclone. (BTW, Vaude offers some very, very nice ultralight top-loading daypacks/climbing packs. My wife and daughter and I each have one and we use them all the time.) I got a Cloudveil FirsTurn jacket made out of Cyclone. It’s thicker and heavier than my old Cloudveil Serendipity jacket made out of Schoeller Dryskin, but seems pretty bombproof in terms of wind and water resistance, and even likely abrasion resistance, much more so than DrySkin. Will have to see how it lasts. The only thing I don’t like about it is the hood design; there is no drawstring around the entire face opening of the hood, only something that pulls from the back and tightens the top half of the opening. While this allows flexibility for active travel, it’s not as good when you’re hunkered down in a bivouac and want to cinch the hood tight to shut out the wind. Cyclone seems similar in some ways to Polartec Weather Shield (see below), but my experiences suggest that Cyclone absorbs much less water and stays drier than Weather Shield.

Arc’teryx (which seems to have supplanted Cloudveil as the leading vendor of very-nice but very-expensive outdoor clothing) has two new materials, Burly Double Weave (thinner softshell fabrics are pretty much all double weave, thicker ones are sometimes a laminate of two fabrics), which they have used to replace Schoeller Dynamic (thin softshell, good wicking); and Fortius (three variations, see above), both of which are similar to Schoeller Dryskin Extreme, and Arc’teryx makes both jackets and pants of these materials. Since Cloudveil no longer exists, if you want durable, warm, fast-drying, wicking, well-fitting pants that you will use for many years, you might look at what Arc’teryx has.

I got a new North Face Elixir top in May 2012. It’s made of two versions of Apex, which is The North Face’s name for any softshell material that they sell, and in particular, “Apex Aerobic” which I guess means relatively thin and breathable. (“Apex Aerobic” appears to apply to both materials.) Both of the softshell materials are quite thin. One is moderately wind-resistant and somewhat water resistant (although being out in mild rain for a 15-minute walk had my shoulders getting damp), and has impressive one-direction stretch, oriented around the circumferance of the arms. The other is less wind- and water-resistant, but strecherier and more vapor-permeable, and used in the armpits and sides (and, by November 2013, this material is now all pilled and fuzzy, with wisps sticking out 1/4”, simply from abrasion from my pack hipbelt). This means that, despite this being marketed as a soft-shell, I can push the sleeves above the elbow without constriction. This reminds me of the REI fleece that I have, that’s WindBloc throughout most of the jacket, but Powertstretch along the sides and in the underarms, quite similar two-material construction.

The Elixir top is designed as a softshellish jacket – it has a full zip and a drawcord around the bottom – and it makes a nice stretchy shell over my Ibex wool sweater to block mild wind, though I would put my Arc’teryx Squamish Hoodie of Gossamer over it if there was either rain or strong wind.

North Face in November 2013 only sold clothing with Apex ClimateBlock fabric, which is highly wind-resistant (0 CFM they claim), and Apex Universal, which is less wind-resistant (5-15 CFM) but more breathable and more stretchy. But I lost my Elixir jacket on a flight to Zion National Park, and was able to get (March 2015) the North Face Nimble Jacket, which is made out of Apex Aerobic, but without the contrasting side-panel material. It seems to be just as stretchy, and a bit more wind-resistant. Like the Elixir, it also has three zip pockets: a right handwarmer pocket for my Outdoor Research (OR) Sensor gloves that allow me to use my cellphone as a GPS, and OR Revel mitten shells; a left handwarmer pocket for my OR Rando Cap; and a small chest pocket for a Seirus Comfort facemask. That’s my standard outerwear for cold weather hikes, climbs, SAR tasks, or just walking the dog.

I got (2012) a pair of REI Endeavor pants. These came in two models, plain pants and ones that have zip-off legs, the kind that you can zip off and remove by unzipping the entire side seam, without taking off your boots or even your pack. I got the zip-off kind, as these are the first completely-removable zipoff softshell pants I’ve seen. They are made of a thin softshell that seems quite sturdy on the outside, and the inside is a comfortable wicking layer. They material is just a bit stretchy, and fairly stiff. It is about the thickness of Schoeller Dynamic.

I contacted my local REI store to ask what they were made of. They didn’t know. I called REI HQ in Seattle. Turns out that the material, which is a proprietary material that REI contracted with an unnamed company to provide, doesn’t have a name. The suggested I come up with one, so I did: “Endeavour-cloth.” I truly like these pants; I think they’re ideal.
for hiking when the mornings are cool, the days are warm, and there may be rain. Where the pants legs zip off, wind comes through a bit, so not ideal for windy conditions.

Does this mean the end is nigh for named clothing materials? Not that names actually corresponded with any one particular material, but if a big retailer like REI doesn’t even bother to name the materials, then I guess people are finally catching on that names don’t have much correlation with actual materials.

In December 2012, my wife got three softshell jackets from Woot for $20 each. They’re made out of the same Endeavour cloth. The tailoring’s not great, as there’s no drawstring on the bottom, and the wrists just have some elastic. And, the jacket is heavy (twice the weight of my stretchy North Face Apex softshell jacket), and not very stretchy. But it’s nice and fuzzy on the inside, and the outside seems quite bombproof. Highly wind-resistant, more so than the North Face Apex Aerobic jacket, and I suspect highly water- and abrasion-resistant. REI no longer sells the Endeavour pants, or indeed, as of 2018, any REI-branded softshell pants at all, only those of other manufacturers. Too bad.

In 2012, REI sold a line of REI-brand Acme softshell pants, made of the latest version of Schoeller DrySkin. It’s quite interesting to compare these with my Cloudveil Symmetry pants, made of one of the first generations of DrySkin. The new pants’ DrySkin is thinner … about half the thickness of the original. It is made of thread about twice as small, which is why it’s thinner. It seems to be more water- and wind-resistant, and much stretchier. The early DrySkin stretches about 10-15%, this new stuff stretches about 30-40%. The tailoring is great, and the pants have nice features such as an gusseted ankle zip, and when you unzip this, it’s easy (and reasonably comfortable) to fold them up above your knees to make shorts. They also have grommets at the cuff for gaiter-type straps for under your foot. They aren’t as warm as my original Cloudveil Symmetry pants of Dryskin, simply because the material is thinner. I got another pair of the Acme with a 2” larger waist than my original. It is made of thread about twice as small, which is why it’s thinner. It seems to be more water- and wind-resistant, and much stretchier. The DrySkin performs better than any other softshell pants I’ve ever worn: wide comfort range, great wicking, impressive wind and water resistance, quite stretchy. Schoeller continues to improve Dryskin and I regard it as the acme (pun intended) of softshell materials. The REI Acme pants also work well in the heat. There is a wide gusset behind the zipper at the bottom, and the Velcro closure tab will hold the gusset open when you unzip the gusset. You can then fold the pants above your knees easily, turning them into shorts. Far superior to zip-off legs. REI, start making these again! I want another pair! I have only one complaint: this newer DrySkin is not as durable as the original. After a several years of frequent use, there are areas at the knee and around the ankles where the inside fuzz has worn off, and there are now many thorn-pulls.

In 2013, REI came out with Mistral pants, again made from an unnamed softshell from an unnamed source. I did contact REI and they said “The softshell material used in the Mistral pant is non-branded and is from a textile mill called Everest and is a blend of nylon/polyester/spandex.”

Compared to the Acme, the Mistral pants:

- were made of a generic softshell material, much rougher on the inside; not as bad as Spandura, that after a day of climbing left the back of my knees bleeding from the abrasions, but halfway between Spandura and Schoeller Dryskin and Endeavor cloth;
- are less stretchy, as the axis of the major stretch of the material goes along the legs rather than around the legs like in the Acme pants, however, they are more stretchy than the Endeavor pants;
- do not have a patch cargo pocket on the thigh (which is a handy place to keep a folded map);
- do not have a gusset behind the lower-leg zipper, which means the Mistral allows some wind through and it’s harder to roll them up above the knee to make into shorts;
- are more water- and wind-resistant. (REI makes no claims for water resistance, that’s just my observation, but they do note that the Mistral pants will resist wind up to 25 MPH.)

I would rate the Mistral as a superior shell pant over Capilene 4 bottoms for very cold weather (this would eliminate chafing, and it stretches fairly well), but much inferior to the late and lamented Acme pants for 3-season wear. REI says they stopped selling the Acme pant as sales dropped off; this is likely because the Acme pants cost $170, and the Mistral pants cost only $100. That’s because the Mistral design isn’t as good, and the material isn’t as good, as the Acme pants. I guess you get what you pay for.

In 2015, I got another pair of REI Mistral Pants. The material has changed a bit. It is thinner and lighter, still a very fine weave. It now has 4-way stretch equal to the Schoeller Dryskin Acme pants. But compared to Dryskin, the material doesn’t drape as well, feels more slick and hard on the outside and not as fuzzy on the inside. Still, probably the best deal in a pair of general-purpose softshell pants as they cost less than $100.

Mountain Hardware has a midweight very-stretchy softshell called Chockstone Doubleweave Softshell. I have a pair of these pants. They aren’t quite as good as the late, lamented REI Acme pants in construction, but they are stretchy enough that you can roll up the pants above your knee, but unlike the Acme pants with their gusset, it’s pretty tight and tends to cut off your circulation a bit. Still, a respectable pair of softshell pants, and a close runner-up to the REI Acme pants.

As far as softshell materials, it seems to me that Scholler’s Dryskin is always a couple of years ahead of the competition. It has a great “hand” (feel), is quite stretchy, and is water- and wind-resistant enough. Competitors may tout their material as better in terms of water- and wind-proof qualities. But that’s always at the cost of being less stretchy or less breathable.
I should mention Ibex (the leading manufacturer of pricey wool outdoor clothing until they went out of business in 2017) and their line of softshell materials. The Ibex softshell materials have an abrasion/wind/water resistant outer shell and an inner layer, not of polyester microfiber, but of soft wool. I have two pairs of pants of Ibex softshell. The Tuck Pants are comfortable midweight pants with an elastic drawstring at the cuff. Quite comfortable, wicking, and durable; suited best for spring and fall. The Equipo pants are designed for winter, with medial-ankle abrasion patches, and snow cuffs (internal gaiters). However, they really aren’t that thick for winter use, so I use them over a pair of long underwear. Are these pants better than, say, my Cloudveil Symmetry pants or REI Acme pants made of Schoeller Dryskin? Hard to tell.

January 2016: I should make a note about abuse of the term “softshell.” ORC Industries makes special forces style military clothing. I was looking for softshell uniform pants, and found their MCU Level 5 Softshell Trouser - Alpha Green for less than $100 a pair. They are made from a softshell material called Agility by the Brookwood Companies. It’s 98% nylon and 2% Spandex. It reputedly has 2-way stretch.

I am now holding these pants in my hands and wearing my 20-year old Cloudveil Symmetry softshell pants, the bottom partner to Cloudveil’s first-of-a-kind Serendipity Jacket, the first softshell garments sold. They’re made of the original Schoeller Dryskin. There is almost no comparison.

The Cloudveil pants have a soft “hand” — the material is supple, bending easily and draping across my legs well. They are stretchy enough — about 10-15% — that they feel comfortable even when I’m sitting on a Balans chair with my feet right under my butt. They are also soft on the inside… a brushed wicking layer that sucks the sweat off my skin and is very comfy against the skin.

The Agility pants are hard to the touch, are crinkly and noisy, and there is no fuzzy, wicking lining. When I first got them, I was convinced they didn’t stretch at all. After reading more about the material, I tried really hard, and with difficulty, was able to get it to stretch about 2%.

