



Suggested Clothing for Alaska Fall Tours and Workshops.

*****My bulleted list of suggested apparel is on the last page.*****

Alaska Fall Weather (late August and September).

Some days can be quite sunny and pleasant but normal fall weather in Southcentral Alaska is frequently in the hypothermic zone. Temperatures of 35F-60F are common. Clear nights can see below freezing temperatures even in early September. On the Denali Highway, temperatures on wet days are typically in the 30's and 40's, with 50's in lower elevations like Fairbanks. On clear nights photographing aurora, we can see temperatures dip into the low 20's by sunrise. Though not anywhere near winter, it will most likely be colder than where you came from. Dressed properly, you can remain quite comfortable for hours in typical fall weather in Southcentral and Interior Alaska.

We will be near or on glaciers, near cold bodies of water, walking on wet tundra or through tall brush searching for moose or getting to a nice vantage point. Most of the Denali Highway (tundra fall colors) is above tree line (about 2500'). New snow in August and September, called "termination dust" by Alaskans, is common in the higher elevations of the Alaska, Chugach and Talkeetna Mountain Ranges. We want fresh snow! It makes for better images. Low elevation snow including Anchorage, Palmer, and even Fairbanks is rare in September.

The highest elevation we see on any Alaska fall tour is just over 4,000' at Maclaren Summit on the Denali Highway or in Hatcher Pass in Southcentral Alaska.

How to Dress: Overall Philosophy

I thought I would add some context as to why I recommend what I do. I realize that after reading this one might think Alaska is too harsh and cold and not worth a photo trip. This is not the case! The things we see and photograph and the light can be nothing short of magical. We just want people to be prepared.

I am coming at this from a position of 30+ years of wilderness Alaska experience that includes many remote long trips in a near constant hypothermic environment where the ONLY source of heat was your body heat. I've found out from my experience and poor youthful judgement how dangerously fast you can get hypothermia, and be uncomfortably cold even in summer with cheap clothing and rain gear.

Most of our participants are seasoned travelers and have visited other cold places on photo tours and most likely already have most of what they need. But I have to write this for folks who may be new to photography and are still gearing up with a performance layering system for places that can dish out harsh weather.

You've already invested a lot in photo gear. Making sure you are comfortable, warm and dry lets you maximize your energy toward creating the shots you are after.

As with any other gear, the 2 out of 3 principle applies to apparel as well: Price, Quality (durability and performance) and Weight - Pick 2. Example: If you want an inexpensive and lightweight rain jacket and pants, don't expect them to hold up in anything more than a



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sprinkle, and expect them to “wet out” quickly from the inside even on a light hike in a sustained rain. If you have to prioritize your apparel budget, don’t compromise on waterproof/breathable outer shells, including bottoms. A quality, 3-layer Gore-Tex shell can cost up to \$400.

My favorite brands for quality technical apparel include but are not limited to: Patagonia, Mountain Hardware, Arc’teryx, Outdoor Research, Marmot, Montbell and Rab. You can’t go wrong outfitting yourself with any of these brands. Yes, they are more expensive than your typical Cabela’s or L.L. Bean offerings. Unfortunately, as with cameras and lenses, quality and performance apparel means shelling out some \$\$.

Layering is the best approach for maintaining comfort and core temperature. Layering works best for both standing around on a cold night of aurora shooting and for active daytime shoot sessions. Layering allows you to avoid over perspiration and getting wet from the inside. Staying dry inside is as important in preventing hypothermia as staying dry from rain and snow is. The main ingredients for layering are non-cotton, moisture-wicking base layers, insulating layers like soft-shells, and waterproof/breathable outer shells. **High quality outer shells are the most important component.** Even when not raining, you can still get wet going through wet brush or tundra.

Notes about cotton. For non active shoot sessions, (Denali Highway tours are easy physically) cotton layers are fine in dry, cool conditions and if you have really high quality waterproof/breathable shells over them to keep you protected from wet brush and ground. However, there are better choices for overall comfort and performance in any hypothermic or extreme cold environment.

Even when dry, cotton has a poor weight to warmth ratio and is utterly useless when damp or wet. Damp cotton undergarments can accelerate shivering and the onset of hypothermia faster than you think. But it’s cheap and comfortable.

Lack of breathability with your outer shells will result in dampening of cotton layers from condensation of moist body heat. If you prefer natural fibers, go with wool. Wool technology has come a long way and the days of heavy, itchy wool next to your skin are long gone.

Base layers: Short sleeve and long-sleeve T-shirts, or zip tops and lightweight bottoms of Merino wool or Capilene are great choices.

Insulating top layers: Expedition weight Capilene or wool tops, and light to medium soft shell fleece or pile jackets, and/or light puffy jackets.

Bottom layers: Legs don’t need as much insulation as the upper body. My pants layers are quick-dry lightweight hiking pants. For additional warmth I just don my rain pants and/or the lightweight Merino wool long-johns/tights. For more comfort on chilly aurora nights, thick fleece pants and/or winter weight full length tights under your outer shell bottoms work great.

