
A Texas Nature Kayaking Guide

Dress for Success – Cool Weather

The clothes that are mandated for a paddle when the air temperature is 45 degrees F are much different than the clothes that are mandated for a paddle when the air temperature is warm. This guide lays out guidelines for dressing for cooler weather. In general, one should dress as if you were going to turtle (turn over). The American Canoe Association recommends that if the sum of the air temperature and the water temperature is 120 degrees F or less, the paddler should wear a wet suit or a dry suit.

As a minimum, when paddling in the heat of summer, we learned in Dress for Success – Warm Weather one should wear:

- A hat,
- Sunglasses,
- Foot protection,
- Sufficient clothes to protect one's modesty and not shock fellow paddlers,
- Sun screen,
- A properly fitted PFD (life preserver).



• Figure 1 dressed for success when the air and water temperatures are cold

As the weather cools, clothes become more important, since they need to also protect us from hypothermia and from being miserably cold.

Usually the first rule for cool weather kayaking is ABC – Anything But Cotton. Cotton retains water and loses its ability to insulate. Some experts insist that cotton will hold 75 times its weight in water. If you are wearing cotton and it gets wet, your body has to heat all that water before you start feeling comfortable. During the summer, it can be an advantage since it can help keep you cool, but during cool months, cotton is dangerous.

Silk, acrylic, wool, nylon, and polypropylene retain insulative properties if they get wet. Dress in layers. That way you can add or shed to remain comfortable. Usually the outer layer should be a windbreaker and should tend to shed water. Recently, while kayaking in cold weather, I wore silk next to my body (this becomes important if I wear itchy wool), and then polypropylene long johns, a wool

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flannel shirt, and water-resistant pants; and I had a light-weight, water-resistant windbreaker and a heavier fleece jacket. I put the heavy jacket in a dry bag in the event I needed it, and I shed the light-weight windbreaker about 10 minutes after I put it on.

While on the water, if you need to add or remove clothes, ask someone to stabilize your kayak while you make adjustments. An individual probably would not be very happy if she was removing a jacket because she was warm and turned the kayak over in 60 degree water. It might even be described as a shocking experience.

During cool weather a hat is just as important as it is in the summer, but for a different reason. About 7% of our heat loss is through the scalp. An insulative hat or cap can help keep a person warm. Gloves are important in keeping hands warm, another high-heat-loss area, as well as protecting the hands from chafing. During very cold weather, a ski mask becomes a valuable tool. Again, while a cotton ski mask may work on the ski slopes, it does not work very well if it gets wet.

Outer wear that will shed water and wind, will keep one warmer in cold weather.

Feet and ankles will get wet, unless the launch point allows someone to push your kayak into the water after you are seated, or allows you to mount your kayak from a dock. Wear shoes with that in mind. There are neoprene booties that provide insulative protection to the feet.

If the sum of the air temperature and the water temperature is less than 120 degrees F, consider adding a wet suit or waders. If you are making long crossings of open water, especially in windy conditions, you may still get chilled. For most of Texas, do not waste your money on a dry suit, or on a neoprene wet suit that is more than 3.5 mils thick. In both you will cook. As you kayak in cooler areas, both become valuable pieces of gear.

Wet suits work by trapping a layer of water next to the skin. The body heats the water, and the person remains warm. When the wet suit is dry, especially in a wind, the suit does not provide much insulation. Dress in layers. If you need insulation, add it under the wet suit if you can fit it in. Otherwise, wear it over the wet suit. As you can imagine, a layer that will block wind becomes important on a windy day.

If you get a wet suit, look for one that is 2 to 3 mils thick. A "Farmer John" type suit works best for kayaking. It looks like bib overalls, and there is not any neoprene to chaff around the arm pits. "Farmer John" suits come in long-pant style and short-pant style. If you get a sleeved wet suit, invest in some silk long-handles to wear under them.

In selecting a wet suit, keep in mind that sooner or later Mother Nature will call. Before that happens, figure out how much you are going to have to undress to answer the call. Some wet suits come with a fly, but if you have a wet suit with a zipper down the back, you must take off all of the clothes on the top of the body before you can drop the wet suit.

A dry suit keeps you dry by being waterproof and having gaskets at the ankles, wrists, and neck. Dry suits do not breathe, so if the sun is shining on you and you do not have a way to cool off, you will be steamed before the day has progressed much further.

An alternative to wet suits is chest waders. Waders can be made of breathable, waterproof fabric or neoprene. The breathable fabric keeps one dry, but provides no insulation. One must layer insulation under the waders for protection against cold. Neoprene waders offer insulative protection; but since they are not breathable, if you perspire, and you probably will, it will build up inside the waders. Waders come with built-in boots or with stocking feet. The stocking feet type requires one to wear boots or shoes over the wader. Stocking-feet waders are usually much more comfortable than boot-foot waders.

Regularly in discussing waders, someone states that if you fall in the water, the waders will fill up with water and pull you under. In swiftly-flowing water that statement has some validity, but not in slow-moving water or still water. When wearing waders, it is appropriate to wear a wader belt. This keeps water from flowing into the top of the waders if one enters the water. It is appropriate to wear the PFD on top of the waders. This is added insurance.

In May, 2006, during a paddling and safety class, I attempted to disprove some of the false information about waders.



Figure 2 Deep water reentry wearing waders



Figure 3 Waders hold lots of water

With waders on, I turtled, spent 5 minutes in the water, and crawled back into my kayak. I had less than a quart of water in the waders. Then I removed my wader belt and placed my PFD inside the waders and turtled again. To insure that I got plenty of water inside the waders, I dove underwater twice while holding the waders away from my chest. At this point kicking my legs to swim became difficult because of all of the water in the waders, but I rode as high in the water as I had done when I kept most of the water out of the waders. I heaved over my kayak without much more problem than I had had when the waders were not full of water. Moving my legs into the kayak was more difficult. In the process I spilled some of the water from the waders. After getting to shore, we poured an estimated 7 or 8 gallons of water out of the waders. A scale would have been nice.

If you decide to wear waders in a kayak, practice deep water reentry with the waders empty and with the waders full. Otherwise, do not wear them. Do not wear them in rapidly-moving water or where wave action is anticipated.

All that having been said, an ACA instructor trainer recently told a class of instructor candidates that the most common reason kayak fishermen drown is they take beer with them, they wear waders and when they have to urinate, they stand up in their kayaks, take off their PFDs, drop their waders around their ankles, and inadvertently fall in head first.