There is a lot of variation in what’s considered softshell. I hereby stipulate that to be considered a softshell, a garment must (a) have a soft hand and drape well, (b) stretch at least 10% in at least one dimension, and (c) have a fuzzy, wicking inside.

That said, these MCY Level 5 pants are pretty good hardshell pants.

July 2017: Malden Mills has come out with a new fabric, Polartec Power Wool. It’s a wind- and abrasion-resistant synthetic-fiber on the outside, and wool on the inside. That’s different from one of the Ibex wool/synthetic combinations, which was wool fibers twisted around a synthetic thread, which feels like wool on the inside and feels like wool on the outside but is more durable, though maybe not as durable as Power Wool. The Power Wool feels like fine merino wool on the inside (which it is) and slightly slick, partially-recycled polyester on the outside, which it is. The wool provides natural smell resistance, and the artificial fiber exterior is treated with silver to make it somewhat smell-resistant. I had seen some nice tops of this at LL Bean in 2017, but when I tried to find them, in January 2018, I recanted. No go.

I have a thin, longsleeve Power Wool top from MtnLogic (never heard of them, got it remaindered from sierratradingpost.com) that says it’s 69% polyester and 31% wool. So, 2/3 polyester. It is stretchy enough that I can pull the sleeves up above my elbow (though I cut off the sleeves to make it shortsleeve) but then it’s very thin. Malden’s argument is that wool provides a better microclimate when right against the skin. I have to admit that in mixed conditions or cold, good quality wool against the skin just makes me feel better than an artificial fiber. Not sure why, but there it is.

Ibex had a similar fabric, Climawool, for several years. I have a pair of Climawool pants and I find that my non-wool softshell pants are much more comfortable. The synthetic outer layer just isn’t very stretchy compared with my 20+ year old Cloudveil Symmetry pants.

In 2018, I got a pair of Kühl Klash softshell pants made of material called Flexwürx, which stretches about 10% in one direction and 20-25% the other direction. It’s not particularly soft and fuzzy on the inside but seems tough on the outside. More of their clothing seems to be appearing in outdoor stores these days.

P.S. there is nothing Germanic about this company, they just thought an umlaut in their name would look kühl.

**Gloves**

There is a material called Polartec Weather Shield that waterproof and breathable and stretchable; my wife, 12-year-old daughter and I used Seirus All Weather gloves made out of it on an 8-hour hike in rain with temperatures just above freezing in Shenandoah National Park in October 2011. The gloves are not seam-sealed — seam-sealing would make the gloves much more bulky and stiff. The material got and stayed pretty wet, and was slow to dry. And, our daughter’s fingers were red and numb the entire time. I think her gloves were a little tight, and the compression effect of the stretch material was enough to keep her fingers numb the entire day, though no actual immersion foot (hand) or frostnip. Seems like nice material for wind – the gloves are OK in the wind when it’s not raining – but not ideal for wet-cold condition.

I have some Outdoor Research Windy Ridge gloves of Polartec WindBlock that, like natural materials, end up “breaking in” like a pair of shoes and now fit my fingers perfectly. Even if not as waterproof, nor quite as thick, I suspect they would have done slightly better on this wet-cold hike.

My favorite gloves for somewhat wet-cold conditions are now the REI Minimalist gloves. They are relatively cheap and consist
of a (non-seamsealed) waterproof-breathable shell, and a thin fleece lining. Unlike attempts to combine both shell and lining in one material, these are made of two distinct layers. And the outer shell is cut generously, so at first the gloves seem a bit clumsy. However, I soon realized that there is a great advantage to this: *no constriction of your fingers*. Those Seirus gloves I mentioned above really constrict the fingers, decrease bloodflow, and make your fingers cold, whereas the Minimalist gloves don’t constrict at all.

Sometimes older construction techniques outperform newer high-tech materials. The REI minimalist gloves are highly recommended. However, my go-to hand covering for most winter conditions has changed. Many companies make midweight gloves that will also work with your cellphone’s touchscreen. My favorite brand is the Outdoor Research Sensor gloves. These are fine by themselves in temperatures above freezing as long as they’re not wet. For colder or wet conditions, I put a pair of Outdoor Research Revel Shell Mitts over them. These waterproof-breathable shells fold up small and are light but make the gloves about twice as warm. They have cords you can loop around your wrists, so that you can easily pull them off and let them dangle from your wrists while you use your gloved hands for your cellphone or other tasks. They aren’t quite as supple as thin liner gloves, but the OR Sensor gloves are very supple and allow you to accomplish most tasks you could do with thin liner gloves.

**NikWax**

Many of my European mountain rescue friends swear by NikWax. Now NikWax is a company that makes lots of different things, including a big line of detergents and treatments for clothing. If you go to any REI store, you’ll find a whole display of NikWax products, including stuff for washing down, for replacing the DWR treatment (durable water-resistant) for softshell garments (which works quite well – I’ve used it on my older softshell garments), etc.

But what the Europeans swear by (and I’ve told myself over and over I’m going to try) are garments specifically made of materials that are waterproofed by a special NikWax wax treatment. Those who hang out in the wet cold of northern England, Wales, Ireland and Scotland (“where we have a wee problem with horizontal precipitation” as my Scottish climbing guide friend Eric Pirie puts it) swear by the stuff. Some are very much into good Gore-Tex, and indeed my Marmot Cairngorm hardshell Gore-Tex parka, designed by Marmot in coordination with the climbing guides at Glenmore Lodge, is one of my prize possessions. (It was my big Christmas present from my wife a few years ago.) But a sizable fraction use the NikWax garments and swear by them. William Lumb, a mountain rescue doctor from the north of England, puts it thusly: after a wet, cold day-trip in the mountains, you can take off your NikWax top, leave on the NikWax bibs, and drive hours back home while still wearing them, in perfect comfort – something seldom done with Gore-Tex bibs. But they nonetheless keep you dry in wet, cold conditions.

Though NikWax is similar to other DWR treatments, the actual wax product, used on specific softshell materials, seems to provide a level of waterproofness and breathability similar to Gore-Tex. Paramo has a big line of softshell NikWax-treated “waterproofs” that are very popular in the UK and Ireland. They are available [online](https://www.nikwax.com). They do require retreatment with the NikWax wax waterproofing solution every couple of years (with average use) but this can be reapplied indefinitely.

I often wonder if the marine climate of the British Isles has something to do with the clothing preferences of British and Irish outdoorspeople – it’s wet and cold, but the change in temperature throughout the day is seldom much, and it’s very rare to have sudden changes in temperature, unlike the more continental climates in the Alps and in many parts of the USA. British and Irish climbers also tend to do lots of day trips and not many multi-day climbs, at least proportional to what happens in the USA, and I wonder if this affects choice of clothing materials. I’d be interested in hearing anyone who uses NikWax-specific “waterproofs” in place of Gore-Tex in the USA.

**Higher-Tech Flash-in-the-Pan: PCMs et al**

People are always trying something new, from battery-operated sock heaters (forget them) to Phase-Change Materials (PCMs) such as Outlast and ComforTemp. PCMs are basically materials that absorb lots of heat when warm (like when you’re struggling up the side of the mountain) and then release it when you get cold (like coming back down). Once when coming down off a snowy peak in the Cairngorms (Scotland) I had a mitten with Outlast in it on one hand and one without on the other hand. It didn’t make a big difference, but it did seem a bit warmer than the other mitten. In 2011, this idea to have gone out of vogue.

In 2005, W.L. Gore also came out with Airvantage: breathable clothing you blow up to make it thicker and warmer when needed. Marmot made an *Echo Airvantage* Vest out of the stuff for $150, and Victorinox a $350 jacket made of the stuff. Supposedly it fluffs up to the same insulation as 200-weight fleece. But I don’t know what kind of insulation it offered before you blew it up, or how much it weighed, or how durable it was, and I suspect it didn’t ventilate at all. By 2011, it seems to have died a natural death.

**Old is New: Wool and ThinShell**
For the first major update in several years (version 2.7, August 2011), I highlighted two new materials that are really old materials: wool and nylon.

Wool is in. As far as I’m concerned, wool has always been in – at least for socks. Socks that are at least partly made from wool are superior to any synthetics. True, they’re smelly when wet, and take a long time to dry compared to synthetics. But unlike synthetics, they keep their spring, and avoid matting down under your foot. And the padding provided by wool under your foot is nothing to sneeze at. A good wool sock can extend by hours the time when the bottom of your feet say “no more”! But wool socks were so scratchy that people hated them. Used to be, everyone wore Ragg wool socks made of hard, scratchy wool, and thin liner socks to protect us from the scratchy Ragg socks. (Don’t believe those who said it was to prevent blisters.) You can buy things called Ragg socks but they’re pale, soft and wimpy imitations of the he-man Ragg socks that were available back in the 1950s and 60s.

Ah, but if your socks are made of a fine merino wool – like expensive dress socks only thicker – they aren’t scratchy! It used to be that only Rohner of Switzerland made merino-wool socks. Merino wool is soft, tough, and expensive. Their socks are great – I almost never wear anything else. But the only place I can get them in the USA is remaindered at sierratradingpost.com, though SocksFox will ship them to me from the UK. Nobody thought that customers in the U.S. would pay the extra for merino wool outdoor socks.

But then in 1994, SmartWool started selling expensive merino wool socks, and they sold like hotcakes. And soon everyone was selling merino-blend socks. The footnote to Cotton mentions Hamlet Socks, which Murray Hamlet developed for the military to prevent blisters.

I think I need to expand a bit on Hamlet Socks.

Murray Hamlet, DVM, was Research Director at the Army Research Institute of Environmental Medicine in Natick, MA in the early 1990s. He was very interested in foot blisters: a big problem in basic training. He researched the available sock systems, including coarse Ragg wool socks with thin, slippery liners (what he and I learned to hike and climb in), and a variety of commercially-available socks. He and his colleagues developed a new military sock that reduced blisters significantly, based in large part on the trekking-sock design of Rohner of Switzerland. This new design featured terrycloth-type loops, like the padding inside many commercial boot socks, but unlike those socks and like the Rohner socks, on the outside of the sock. This allowed most of the movement between foot and boot to occur between this “nap” and the boot, rather than against the foot where the movement and friction heating and damage might cause blistering. Although the socks were made from a fine, soft wool, the terrycloth-like loops on the outside were twisted quite tightly.

In 1992, they tested this prototype using Marine recruits at Parris Island. The new design, with an added thin, slick polyester inner liner sock, was tested against standard Marine socks (a blend of wool, cotton, nylon and Spandex), and against a standard Marine sock with the same thin liner. Recruits with the prototype and liner had a lower blister incidence than recruits with the standard sock (risk ratio=1.8, p<0.01) and recruits with the standard sock with a liner sock (risk ratio=2.0, p<0.01). Subsequent unpublished testing showed that, with the new design, a liner sock was not needed.

You can get military-style socks from military suppliers like TechSpun. You can also buy socks like SmartWools, with a terry-loop nap inside, and wear the socks inside out. However, the loops in most such socks are not twisted as tightly as those in the military “Hamlet Socks” nor in the Rohner socks (which I wear all the time) that provided inspiration for the new military sock design, so it’s not a perfect substitute, but enough to prevent blisters.

Other than Rohner trekking socks, the only socks I’ve found to rival those civilian Hamlet socks are Patagonia’s Ultra Heavyweight Mountaineering Socks, again worn inside-out. The weave is much denser than SmartWool socks, which provides better cushioning under your feet. However, they’re so thick your boots may not fit.

Back in the old days (1950s and 1960s) all outdoorsmen (there were very few outdoorwomen then, and the men were mostly very sexist, so I use the then-contemporary term) in cold-wet conditions wore wool. I did a lot of climbing and backpacking and caving in wool with a ventile cotton parka or caveralls over it.

More recently, several outdoor clothing companies – SmartWool being one – have started selling merino wool clothing, from summer T-shirts to thick winter sweaters. Ibex is the best-known manufacturer of wool outdoor gear. I have one of their vests, but to be truthful, it’s so nice that I wear it with my work clothes all the time (and get compliments on it) and use my Power Stretch vest for true outdoor use.

Aficionados of wool point out that it ventilates better than fleece. And it’s true. This past winter (writing this in 2010), whenever I would go out for a half-day walk or a dayhike, I would wear a wicking baselayer (often one of those Patagonia R 0.5 tops I mentioned above), a thick loose-knit wool sweater, and a wind shell, with hat, mittens or gloves, and a facemask. By unzipping the wind shell, I could let some wind into the sweater and easily ventilate going uphill, and then zip up when on a windy ridge or heading downhill. For fall 2011, Ibex introduced a full-zip version of their thick Guide sweater (I want a full zip for better ventilation and ease in donning and removing), and I got one, as it’s a lot lighter than the “street” wool sweater I wore a lot last winter. From my experience: if unsure which of two sizes to order, order the smaller one, as it’s quite stretchy. Indeed, the Ibex sweaters are extremely stretchy, so they fit you like a glove.


‡ Murray Hamlet, DVM, personal communication.
Makers of synthetic baselayer fabric have struggled for years trying to find the ideal additive or coating to prevent bacterial growth, which causes smell. They’ve tried many things, including silver (which works fair but not great). But wool has its own natural antibacterial effect, which works much better. In 2014, a microbiology research report explained why it’s so hard to keep polyester clothing smelling nice; bacteria called micrococci love to live in polyester, and they stink (nothing personal). From my own personal experimentation, wool T-shirts stay unstinky for 3-4 times as long as synthetic ones. YMMV (your mileage may vary), I don’t have a very strong body odor, but when in the backcountry, I can wear a wool T-shirt for almost a week before it gets smelly.

Backpackinglight.com has a nice review of their testing, using hybrid garments, half wool and half synthetic, as well as lab testing, with background information and lots of graphs. Their bottom line is that wool baselayer takes about twice as long to dry as synthetics, for a given thickness=warth, but that wool felt warmer as it was drying. Wool is also heavier when wet, as it holds more water. Mark Veber did some testing on water retention, providing detailed figures on cotton, wool, and polyester, showing that you can get polyester fleece soaking wet, then wring it out, and it only retains 10% of its weight in water. After wringing out, cotton retains 150% of its weight in water. Wool is in-between. Let me offer an observation on drying wool, though: spinning. If you wash your wool socks, you can get most of the water out of them by holding them by the ends and spinning them around your head for a couple of minutes. Centrifugal force drains out most of the water. (Don’t do this in a crowded room.)

Addendum, May 2105: Ibex and Smartwool (at least) are promoting thin wool garments for summer use. I have a few thin wool T-shirts and bicycle-jersey type tops that I have used extensively in mixed cool-warm conditions, and I’ve been very happy with their performance, indeed, they’re my favorite tops for these conditions. More recently, I’ve tried them in hot, humid conditions, comparing them with thin synthetic-wicking tops. The synthetic tops win, hands-down. Why? Because “wool is warm when wet” whether the wet is from rain or sweat. The synthetic tops cool me off quite a bit better, they not only feel cooler, but you can tell that the sweat is spreading better than with the wool tops.

Full disclosure: there are a few disadvantages to wool. First, though it’s warmer than fleece, it’s heavier. For a given thickness of material, I’d guess that wool is about 2.5 times as heavy and 1.5 times as warm. So, for a given warmth, fleece is lighter. Fleece also retains less water than wool and dries quicker. Wool smells like sheep, especially the better wool like that used by Ibex, and more so when it’s wet. Wool can be scratchy, though the high-quality merino wool used by Ibex and Smartwool is only very minimally scratchy. And, wool isn’t as strong as polyester or cotton. Thin pure wool baselayer lasts about a tenth as long as cotton or polyester. I have had to trash a number of Ibex wool T-shirts as they just fell apart. In 2013-14 Ibex made up a new thread (officially, “yarn” but it’s thin enough your or I would call it thread) with a nylon core. I have a couple of T-shirts made from this yarn, and they do seem a lot more durable. The only downside I see is that they don’t stretch quite as much as thin pure wool baselayer, but they still stretch plenty.

But, as with fleece, quality and construction matter. Interestingly, Ibex wool gear may not be the best in terms of usefulness-to-weight ratios. I’ve got some sort of fluffy-ish wool sweaters that are as thick as my Ibex wool sweater but less than half the weight, likely due to their loose weave, and loose yarn. The Ibex sweater that I have is, however, much, much tougher and likely to last for a long time. One other thing; you can tailor fleece and other artificial fiber materials easily; for instance, I have shortened the sleeves and tightened the wrists on my Capilene 4 zip turtlenecks that I wear a lot. (I have shorter arms and smaller wrists than Patagonia designed into them.) You can’t tailor a knit sweater. However, the Ibex cuffs are designed to turn back to shorten the sleeves if needed, and it is so stretchy that you really don’t need to tighten the wrists even if, like me, you have smaller wrists.

Ibex offered softshell gear. Their gear is basically like other softshells, except that it’s a mixture of artificial fibers (for the outer, wind/water/abrasion resistant layer) and wool, instead of wicking polyester, for the inner layer. They made an Equipo jacket and pants made of material jointly labeled as Schoeller Naturetec and PeakIbex Climawool. I got a pair of the pants, and they’re very, very similar to my Schoeller DrySkin Cloudfell Symmetry pants, except they have a softer hand and better drape. The material has limited four-way stretch. The outer layer has a fairly hard, plastic-y feel, so I suspect it will be quite abrasion-resistant. The pants have an abrasion patch on the medial ankle, and an integrated snow cuff with a gaiter hook. However, the material is pretty thin, so when I use the for deep winter/snow, I’ll be putting on some long underwear first. I also got a pair of the Tuck pants, which are of a slightly different material; it’s about the same thickness as the material used for the Equipo pants, but the outside is quite a bit softer and finer to the hand than the Equipo pants or my original Schoeller DrySkin pants. The material, however, has only 2-way stretch, oriented along the long axis of the legs, and they are cut slim, which might be an issue if you bike a lot and have big thighs (me). They are a bit snug on my thighs but not uncomfortably so. Overall, the Tuck pants are quite light; just a bit over a pound. There is no snow cuff, and no abrasion patches. There is stretch-cord around each of the cuffs, allowing you to snug them tight around your boots. Given how wool is superior to artificial fibers for preventing bacterial growth = smell, I could see wearing these pants on a trek, every day for a couple of weeks.

I and other cavers used to wear Sears wool underwear under our caveralls (caving overalls, either military-surplus flight suits or Sears work coveralls, often with the seats and knees treated with a rubber-cement-like stuff called Canvas-Grip, alas no longer available). The Sears wool underwear was superior to other brands, as it was made from a long-staple north-coast Australian wool that was actually not very scratchy. (I do remember one trip where I was sunburnt and then my wife accidentally spilled sweetened tea on me in the tent, and the combination of sunburn, stickiness from the sugar in the tea...
and the wool underwear was particularly itchy, but I'm sure you'll agree that was an exceptional case…) But the wool in Ragg socks, Dachstein mitts, and particularly some very-hard wool knickers (still in my closet) are quite itchy.

The Swiss company Rohner has made high-quality wool trekking socks since 1933, and I wear them all the time, even as my dress socks, and don’t find them itchy at all. And my daughter (12 years old when I wrote this this) who instantly rejects anything with a trace of itchiness, used to wear inside-out SmartWool socks (I couldn’t find Rohner trekking socks in her size) without complaint, and when she was 14, she started wearing 14, wears Rohner socks and is quite happy with them even as she’s getting ready to go to college.

This brings up another “old is new” – nylon wind shells. Nylon wind shells have been around for years; I had an REI nylon windshell back in the 1960s. It was OK. But things are now changing.

I am going to coin a new phrase (September 2011), and we’ll see if it catches on: ThinShell (or perhaps LightShell). A decade or two ago, SoftShell was all the rage: water-resistant but highly-breathable shells with a wicking construction on the inside. Now, new tough, very thin-and-light, water-resistant and highly-breathable nylon fabrics such as Gossamera make a new kind of shell possible.

Most of the winter of 2010-11, I used an old CloudVeil Cirque jacket. This is a thin nylon shell jacket, DWR (Durable Water-Resistant = mildly water resistant, but very breathable), with a generous hood to accommodate a helmet or hat, a half-zipper in the front, and two big pockets on the front to hold hat, gloves and facemask when going uphill. I found this was fine even in wet snow around freezing; it was water-resistant enough for me to never have resorted to my Gore-Tex shell jacket.

The only thing I really didn’t like about it was that half zip in front. I really wanted a wind shell that would allow me to ventilate better. And I figured that I would be able to get something in a lighter, thinner nylon.

First, I got one of the new, lighter nylon Pertex 685 shells – made by Integral Designs (“Pertex Wind Jacket” – a true, descriptive name for a change). It’s designed to be ultralight. It weighs only 4.6 ounces and will fit into your pocket with room left over. It seems quite breathable and water-resistant enough to keep me dry during some light freezing rain showers. The material, Pertex 685, is impressive stuff. I found this online: Pertex 685 is a 40 denier microfibre ripstop nylon weighing 1.85 oz per square yard. The purpose of this fabric is to use fine filament, closely woven calendered materials to create a low bulk product that is windproof, water repellent and breathable. Pertex 685 is constructed using the same DWR + technology as Pertex Microlight (see above). However, the 40 denier base fabric is more robust and abrasion resistant than Microlight, making it the fabric of choice as a shell fabric for Primaloft insulated clothing. It’s about twice the weight of Pertex Quantum, which is used for down gear linings.

However, it has no pockets for my gloves and hat. And, the hood’s front closure is bizarre – to save weight, it merely has some elastic around it, no actual drawcord. That means that when the wind comes up – and remember, this is supposed to be a windshell – that the wind comes in around your head and chills your head and neck, and there’s just no way to prevent this. I was unhappy enough with it – bad hood design, no pockets for my gloves and hat – that I relegated it to emergency use as a loaner and it went into the back of my car. I also later found it had basically zero resistance to real rain.

Next, I got an Arc’teryx Squamish Hoodie, which I think is more designed for warm-weather use than my intended use as an outer shell for the winter. I got a large so it would fit over my heavy sweater or a couple of layers of fleece. It has a great hood design with a drawstring closure with hidden ends to avoid them slapping you in the face when windy. Velcro wrist closures with just enough stretch to get on without undoing the Velcro, excellent tailoring and design overall, and a full front zip for ventilation. It only has one pocket in front, and it’s a tight squeeze to get a facemask, hat and gloves in there, but I can make it work. If they would only add a second breast pocket, it would be a perfect winter shell.

Most interestingly, the Squamish is made of Gossamera, a very light micro-ripstop nylon with a very thin urethane coating on the inside and DWR (durable water-resistant) coating on the outside. It has an air permeability of 7 cubic feet/minute, similar to Pertex Quantum’s 5 cfm. It has a harder finish than Pertex Quantum, which is quite soft, but it’s not noisy like some hard-finish nylon. Despite being as light as gossamer, it really seems quite tough, though I’m not sure I’d do a long climb on rough rock wearing it. In practice, it seems quite breathable, much more so than my HyVent North Face ultralight Gore-Tex-equivalent pullover (to which I added pit zips).

Like the Pertex wind jacket, the Squamish has a DWR finish, but the Squamish’s seems much more effective. I once put on the Squamish and went for an hour-long walk in a mild to moderate cold rain. At the end, when I took off the jacket and looked at the inside, there was a little water coming in the seams, and just a bit of water coming through the shoulders, but really only a tad more than I would expect from condensation inside a Gore-Tex jacket. I liked it so much I also got one in size small to carry in the summer, and it certainly sheds water a lot better than the Pertex shell. I even seam-sealed the shoulder and hood seams on my small one.

This Gossamera wind shells are about half the weight of my old nylon CloudVeil Cirque windshirt, more water-resistant, more wind-resistant, seem to be tougher and just as breathable, and are full-zip. I’m very pleased with them. As with anything made by Arc’teryx, they are relatively expensive (~$150), but the design and tailoring are impeccable.

This combination: a wicking layer, covered by a highly-breathable merino wool layer, covered by a ThinShell of Gossamera, is in my opinion a better solution than a softshell jacket in many ways. The most important is weight; using wool
rather than fleece adds some weight but using a Gossamerast shell instead of a “wicking” softshell saves a lot more weight.

Eventually, we will have fabrics that have a permanent DWR finish as part of the yarn from which the fabric is made, as shown by a report in the New Scientist. At that point, semipermeable membranes like Gore-Tex may become a thing of the past, like my Ventile cotton anorak and 60/40 parka.

So. ThinShell is in. Wool and nylon are dead. Long live wool and nylon!

Addendum, October 2011: My wife and daughter and dog and I were on a hike in Shenandoah National Park. It snowed 2 inches the first morning, and then a fairly hard and quite cold rain ensued for most of the day. I think the high was a bit less than 40°F. In addition to this being good hypothermia training for my 12-year old daughter, I should note that I wore my Squamish windshirt rather than my Gore-Tex parka. My wife wore a Lowe Triple Point Ceramic (Lowe Gore-Tex clone) parka. However, my non-seam-sealed Squamish windshirt kept me drier than her waterproof-breathable parka. Not sure if this was from condensation (though she had her front zipper open quite a bit to ventilate) or simply from water coming through. Under the Squamish I had a Patagonia 0.5 top, two Power Stretch pullovers, and a Cloudveil FirsTurn softshell jacket made of their Cyclone material.

After the days’ hiking, the Cloudveil FirsTurn jacket – the first layer under the Gossamerast windshirt – was barely damp in October 2012. However, it was sunny all week with highs in the 60’s so it wasn’t much of a test!

One other thought about keeping dry in cold-wet conditions: heat. When you’re active, you generate a lot of heat. This generates an outward pressure to move water away from you, unless blocked by an impermeable layer. And Gore-Tex and its clones, even when dry, are relatively impermeable layers, whereas the Gossamerast windshirt is relatively permeable to water vapor. So, my rave reviews about this windshirt should be taken with a grain of salt. If you’re not active – just sitting there, for instance in a bivouac – then likely Gore-Tex would keep you warmer and drier in the rain.

I’ve used the Gossamerast jacket in a downpour, and it kept me pretty dry, except for the slight leakage at the seams and a small bit on the shoulders. I also just (February 2012) used my small Gossamerast jacket on a trip to Disney World, with my preteen daughter and wife, and wore it on a trip to the Kali River Rapids. On this, you get hit with high-velocity water, including that sprayed by the people on the bridge above who can press a little button to make the decorative elephants on either side squirt you with water. I found that the high-velocity water defeated the DWR coating, in that the material wetted, rather than the water beading up. This meant it took longer to dry. However, I really didn’t get wet inside the jacket. I like this material, and the excellent Arc’teryx tailoring, the more I use it. BTW, I was able to get pants made out of Gossamerast, but only from a tactical rather than an outdoor supplier. Like the jacket, the pants will fit into a pants pocket, and weighs about 4 ounces (120g). Means that for a weight of half a pound you have a solid nontechnical wind suit/rain suit. I’ve since (2016 or so) switched to the Outdoor Research Helium ultralight rainpants, made out of Pertex Shield+, which weigh and bulk about the same but are much more water-resistant. And my legs don’t sweat as much as my upper body so, in pants, water vapor permeability is much less important.

May 2013: North Face has a Verto Jacket made out of Pertex Quantum GL, which is even lighter than Gossamerast; it’s about 2/3 the thickness and 2/3 the weight, but I’m not sure how water-resistant it is compared to the Gossamerast. I did note that my Gossamerast jacket, after a couple of years of quite frequent use, is getting wetted more easily in the rain, so I sprayed some ScotchGard on the hood and shoulders. No tears, pulls or signs of abrasion.

**Combination Yarns**

Ibex manufactured some thin wool baselayer garments and touted them for wear even in the summer. I have several different models of their thin/baselayer T-shirts, and I have to say that I’m sold on them for three-season use. The only problem is that wool that is so thin is really quite fragile. Three of my Ibex wool T-shirts have gotten holes or runs in just a couple years of use. But in 2014 Ibex developed a new material, made from a yarn (thread) that has a nylon core with wool around it. As I wrote this, I was wearing a zip T-shirt/bicycle jersey of it. Not quite as stretchy as the pure wool, but still quite stretchy. I suspect this will be much longer-lasting than my other Ibex wool T-shirts (2018: it didn’t last much longer), one of which had to be trashed and another of which will likely be there soon. Ibex is also in 2015 or so mde a version with wool around a Lycra core I have a T-shirt of this which (2018) I wear all the time. Ibex calls it “W2” (for “weightless wool”) and I love this stuff for three-season wear. It is by far my favorite upper-body baselayer, and it seems, relative to the other Ibex wool tops, quite durable. I’ve found that even when schlepping around home, I can wear one of these wool tops for about 5 days without it smelling; after that long, even though it’s not smelling, it feels a bit oily and dirty and I’ll wash it. I have a couple of long-sleeve zip turtlenecks of this W2, and I just cut off the sleeves to make them into T-shirts. Why? In cold weather, I prefer a thin baselayer, so I can really strip down when I get too hot. But the long sleeves don’t add much warmth and make it hard to layer: When I get a bit hot, I like to partly unzip the layer just outside my baselayer and to push up the sleeves above my elbows. And long sleeves on the baselayer make this hard. So, my favorite tops are short
sleeve with zip necks. Being able to open even my baselayer’s neck really helps me cool off when overheating heading uphill.

I was really bummed when Ibex went out of business. They failed in 2017, and their assets are being auctioned off as I type this. In 2018, there are two other companies still making high-end merino wool outdoor clothing: Smartwool and IceBreaker of Auckland, New Zealand. Since I couldn’t get any more zip-neck short-sleeve merino tops from Ibex (my very favorite top baselayer), I tried ordering an Icebreaker Cool-Lite Strike Lite short sleeve half zip top from them. The Cool-Lite fabric is a mix of 50% merino wool, 33% Tencel, 12% nylon, and 5% Lycra. I am wearing this as I type these words. It stretches to about 150% in circumference, and to about 25% in up-down length. It’s pretty soft, but just a bit rough and not as comfy against the skin as my older Ibex W2 tops; perhaps that’s just because it’s brand new. It is very thin; they call it “150 weight.” I will report back once I’ve worn it for a few months.

A company called Optimer patented a new type of yarn called Dri-Release (aka drirelease). Like Ibex, they use two different fiber types in the same yarn. Ibex wraps wool around a core of nylon or spandex to make the yarn stronger. But Optimer twists different fibers together in the same yarn, fibers that have different wicking and water retention properties. Roughly 80-90% of the yarn is polyester fibers, and about 10-20% of the fibers are “natural” fibers.

To make it wick better, other companies have applied coatings to polyester yarn. This wasn’t very satisfactory, as the coating wore off after a certain number of washings. More recently, companies are applying permanent wicking coatings to polyester yarn. Akwatek is the most prominent brand of such permanent wicking treatments.

However, Optimer is treating their yarns, not to make them more wicking, but to make them less wicking. (This is the same as “making them less hydrophilic and more hydrophobic”). However, they only treat with enough of this material – Teflon and related compounds – to partially coat the polyester and “natural” fibers. Indeed, that partial treatment of the fibers is part of their patent.

Optimer seems to be combining polyester with 10-20% of any other “natural” fiber they can get hold of, up to and including bamboo; I suspect the main advantage of bamboo is that you can tell people your underwear is made out of bamboo. As discussed in the Wikipedia article on bamboo textiles, there are many questionable claims for bamboo fabric. The most common “natural” fiber they use, judging by what retailers sell, is cotton. But note that the cotton as well as the polyester are partially waterproofed.

The central advantage, as expressed in their patent application, is that this decreases the amount of water the material will hold. Less water = quicker drying; they point out that their fabric dries more quickly than CoolMax Extreme and some other wicking fabrics (though they don’t compare to DrySkin, my favorite wicking softshell). Indeed, drying time is important for comfort when I stop at the top of a climb, I want my sweaty garments to dry quickly, as I cool off quickly and want to be dry sitting on top and on the way down.

But does it get the water away from your skin? Does it “wick?” Or does your skin stay all sweaty inside a drirelease garment? There are a few individual evaluations of drirelease garments that note that they do, indeed, wick – or perhaps pass through — moisture quite well.

The patent application goes on and on about “water release” instead of “wick.” I am not sure this is anything more than patent-lawyer obfuscation. The patent application also goes on and on about how much money we will all save by having clothes that dry faster in the dryer. Does quick-drying also mean wicking? A plastic leaf bag dries quickly but certainly doesn’t wick.

Well, in the patent application, Optimer cites some research they did, where one (1) person exercised, both mildly and strenuously. In both cases, the test subject wore a pair of liner socks under thicker outer cotton socks. One of the liners was treated with dilute Teflon, the other was not. After exercise, the outer cotton socks were weighed to determine the moisture content. With both mild and strenuous exercise, there was more water in the outer cotton sock, showing that the Teflon treatment improved wicking. The subject also noted that the foot with the Teflon-treated liner sock felt drier.

There are a few independent single-person test reports on the web that tend to confirm that the fabric does indeed wick quite well. It’s not clear to me that any one combination is superior to the other; I would love to see some testing of the different variants. I would suspect that the polyester/cotton or polyester/wool would be best. The wool would help prevent it from smelling. The cotton would wick better. However, note that the hydrophobic treatment is applied to the cotton as well as the polyester.

Optimer says that their fabrics have the trademarked-but-not-patented FreshGuard to prevent the fabric from getting smelly. On investigation, this seems likely to be a function of the Teflon and related stuff with which they treat the yarn. Teflon is hydrophobic – water doesn’t stick to it – but it’s also lipophobic – grease and oil don’t stick to it. Which is why you may have a nonstick frying pan coated with the stuff. The hydrophobic quality of this Teflon treatment is what keeps drirelease from retaining water (but the remaining wicking of the small amount of non-coated cotton probably provides enough wicking). The lipophobic quality of this Teflon treatment is what likely helps keep down odors. Smelly clothing comes mostly from oils from our skin getting into the material and then being decomposed by bacterial. The Teflon keeps the oils from sticking to the material. One independent tested noted his drirelease/wool pants getting a bit smelly after three days. Another independent tester reported online that he rated a drirelease/wool shirt as a 7/10 for odor-resistance, with 10 being pure wool, and one being the original untreated polyester.

8 They coat fibers with a polytetrafluoroethylene, polyvinyl acetate, and polyvinyl acetate/acrylic copolymer.

http://www.google.com/patents/US20040185728
polypro underwear (very smelly after just one day). So, not too bad.

Another question still to be answered: does this yarn retain its warmth when wet, like wool or other all-polyester materials? One would suspect so, given their numbers on how little water the yarn absorbs.

In 2015 Allegheny Mountain Rescue Group got new summer uniform T-shirts of dri-release which are 85% poly and 15% cotton. The material feels much more like a good quality cotton than polyester. April 2015: we had an evening canine training in the rain, with temperature about 55°F (13°C) and wore the uniform T-shirt under a Malden Powerstretch sweater and a Gore-Tex parka. The T-shirt seemed to wick quite well, and felt quite dry the entire time, except slightly damp in the underarms. I’m very impressed.

Insects

Ticks. Mosquitoes. Biting black flies. None of us like feeding insects with our blood. (OK, ticks are arachnids and not insects. Doesn’t matter for what we’re discussing here)

The traditional way to protect yourself is to slather your exposed skin with DEET or another insect repellent. (I prefer picaridin = Natrapel. See www.conovers.org/ftp/Ticks.pdf for more on insect repellents.)

However, a reasonable alternative, or perhaps we should say a reasonable complement to putting picaridin on your skin, is to have clothing that is treated with the insect repellent permethrin.

But first, a bit of pedantic terminology modification: permethrin is often talked about as an insect repellent, but it’s not, it’s actually an insecticide. But it’s quite a safe insecticide to put on clothing, unless you have a pet tarantula, or if you dump it in the aquarium with your pet fish. It kills insects and arachnids but has minimal effects on humans, and is not well-absorbed from human skin. (It can be toxic to cats in large commercial-insecticide concentrations, so keep them away from it.)

You probably don’t want to put it on your skin on a regular basis to prevent insect bites, as you’d eventually develop some toxicity. It is OK to put it on your skin for a short time; putting 5% permethrin on your skin from the neck down at night, then washing it off in the morning, is the standard treatment for scabies. An over-the-counter permethrin shampoo is also available for treating head lice. Permethrin also works for chiggers = sand fleas, a common ankle mite infestation from walking barefoot on certain beaches.

For preventing tick bites (and probably black fly and mosquito bites through thin clothing) you can treat your clothing with permethrin. Stores such as Dick’s Sporting Goods and REI carry spray-on permethrin. Turns out that you can prevent 75% of tick bites by simply treating your socks with permethrin. Treating your pants gets you even better protection. Since ticks climb up you from the ground, treating just your socks and pants will get you quite good protection.

When you apply permethrin to your clothing at home, it lasts for 6 washings or 6 weeks. But you can get clothing treated commercially using a specific formulation of permethrin that binds to the fibers of clothing; it’s called Insect Shield. It reportedly will last through 70 washings, which they state is the typical life of an outdoor garment. (I don’t know about that, as I’m writing this I’m wearing a pair of Cloudveil Symmetry pants, which were the first softshell pants marketed in the US. I’ve had them since maybe 1995 (20 years) and they’re still going strong, a testament to the durability of Schoeller’s first Dryskin fabric. I wear them a lot. I suspect they have been washed many more than 70 times.)

Where to Learn More

Mark Verber has a fairly long page with detailed discussion and specific recommendations for different types of outdoor clothing at www.verber.com/mark/outdoors/gear/clothing.html. Backpacking Light has a (now paywalled) page with the names and lineages of breathable fabrics, but without detailed information on most fabrics. There are websites at www.gearreview.com and www.backpackgeartest.org that feature detailed reviews of many pieces of outdoor clothing, some with comments about their materials. The current Crestone Designs has a page about the fabrics they use.

There are zillions of different brand names listed here, and so in this document – no matter how overwhelming it might seem – I just try to hit the high points. There are many, many outdoor garment manufacturers. The ones I know well and/or like are listed as links in the footnotes. Because there are so many good outdoor clothing materials, each garment manufacturer has to choose just a few fabrics. Thus, if you shop around, you can find many similar garments in different materials. The fabric and garment manufacturers use the same name for many different fabrics, and sometimes a single fabric has more than one name, and sometimes they keep the same name but change the fabric. Sigh.
### Keith’s Picks in Bold

**Against the Skin Everyday Clothing**

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<th>Warmth (not per weight)</th>
<th>Warmth when wet</th>
<th>Water resistance</th>
<th>Wind resistance</th>
<th>Abrasion resistance</th>
<th>Stretch</th>
<th>Wicking and sweaty</th>
<th>Resistance to pilling</th>
<th>Thorn-pull resistance</th>
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<th>thorn-pull resistance</th>
<th>Speed of Drying</th>
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### Layering and Sleeping Bag Materials

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### Underwear Materials

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<td>Other polyester</td>
<td>++++</td>
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### Unique Clothing Materials

- crystalline alkanes
- gel-bead bandannas
- treated leather

### NOTES:


Clothing textiles protect our human body against external factors. These textiles are not sterile and can harbor high bacterial counts as sweat and bacteria are transmitted from the skin. We investigated the microbial growth and odor development in cotton and synthetic clothing fabrics. T-shirts were collected from 26 healthy individuals after an intensive bicycle spinning session and incubated for 28h before analysis. A trained odor panel determined significant differences between polyester versus cotton fabrics for the hedonic value, the intensity and five qualitative odor characteristics. The polyester T-shirts smelled significantly less pleasant and more intense, as compared to the cotton T-shirts. A dissimilar bacterial growth was found in cotton versus synthetic clothing textiles. Micrococcii were isolated in almost all synthetic shirts and were detected almost solely on synthetic shirts by means of DGGE fingerprinting. A selective enrichment of micrococcii in an in vitro growth experiment confirmed the presence of these species on polyester. Staphylococcii were abundant on both cotton and synthetic fabrics. Corynebacteria were not enriched on any textile type. This research found that the composition of clothing fibers promotes differential growth of textile microbes and, as such, determines possible malodor generation.

2. Schoeller Dynamic: My pick for pants and thin jacket for mild conditions. Cloudveil used to make nice pants ("Maverick") and a pullover.

3. Schoeller Dryskin Somewhat thicker than Dynamic, and ideal for cool conditions. The Cloudveil Symmetry pants made out of Schoeller Dryskin Extreme used to be the best pants I've ever had, perfect for inside, outside, wherever, a very wide comfort range; they have only been superseded by the REI Acme pants, made of a 15-year-newer generation of Schoeller Dryskin. The Cloudveil
Serendipity jacket is a great all-around jacket. Dry skin is stretchy enough to be quite comfortable – I’ve found that I wear a size smaller than normal (small instead of medium) and the pants don’t bind at all. There used to be Dryskin, then Dryskin Extreme, then Dryskin Extrem with 3XDry – all just marketese for minor improvements in the fabric. The ratings here reflect the 2013 version, such as in the REI Acme pants, which is thinner and stretchier and more wind- and water-resistant and thorn-pull resistant than the original.

Schoeller WB-400 is a bit like their Dryskin but with a layer of rubbery foam covered by fleece inside. Mountain Gear used to offer a Cloudwalker vest/bib and a top of this material. It is reputedly rated 1-3 CFM (cubic feet per minute) air permeability so very windproof. Compared with Dryskin it’s warmer, heavier, not as stretchy, not as breathable, but more snag-resistant. It looks as though now it’s relegated to knuckle patches on gloves, and an occasional pair of pants (Outdoor Research made some) and jacket (Cloudveil makes one). Schoeller F-Shell seems to be similar. There seems to be a trend (e.g., the Cloudveil Rayzar jacket) to use WB-400 in the shoulders of jackets for better rain resistance.

Polartec Power Stretch Cordura: Crestone Designs offers tops and bottoms of this material, which I haven’t tried. They also will make custom-fitted clothing of many Polartec fabrics. Anyone who’s tried this material please let me know how you like it.

Polartec Powershield This is a combination of 100-weight Polartec fleece combined with a breathable barrier (Gore-Tex equivalent) and stretch nylon/Lycra outside. The garments made of it seemed way too heavy to me, but I’m sure they’re bombproof in bad weather.

Gore Windstopper and Malden WindBloc: Both the Gore and Malden wind-blocking fleece seem a bit silly – the nice thing about fleece is that it is stretchy and porous, and works nicely under a shell garment. They seem especially silly, since the fleece is on the outside where it does virtually no good. Theories for this include (1) fashion, and (2) protection of the wind-blocking layer from abrasion. The Malden Windblok, in my opinion, has it all over the Gore Windstopper. Winblok is stretchier by far. And Windstopper feels, well, yucky against the skin, though it has gradually improved to where it is only mildly yucky against the skin. Malden now has Windblok ACT, which only blocks 98% of the wind, to allow better ventilation. They also have WindPro which is a somewhat wind-resistant fleece. Gore came out with “WindStopper N2S” (next to skin), thereby admitting the yuckiness of Windstopper, but it’s quite thin. Except for gloves, stick with Malden or Schoeller for wind-resistant fleecy stuff.

Malden Aqua Shell (AKA Thermal Stretch) This material was made for whitewater sports and sailing and perhaps diving – it’s touted as a replacement for 2.5/3 mm neoprene wetsuit materials. Gotten some good reviews for diving in warmer water. By 2011 seems to have disappeared.

Malden Thermal Shield I suspect this is the new name for a stretchier Aqua Shell. Used by Serius in non-seam-sealed gloves. Holds water against the skin and slow-drying, but excellent in gloves for windy days.

Inertia: is a proprietary softshell fabric from Cloudveil. Think of the drape and “hand” of a pullover made of fine, tightly-weaved but very soft long-staple cotton. Inertia is soft, flexible, feels very nice to the hand but is highly wind-resistant, quiet, very tough, very thin, wicking – everything you wanted your nylon windshell to be but it wasn’t. Very nice stuff. Any downsides? Not very stretchy (about 1.15%) compared to, say, Power Stretch. Not quite as windproof as Dryskin. North Face has their thin softshell (Apex) that feels similar, and Schoeller has (2006) a Dynamic Extreme, which seems to have a much softer hand than the original Dynamic, and is stretchier; I got a pair of REI short gaiters made of Schoeller Dynamic Extreme, but I haven’t tried any large garments of it. However, I have a small Prospector jacket from Cloudveil that’s made out of Inertia Plus fabric of 2005-6 vintage, and it’s rapidly becoming one of my favorite jackets. Seems significantly better than the larger Prospector hooded jacket I got two years previously as the Inertia got thicker but also much more wind- and water-resistant. The Prospector hood didn’t have a drawstring around the hood opening (bizarre) and so I added one myself. But the newer Inertia cloth has the hand of a fine, well-worn cotton with a soft, wicking internal layer, enough stretch to make a difference (though again still not like Power Stretch) and a very durable outer shell. Moderately wind-resistant, moderately waterproof, and very breathable.

For many of its softshell jackets, Cloudveil switched from Schoeller fabric to Cyclone Plus, a softshell fabric proprietary to Cloudveil (I wonder if Schoeller makes it for them?) Their Cyclone Plus FirsTurn jacket won a Gear of the Year award from Outside Magazine in 2009. Cyclone Plus started as a mix of spandex and polyester with fleece on the inside, very similar to Schoeller DrySkin, but not as stretchy. The 2011 version of Cyclone now incorporated some wool as well.

Patagonia Tactile Aspira: a fabric from Dupont very similar to Schoeller WB-400.

GORE-TEX Soft Shell II Masai is a waterproof shell outer with a laminated 100-weight fleece liner, introduced in the winter 2004-200. Berghaus was the first to make a parka made of the material. See the text. It’s not really a soft-shell like the other materials, as it’s not stretchy at all. It’s just fuzzy.

Helly-Hansen Pile: the original pile (see text above table)
Non-Helly-Hansen Pile copies of Helly-Hansen pile by other companies used different, non-knit base (basically, glued); they pilled a lot, matted down after a while. Not as good as the patented original Helly-Hansen stuff.

Malden Polartec 100-micro, 100, 200, 300, Bipolar, DWR, High Void Grid, Regulator, Thermal Pro, Thermal-FR (flame-resistant), Aircore-200, Lattice, Monkey Phur, etc.

Marmot Outlast is a type of thick pile for gloves, but with tiny beads of wax embedded in the material – the idea is that the beads absorb heat when your hands are warm and then reradiate it to your hands when they are cold. I would have said that this was a bizarre and unworkable idea but it really does seem to work. A friend who’s an instructor at the Scottish National Outdoor Center at Glenmore Lodge has tried alternating them with similar gloves during winter climbs – and the hand with the Outlast glove always stayed warmer. I tried one of his Outlast gloves on a winter trip near Cairngorm and indeed, it really seemed to work, at least a bit.

Malden Power Stretch (and Power Stretch RX, and Special Edition Power Stretch 9400)

Very, very stretchy, bipolar construction for wicking. I loaned my Power Stretch pullover to a colleague during a wet-cold Wilderness EMT exercise where he was a victim. He liked it so much I had a very hard time getting it back! This stuff is as stretchy as Spandex – or maybe more so. As with Schoeller Dryskin, I’ve found I wear a small instead of a medium as I usually do. It is so stretchy that getting pullovers on and off is very easy. Used for layering usually right over a fishnet (mesh) CoolMax shirt, or a Patagonia R .5 top, and with a shell over it when needed, this stuff is great. Indeed, Malden Mills markets it as an against-the-skin fabric, and it’s indeed comfortable that way, though it doesn’t wick as well as a true baselayer like Capilene.

Cloudveil makes a very nice Run Don’t Walk pullover and vest (I have both and wear them all the time); and Crestone Designs makes a variety of garments out of Power Stretch 100 – I particularly like Crestone’s designs as they all include lots of long zippers for ventilation, which I think is very important. For women, Crestone even makes bra tops of Power Stretch 100.

Toesteesocks makes custom whole-body suits that are great under a caving suit; mine is quite comfortable even when wet; BTW, for a shell over this, the best custom caving suits are from B&C Wunderwear.

Although Malden’s website used to show Polartec 100/200/300 having mild-moderate wind resistance and Power Stretch having moderate wind resistance, really this stuff isn’t very wind resistant, even the Power Stretch. Nonetheless it make a great layering material – very stretchy, very comfortable.

The original Power Stretch has been gradually improved, first a version with a durable water-repellent treatment, then treated with silver to prevent bacterial growth that causes bad odors. In the summer of 2002, I got some garments from Lowe Alpine Systems (their MultiPro line) made of Special Edition Power Stretch 9400 which is different from “standard” Power Stretch in that the fuzzy inner layer is only about 1/4 there: it’s a series of “dots” that hold the garment away from the skin. This makes a bit smaller packaging and lighter garment with a bit less insulation but a better warmth/weight ratio than standard Power Stretch. I’m tried this stuff under a variety of conditions and it seems to work pretty well, but I like the Patagonia R1 and R .5 a bit better, perhaps because I bought it a couple of years later and Malden’s technology improved.

All in all, Power Stretch is recommended highly.

From DashAmerica, Inc.: a cheaper and not as stretchy clone of Malden Power Stretch. Pearl Izumi uses it in bicycle clothing.

Parameta-S from Paramo is an interesting material, or at least interesting marketing. This is a bipolar material, hydrophilic on one side and hydrophobic on the other. The interesting twist is that it’s reversible clothing – wear the fleecy side, which is like a fine plush velour, against your skin for warmth. The plush velour fleece is hydrophobic, but the hydrophilic outer layer attracts moisture away from the skin (sort of like DriClime – if you dip the material in water then feel it, the plush side feels dry). If you find it too warm, you take it off and put it back on inside out. Nice idea, but you can tell that, because they ship them with the plush on the outside and the pockets on the outside only, that you’re expected to wear it mostly with the plush side inside. But I must admit, wearing it inside out when you’re sweating a bit makes it a bit cooler and more comfortable. They make a Mountain Shirt that’s a pullover with a snap mock turtleneck and sleeves designed for reaching above your neck (I have one I got in the UK; I wear it for walking the dog and the odd half-day hike, but it’s not stretchy like Power Stretch, so I don’t use it for true outdoor pursuits), and a Trail Shirt that’s cut on a standard shirt design with a collar and a full set of front snaps. Interesting and different, but not on a par with Power Stretch (and it’s about the same as Power Stretch without the stretch), Power Dry or Scholler Dryskin Extreme.

Waterproof Zippers I first saw these on Arc’Teryx packs, but now they’re appearing everywhere. Arc’Teryx calls them WaterTight zips, and Mountain Hardware calls the Simplex zips, and YKK (who makes them) calls them Reverso zippers. Regardless of the name, they allow manufacturers to eliminate flaps over zippers. Though the waterproof zippers are stiff compared with non-waterproof zippers, they’re flexible enough, at least on rainpants, that they do cut down on bulk and weight without impeding movement. In 2004 or so, I was finally able to get some of these zippers from Quest Outfitters, and sew them into some of my existing parkas as pit zips. Very nice.
Nylon Retains a feeling of warmth next to skin, while still allowing lots of heat through; bad against the skin (cold in winter, uncomfortable in summer). Tactel is DuPont/Invista’s tradename for its nylon, and Tactel Aquator is their tradename for a special construction of nylon with a bipolar construction – the only thing I could find that was made out of this stuff was a dress riding shirt, no outdoor garments, and the Dupont site had little information other than that it’s a bipolar sweat-moving fabric. It seems to have disappeared somewhat about 2005. However, there has been a gradual change in nylon over the years – the fibers of the thread are getting smaller, providing a better “hand” and less of a rustle when walking, and making it more comfortable against the skin. For instance, I have a couple pair of very nice Mountain Hardwear nylon pants, made from a very soft but quick-drying nylon. Some of these are zip-off pants that turn into shorts, and some are extremely light yet still quite comfortable and durable.

Ex-Officio is now using a material called DryFlyLite (no kidding) that is 80% Nylon / 20% Polyester

Also, see the Supplex Nylon below, and the section “Old is New” above the table about Gossamer.

Silynol is nylon coated with silicone. The older K-Cote treated nylon was waterproof, but the coating was heavy, it flaked off after a few years of use, and if packed wet, or after a few years in the basement even if not wet, started smelling like an overripe herring. But modern silicone-coated nylon is very light, very tough, doesn’t delaminate, and smells only like whatever you spill on it. Nextec Epic (Nextec is the company, Epic is the treatment/material), AKA EncapSIL, works a bit similarly to Gore-Tex, but instead of a laminated membrane, Epic consists of a coating applied to the fibers of the fabric itself—the silicone coats the fibers themselves, leaving holes the right size to pass water vapor but small enough to not pass liquid water. Seems similar to Pertex in that it’s not as waterproof as Gore-Tex (Gore-Tex is >40 PSI waterproof, but Epic is reportedly only ~1 PSI waterproof), but very windproof and very breathable, and reputedly it will last longer than Gore-Tex or DWR coatings. Does not stretch, but very light. Wild Things used to use Epic in many of its garments, as Mountain Hardwear still does. Gossamer (see text above table) is most interesting recent evolution of nylon: very light, reasonably tough, water-resistant, windproof, breathable.

Supplex is DuPont/Invista’s trade name for microfiber nylon. I’ve had good experiences in cool, rainy weather in Ireland and Scotland with wearing Supplex nylon clothing from Ex-Officio over some thin wicking layer of underwear – many of Ex-Officio’s shirts are ventilated with mesh inserts. RailRiders offers Supplex nylon shirts and pants that have even more ventilation in the form of CoolMax mesh inserts. Their EcoMesh pants have zippers that close over the CoolMax inserts, allowing a degree of control over warmth/ventilation – however even though I am not all that fat around the middle, I found that the EcoMesh pants that fit my waist were way too long, and with the zippers the way they are they’re a pain to tailor.

Spandura A combination of Lycra and Cordura nylon. Outdoor Research used to make a variety of garments, especially pants, out of Spandura. Not very comfortable against the skin, and my Spandura pants caused bleeding abrasions on the back of the knees after a day of climbing or hiking, but stretchy and tough. Mine lie unused in the bottom of one of my dresser drawers, which is likely why all the outdoor clothing manufacturers seemed to have stopped using it.

Supplex Ripstop Nylon As with Intera shirts, the combination of a ripstop-style weave with a wicking coating on the fibers makes this stuff a lot more comfortable against the skin than non-ripstop nylon and Supplex nylon materials. A Supplex ripstop-texture shirt from LL Bean (that they don’t offer any more) is my favorite for really wet weather; tough, and unlike plain supplex, the ripstop texture means it doesn’t stick to my skin when wet.

Gore-Tex et al I include here Gore-Tex and all the various similar fabrics, now that the original patent has expired. Please email with similar fabrics you’ve seen and I’ll add them here. Of particular interest is the Gore-Tex XCR fabric which is just as waterproof as classic Gore-Tex but 25% more breathable, or at least so they say; also their Paclite which is a very thin but durable lighter-weight Gore-Tex, Cloundveil (Dermizax) and Marmot (MemBrain) have stretchy-versions of Gore-Tex, but they’re really not that stretchy compared to some of the other fabrics available now. Also note Gore-Tex Windstopper which competes directly with the Malden Mills WindBloc fleece fabric. I personally find the idea of a windproof layer INSIDE of a wool or pile or fleece layer one of the stupidest things I’ve ever seen of. (Every heard of Bloody Stupid Johnson in Terry Pratchett’s Discworld novels? He must have designed these fabrics.)

Gore-Tex et al Abrasion Resistance The abrasion resistance of Gore-Tex and Pertex and similar waterproof/breathable materials (generally some form of expanded polytetrafluoroethylene = PTFE = Teflon) is nil. The abrasion resistance is entirely dependent on whatever it’s laminated to. Some of the materials are simply thin nylon (I have an LL Bean nylon-Gore-Tex parka like this that folds up into almost nothing) but are not suitable for abrasion on rocks – others, such as parkas made by Patagonia, Marmot, Cloundveil, Arcteryx and other top-end suppliers, are much more abrasion resistant. One of the most interesting variants is something called ToddTex – developed by Todd Bibler for Bibler tents. It has a fuzzy internal laminate that works like a built-in frost liner. Nice stuff, but fragile – I’ve had to repair some abraded holes in my Bibler Torre tent where something rubbed against the ToddTex. Pertex and similar materials sacrifice some waterproofness for breathability. I have a British-style bivouac shelter (a Terra Nova Bothy 4, from Cotswold Outdoor Equipment, who will sell these by email) of Pertex, which is very light but provides a sort of floorless tent to throw over four people (four very friendly people, or two if you want room to eat lunch in the rain). The Pertex is waterproof enough that
you won’t notice any rain coming through compared to the condensation, even with two vents. Terra Nova now also offers lighter but more expensive SilNylon versions. These shelters are great for day-hikes in marginal weather and high terrain, or for wilderness first aid to quickly shelter an injured person.

**Gore-Tex et al Stretch** There are a few stretchy Gore-Tex-like materials on the market. None of them stretch much compared to, say, Malden Mills’ Polartec Power Stretch, or Spandura. Cloudveil, for instance, made a pair of pants that look like regular pants but were stretchy (slightly), waterproof yet breathable. The material is called Dermizax Stretch Light (where DO they get these names?) and it’s called the Snaz line, they also make a parka. I’ve tried the pants in the rain a couple of times, they’re OK, but you still sweat in them, a lot. Remember that Gore-Tex covered with water doesn’t breathe. But with intermittent wind and rain, these pants are pretty nice. And they stretch enough to be better than most rainpants (although my Arcteryx rainpants that have waterproof zips up the side are very, very nice, and roll up quite small for good sturdy rainpants). I use my Snaz pants when I’m going out for a hike in cool weather and I know it’s going to rain all day.

**Pertex et al** This includes a variety of similar fabrics—a fairly open PTFE layer bonded to some other fabric, which is water-resistant (not waterproof like the original Gore-Tex and clones) but very windproof and somewhat breathable (not as breathable as they’d like you to believe, though!) Examples other than Pertex include Activent for shell clothing and Dryloft for sleeping bags from W.L. Gore; interestingly, at least one of the companies that makes expedition-style down parkas went from Dryloft back to regular Gore-Tex as the Dryloft wasn’t durable enough, same with some sleeping bag manufacturers. Pertex Quantum is very thin and light, used in sleeping bags; Quantum GL is similarly very light and thin, but used in windshell jackets.

**Wool** The scales on the outside of wool fibers break up surface tension, and resist wetting. The lanolin (oil) on wool also helps resist water, and it oldens, oiled wool sweaters (with extra lanolin added back after the material was made) were the standard for cold, wet conditions. But when wool gets very wet, the hydrophilic core soaks up water, is heavy, and requires lot of body warmth to dry out; wool is kinky, no parallel surfaces to hold water (such as in cotton). Wool is still king for socks. Some comments on socks may be found in the emails below the chart but above these footnotes. In particular, Jacob Rohner of Switzerland makes what are probably the best everyday socks in the world—all of the socks I wear every day are Rohner trekking socks. Expensive but worth it. Sometimes you can get closeouts on Rohner socks from Sierra Trading Post.

**Cotton** Has a reputation for killing people in cold, wet conditions, and deservedly so. I had originally planned to leave it off the table entirely. However, in hot, dry conditions, wet cotton’s ability to absorb and hold lots of water, and to act like a heat pump, and towick and rapidly spread water from one place to another, is a positive benefit. In hot, dry environments, it’s common to wear a cotton T-shirt with a loose, longsleeve cotton shirt over it. And I’ve heard that at Outward Bound in Texas, not only the women but some of the men hike in ankle-length loose cotton skirts to protect against the sun while allowing ventilation. (Thanks to Suzanne Atkinson of Allegheny Mountain Rescue Group for this tip.)

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**Subject:** RE: Clothing Materials Table/no cotton?
**To:** NCRC Discussion List <NCRC@ontosystems.com>
**Copies to:** sar-l@listserv.islandnet.com, mra@altadena.net
**Send reply to:** kconover@pitt.edu
**Priority:** normal

On 16 Aug 2000, at 15:54, Steve Knutson wrote:
> Regarding cotton, I think it is absolutely necessary if you want to have "perfect" clothing. On the feet,
> it should be either cotton or wool (some people are allergic to wool) next to the skin--the coefficient of
> friction of synthetics is much higher than natural fabrics and you will be more prone to blisters and skin
> irritation in tropical conditions with synthetic socks.

Interesting point. I don't like cotton for liner socks because they tend to hold water against your skin, causing maceration ("prunification") and thus predispose to blisters.

Nevertheless, _this_ at least is something on which we have some scientific evidence. Murray Hamlet of the U.S. Army looked at various types and combinations of socks in various materials, because the Army has a BIG interest in preventing blisters. He finally decided that there were no socks out there that were ideal, and so ended up contracting for what are now known as "Hamlet Socks"—a combination of an outer very thick sock, made mostly of Merino (=expensive) wool, with the plush layer on the outside and the flat, smooth surface on the inside. The fibers are very highly twisted during material construction, both to resist matting and for durability, and despite the military's desire for multiple suppliers, they’ve only got one supplier at present. I got a pair of the original Hamlet socks and they are the best socks I’ve ever had. However, then I ordered some more and they, to put it bluntly, sucked. I found out from Murray that the original company basically went bankrupt and their quality was terrible--later they got bought out and the socks are now back up to Murray's exacting standards.

Interestingly, he specifies a Coolmax liner sock. And with this combination, compared to normal wool Army socks, he found a lot less blisters. Specifically, he went to the US Marine Corps base at Parris Island, South
Carolina and outfitted recruits with Hamlet socks, Coolmax liners, and then let them
get on with their 14 hours/day of basic training. Blisters dropped by a factor of 3! This is the best scientific
evidence for any particular sock actually making blisters less likely.

A poor second best, he says, is to get SmartWool socks with CoolMax liners, but wear the SmartWool socks
inside-out.

To buy Hamlet socks, call 800-392-8500 and speak with Joe Gallagher.

I have no affiliation nor do I receive any kind of remuneration for endorsing these socks.

Addendum 2006: The quality of the TechSpun socks has been variable. The first pair I got were outstanding; a subsequent box from
about 2001 showed poor construction, with there being “dog-ears” at the toe seams that made big lumps that pressed on your toes.
Some subsequent socks I got from them a year or two ago were much better, but not up to the quality of their first socks. Others
including Cheng Hu emailed me with similar experiences from 2002-2003. If you got some then and were disappointed, try again.
- Remember that synthetics DO NOT wick moisture—the myth that they do is an advertising ploy and has no reality.
- Synthetics are almost always hydrophobic and thus CANNOT wick moisture. What happens is that your body heat
- drives the moisture in vapor form through the fabric, but this doesn’t happen when you are very cold. Drylete
- and other dual fiber fabrics (with a hydrophilic yarn on one side and hydrophobic on the other) are the only
- synthetics that wick moisture. Cotton underwear shorts are also much kinder to your skin. This is
- especially important in the tropics.

You know, I’ve heard this before, but certainly there are a lot of people, Murray Hamlet included, who
disagree, and indeed have done some studies to show that these wicking treatments do work. For instance,
remember the British ship hit by an Exocet missile during the Falklands war? They were wearing polypro, and
during the explosion, there were a lot of burns, and there was melted polypro all over them. But the British
docs found the polypropylene actually helped the debridement of the burns slightly, rather than causing much additional
burning as rumored. So, the British still wear polypro—-but have a silverized outer layer that helps protect
against flash burns. (Information from the British via Murray Hamlet of the U.S. Army, again.) Maybe this should
make us reconsider the polypropylene vs. cotton/fireproof fabrics for domestic mountain rescue helicopter use?

[Massif (http://www.massif.com) has a line of Nomex fleece—fire-resistant, but insulating/wicking qualities not well known. – KC.]

Indead, there is an easy way to test this yourself. Take a bowl of water and hang some of the material in it.
Wait an hour and see how high the moisture has climbed up the material. Cotton is clearly the champ, but the
fact that it also acts like a heat pump when wet, along with the large amount of water that it retains.

However, this is a poor test of wicking related to what we really want it to do, as in wicking sweat off the skin. I suspect that the Army
has done some more detailed tests, and I’ll ask Murray what he’s found in his lab at Natick, MA and let everyone know.

And John Gookin wrote:
> Thanks for posting this great information. Good stuff. I completely agree with the confusion created by
> manufacturers’ claims.

Not sure it's "great," in fact I'm sure, especially after looking at all the typos and stupidity in version 0.1
(0.2 is up now) that it's pretty cr*p information. But I just couldn't find anything quite like it, and
whenever I do something for my own use, I like to share it. A few others might find it interesting, and many
others like you with more knowledge than me may give me some pointers.

> I wrote the clothing chapter for Paul Auerbach's upcoming edition of his big Wilderness Med book. My point
> isn't that I'm smart; it is that I recently researched these topics pret I included cotton in the fabrics (in
> PA's book) for a few reasons. 1) "Cotton kills", so people who do serious stuff need to see how far off
> scale it is in temperate or cold environs. People often want to do micro-analyses of various fabrics when 2)
> In hot weather, "cotton's cool" because it wicks moisture so well. 3) Firefighters, welders, helo crews and
> others exposed to flames like the slow burn/melt rate of cotton. 4) When we are going in and out of heated
> spaces the absorbancy of cotton socks CAN BE healthier for athlete's foot or even immersion foot. I think
> cotton socks cause more immersi Don't get me wrong. I don't WANT all those firefighters & EMT's to
> keep wearing jeans when they come "lend a hand" in the deep snow. But I think cotton has its little niche as a
> t.

John Gookin
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OK, OK, I’ll add cotton. And the things that make cotton bad in cold- wet conditions makes it good in the heat
-- retaining lots of water and acting like a heat-pump. Speaking of which, I've tried those "cool bandannas"
with beads of some sort of polymer in them that hold water -- and though they do indeed hold a lot of water for
a long time, they give it up pretty sparingly. In the humidity of the East they're useless. So last week I tried
one of them at 10,000 feet in Utah. The outer cotton dried out pretty quickly, cutting down on the coolness and
evaporative cooling, even though the polymer beads had lots of water still left in them. So I think a nice
cotton headband, wetted every hour or so, is probably a lot better brow-cooler.

And Rebecca Jones wrote:
> Just a note, this is the way these fibers perform under "ideal" conditions. Add dirt, and all bets are off.
> Mud encrusted clothing can't wick, no matter what it's made of. "Resistance to Compression Matting" is
> probably the best indication that, after thorough washing, a garment will regain its
characteristics.

True. When your clothing is covered with cave mud, you're basically wearing cave-mud laminate, and it doesn't really matter what the inner layer is. Which is one of the reasons why my caving suits have pitzips for ventilation. Surprisingly, I've had no failures or problems with them over the past 10 years.

And Anmar Mirza wrote:

> Further, I really like jeans for caving in the conditions in which I normally cave for a number of reasons.
> (some of my trips extend 15-20 hours. Mostly non immersed but many slimy and wet)
> 1. Jeans are very cheap. $10 a pair from wally world, I can wear them for a few months then retire them for caving.

Point. Most of these new materials are expensive.

> 2. Jeans are fairly durable. I cave a *lot* (1-2 trips a week) and some of the places I go are very hard on clothing. I can't afford to buy a new cave suit every couple of months which is what I would have to do given the type and quantity of caving I do. (this is based on experience)
> 3. Jeans are flexible (unless you buy them too tight).
> I also like surplus light jackets which are also made of cotton. I can get these for $5-10 and they last a long time (except for having to sew the buttons back on).
> I cave *hot* so normally being cold is not a problem for me. For others this is not the case. Cotton is pretty good when it comes to hot weather stuff, combine this with it being cheap and you have a resource that should not be ignored.

I suspect that you are in excellent aerobic condition, too -- so you don't tire out where others might. And the problem with cotton comes when one's energy runs down -- and there's still all that cold water held against your skin. I'd suggest that your wearing cotton is a lot like rock-climbing without a helmet or belaying without gloves -- some people can get away with it but it's certainly not something to suggest to a newbie, or to even allow them to know about:

> When I am going into a wet cave, or a cold cave, or cold weather conditions, of course my clothing fabric choices will change (34f caving, expedition weight polypros, a 2mm shorty wetsuit, and a full nylon caving suit. 72f caving, shorts, tshirt and knee and elbow pads...) But for 90% of the caving I do and a third of the outdoor stuff, the cotton shell I use suits my needs pretty well.
> While it is fine to say "cotton kills," what really kills is ignorance and lack of experience/training.
> Just like I said in another thread on this list, I think that using equipment and resources when and where appropriate is much better than trying to make a rule of thumb fit every occasion.
> Other than that think the table is a neat idea. Even though it is subjective, it gives folks a good starting point. I've got it bookmarked, thanks Keith!

> Anmar Mirza - Central Region National Cave Rescue Commission
> Coordinator EMT-A: Amateur Radio N9ISY: Cave Rescue Coordinator for LCSAR IKC Rescue Coordinator

Well, please let me know about all of the errors and omissions. I've added Gore-Tex and Pertex and will need to add Activent, Bipolar, and some others. As well as some links to some good sites with more information about clothing materials. There are so many different materials that I'm going to have to, I think, keep it a selective list, with the best/most popular only (with the ones I like best featured, of course).

Thanks for all the comments!
Keith Conover, M.D., FACEP
http://www.pitt.edu/~kconover
sent with Pegasus high-security email
download free from www.pmail.com

Some more information on the military-designed Hamlet socks I have been raving about recently. The company is Double Lay-R doing business as TechSpun, and is reachable via the email <tecspun@aol.com> (Joe said that AOL wouldn't let him put in the "h". Go figure.). Or 1-800-392-8500. They offer several different socks.

1. Double Lay-R Blister Free.
These double-layer socks have outer and inner faces that are designed to be high-friction, and the matching faces are designed to slip against one another. I used to use some of these socks as liner socks, and they worked pretty well to prevent blisters. However, you have to be careful in putting them on so as not to get wrinkles, and your foot does slide a bit, which can be a bit of a problem going downhill.

2. Seamfree seamless socks.
These are designed for people with diabetes and ischemic feet.

3. All-Weather Lightweight Sock System.
These are a somewhat lighter version of the "true" Hamlet socks, below. Includes a lightweight Coolmax liner sock and a thicker outer sock, about the same weight as a usual boot or Ragg sock. If your boots fit snugly, you won't be able to wear the "real" Hamlet sock without your boot fitting too tightly, so order these. Retail price is $13.75/set as of August 2000 (7 if that includes the liners). High-density reverse nap, same as the "real" Hamlet socks. Liners are 80% Coolmax, 20% nylon. Socks proper are 40% long-staple wool, 40% polypro, 10% nylon in the toe and leg, and 50% long-staple wool, 50% polypro in the foot.

4. All Weather "Extreme Weather" Heavyweight
This is the "real" Hamlet sock, the one with the 3-fold decrease in blisters in Marine boot camp recruits and DI's at Paris Island. Work well in very hot or very cold, but may require a boot one size larger than usual. As of August 2000, retail price was $14.75/set. (Actually, I think it's $5 extra for the liners -- although maybe that's for extra liners.)

Again, I have no affiliation with this company at all, I just really, really like the socks and respect the guy from the Army who designed them (who also makes no money at all from their sales).

xxxiv Cotton Comfort For cotton, comfort against skin is really ++++ when dry and XXXXX when wet. Take your pick.

xxxv Cotton Wicking For cotton, when sweaty, it starts off great, but after it gets soaked it’s miserable.

xxxvi Polartec Power Dry Against your skin, the original stuff is as comfortable as a well-worn cotton sweatshirt – and soaks up your sweat as well (must be the way that they make the inner portion). However, it’s warm when wet and dries quickly. Great stuff. Cloudveil’s TeeWinot line used to use this material. I think the fuzziness of the inner face of this fabric is what allows it to soak up the sweat so well. Just like the original polypro spread out the sweat better than wool, and wicking treatments for polypro and now polyester allow underwear to wick sweat better than the original polypro, this stuff beats other treated polyester – the best wicking layer I’ve experienced. The Cloudveil TeeWinot line also looks good, good enough to replace a polo shirt for when you need to be dressed up just slightly. Unfortunately, Cloudveil quit making the TeeWinot line, and Malden had also changed Power Dry. There is one version of Power Dry used in the Patagonia R.5 line and REI midweight and expedition-weight underwear (with fuzzy bumps inside). It is really a die-cut successor to Polartec Power Stretch. There is another Power Dry variant that is thin and somewhat silky, but not as comfortable against the skin as the original. OK, but I have to admit I liked the earlier thin Power Dry – it looked and felt like a well-worn cotton T-shirt, only stretchier, and wicking. If anyone has any used TeeWinot short sleeve shirts, size small, let me know and I’ll pay you top dollar for them. Sigh.

xxxviii Intera Intera is a coating for either nylon or polyester, a permanent wicking coating (at least they say it’s permanent, and have some test data on their website that, if accurate, supports this, and nothing on the other companies’ websites contradicts it). But as I know it from two shirts I have, it is type of almost ripstop-like nylon, and the Intera shirts I own have alternating thicker and thinner threads in the weave. Although a relatively hard fabric, it’s nonetheless relatively comfortable against the skin when you’re sweating. I got a couple of shirts from LL Bean out of this fabric, and they are indestructible, almost totally impervious to wrinkles, and look good. Ideal for travel clothing. They still have something called a Journey shirt that is made of ripstop with a wicking treatment, but may not be the Intera tradename. They point out on their website, though, that using fabric softeners can ruin the coating.

xxxviii Intera DryForce is listed as separate from plain Intera as it’s a very different material. No coating, this is a bipolar material similar to Parameta-S or Power Stretch. It has a smooth, silky outside that feels like fine nylon tricot, and a fuzzy inside that feels like the inside of Power Stretch, but the shirt I got from Cloudveil is only about half the thickness of Power Stretch; not quite as stretchy as Power Stretch but a nice “hand” to it, drapes well.

xxxv Tencel Tencel is a fabric made from reprocessed cotton. The main marketing feature is that it feels like silk. It does, and drapes nicely – I have a couple of mock-denim shirts out of the stuff and they’re quite nice. Seem to wick a bit less than cotton, hold a great deal less water than cotton, and wrinkle quite a bit less (though not so wrinkle-resistant as Intera).

3. Polyester microfiber Despite the reputation of polyester from the 1960’s, this is a great material. It’s really not an “outdoor” fabric, but as I’m a fan of wearing “outdoor” clothing everyday (I don’t see why everyone doesn’t switch from cotton to CoolMax underpants) I
have several pair of dress pants in polyester microfiber from Travelsmith, which are virtually indistinguishable from fine worsted wool trousers – but resist stains better, dries more quickly, doesn’t wrinkle as much (though worsted wool is quite good for resisting wrinkles) and can be washed in a hotel sink and hung up, and they will be dry the nest morning. Travelsmith has shirts and pants, and LL Bean also makes a nice pair of pants in microfiber. I also have a blazer from Travelsmith in “tropical” microfiber – relatively light, looks nice, doesn’t wrinkle, stains come out easily. Indeed, one of the nursing supervisors at my hospital spilled some coffee on my blazer, and she was horrified and was afraid she’d ruined it. I threw the arm of the jacket in the sink, rinsed a bit of hand soap through it, rinsed it out, and hung it up on the back of a chair for an hour. After that it was dry and looked good as new.

CoolMax everyday wear I got a pair of pants from Travelsmith in sort of a stretchy CoolMax canvas back about 1999. They pill a lot, get a lot of pulls, and are sort of ugly. Totally unlike their polyester microfiber.

PolarMax is a brand of wicking polyester. I like it because their mock turtlenecks look quite dressy, and you can wear them with a (polyester microfiber) sport coat and look like you’re semi dressed up, yet still be dressed in wicking warm-when-wet clothing.

Primaloft/Liteloft Three different diameters together, crimped, larger fibers on the outside layers,

Thinsulate Once washed, the insulation value goes down; made by blowing fibers onto a surface; good for high-compression areas, too stiff for most handwear, OK for boots and similar.

Polypropylene There are many various coatings for polypro and polyester underwear, with various brand names and various claims. However, polyesters have generally replaced polypro for against-the-skin wear—does better in hot dryers and near campfires without melting, doesn’t hold odors as much, doesn’t “pill” as much.

Polypro Wicking Depends on coating.

CoolMax Polyester CoolMax is an extruded material with dips in it, better than Thermax; very good against-the-skin material. There is also now a CoolMax Alta fabric, which reputedly is better in all sorts of ways – as far as I can tell from one T-shirt I got (from Campmor, by Duofold: Hydrid Lightweight T-shirt), it’s a bit thinner yarn, which can make a thinner layer against your skin (although I’m sure they can make it thicker), and it’s a bit more durable (doesn’t pill as much). So it’s probably just the next generation CoolMax. Look for it to replace CoolMax. However, it seems a bit fragile—my T-shirt developed several holes after only having it for a few months.

Thermasix Polyester Extruded hollow polyester; doesn’t pass moisture well compared with CoolMax; seems to be extinct.

Other Polyester certain types of Capilene, others – no independent confirmation of various wicking claims. Some of the materials/coatings include: Terramar’s Body Sensors EC2 Qwik-Dri fabric (I hope they didn’t pay much to the agency that came up with these names), which claims it moves perspiration by electrostatics and not by wicking. They say that this makes it work better because it sucks water vapor away even where it’s not in contact with the skin. Of interest, Terramar has trademarked the phrase “There is no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing.” The way I’d heard it was “There’s no such thing as bad weather, just the wrong clothes.” –anon Norwegian” Whatever.

I gotta admit all these materials/coatings seem to wick pretty well, and except for Malden Power Dry, none seems to be much better than the other. See also the notes on Interia, above.

Crystalline Alkanes Talion Corporation makes vests, for both humans and dogs, of this special material that cools as it melts. Objective testing by the U.S. Air Force, quoted on their website, confirms its efficacy. Certainly for hot, humid conditions, like inside a HazMat suit, or in Florida or Louisiana or the tropics, evaporation is of limited use. Amir Findling of Western New York SearchDogs says the vests are somewhat heavy, pricey, and maybe not durable enough for a dog in a backcountry search task, but did a great job of cooling for about 4 hours.

Gel-Bead Bandannas These are marketed under a variety of names. The gel inside the “bandanna” soaks up water and lets it evaporate slowly. These are, by my testing, totally useless anywhere in the East or the Appalachians in the summer. I’ve used them in dry conditions in Utah and they help, a little bit, but the beads evaporate so slowly they don’t cool enough. Despite some good testimonials from some people, my recommendation is get to a stretchy cotton terry cloth sweatband and keep soaking it with water instead. The Sharper Image used to market an active cooling device for the back of the neck. It had a metal plate for good heat transfer to the neck, a reservoir for water, and a little fan powered by a single AA cell. It had a number of significant design flaws and some signs of frantic last-minute modifications. I got one to play was and wasn’t impressed. A nice water-soaked terry-cloth sweatband and a small bottle of water will work better and weigh less.

Pittards of England is the best known, and some Lake winter bike boots I recently bought (very, very nice) had a card for Pittards WR100, which is I guess their current leather treatment. I know almost nothing else about it.