Outer shells: This is the most critical part of your layering system. Use only high quality waterproof/breathable shells with hoods, storm closures and cuffs you can close off. Even when not raining, shells are great for extra warmth from wind. Armpit zips are really nice for



thermo-regulation when active. They should fit loose enough for 2-3 layers underneath. For bottom shells, I like zippers that are long enough to easily go over boots and gaiters.

Down Jacket: When the sky is clear, and all the lakes and ponds are still liquid (what we want) that dampness can pack a pretty good chill, especially after summer's heat. It's hard to beat a good down jacket while standing around waiting for aurora displays. For fall night and sunrise photography, a down jacket is more of a luxury than necessity. A high quality down fill (800 fill or higher) with hood works great if you have one. Make sure it's big enough to get an insulating layer (soft shell) underneath without causing restricted movement or the down to compress. Expect a good medium warmth, light-weight down jacket like the Mountain Hardware Ghost Whisperer (gold standard for long hikes on the PCT) to weigh less than a pound and cost around \$350-\$400. Ouch!

Shoes/boots: You are going to get your shoes wet here so you have 3 choices:

- 1) Ankle-high waterproof/breathable hiking boots: synthetic or leather. Combined with waterproof gaiters, these boots will perform well even with a few inches of fall snow. Boots need to be stout enough to hold a pair of micro-spikes.
- 2) Calf high, insulated rubber boots. These boots should fit snugly around the ankles to avoid your foot from lifting out of the boot in muddy areas. Xtra-Tuf are the most popular brand of "Alaska sneakers" and most Alaskans have them. Not the best for hiking but best at keeping your feet dry in wet places.
- 3) Normal running/hiking shoes are good for town or hanging out at the lodge.

Socks: Layering your socks will help keep feet drier and warmer. Base layer socks should be non-cotton as well. Make sure your socks in your boots don't cut off circulation even in the slightest. That will result in cold feet. I use double layer Wright socks as liner socks and a thicker wool/stretch blend for colder nights shooting aurora.

Gaiters: This lightweight item is indispensable! A good pair of waterproof, breathable, calf-high gaiters go a long way to keeping feet warm. They stop moisture from entering the top of your boots. The downside of waterproof/breathable (GTX) boots is, once they get wet, they take forever to dry. Gaiters go a long way from preventing that.

Hats: This is also something else I like to layer. I have a stretchy thin liner beanie and a medium weight beanie that goes over my ears. Several of my jackets have hoods that act as back up. For light rain when it's not that cold I use a synthetic baseball hat. Another good choice of rain hats is the Seattle Sombrero from Outdoor Research.

Gloves: Keeping your hands warm and being able to operate your camera in the cold is the biggest challenge for photographers. There is no perfect way to keep your hands warm and be able to efficiently operate your camera and tripod.

Unless you are particularly prone to cold hands, light gloves and mittens work for fall shooting. For camera operation I use windproof wool fingerless gloves designed for anglers in winter. My fingertips actually stay warmer than being covered in liner gloves and I have the dexterity I need for camera operation. For an exceptionally cold night (20F) of fall aurora shooting, I place a hand warmer in the palms of my fingerless gloves, and I wear a jacket that has pockets big



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enough to hold my hands with fingerless gloves when inactive. For wet and wind, I have a pair of waterproof/breathable mitten shells that weigh 1 OZ that I wear alone or over my fingerless fleece gloves.

Hand warmers: This is a personal choice and I rarely need them for any fall shooting in Alaska. We usually have a supply of chemical hand warmers to pass out to those who want them. If you are prone to cold hands, consider rechargeable hand warmers (available on Amazon).

Traction devices: Not needed. For on-glacier trips, we provide Kahtoola Micro-Spikes for participants.

Headlamp: A headlamp is essential for aurora photography and sometimes even really low light blue hour shooting. Please make sure your headlamp has red light capability. This is for courtesy to other photographers in not blinding them when we are in close proximity. (Nitecore brand has rechargeable built-in batteries and are ultra-light.)

Bug net or repellent: By late August, mosquitos are dwindling down fast. Early fall, until a hard freeze, can still see pockets of biting midges and gnats. They are more of a nuisance than a danger. Cold clear nights of aurora shooting and out on a glacier are bug free. Since we will be mostly covered from head to toe and not in shorts and t-shirts, a simple head net that rolls up smaller than your fist and easily stores in any camera bag or pack is the way to go. DEET shouldn't be used around cameras due to its caustic properties. An alternative bug dope we use is Picaridin.

My Apparel List for fall Alaska tours and workshops.

This is what I use to stay warm and dry for cool, wet fall weather:

Upper Body

Base layer: Short sleeve Patagonia Capilene light weight
Long sleeve Capilene light weight hoodie

Insulating layers: Soft shells - Arc'teryx and Patagonia pile jackets
2-Patagonia Nano Puff jacket (easily fit over each other)

Outer Shell: Waterproof/breathable Patagonia Calcite parka

Lower body

Base layers: Patagonia ultra light Capilene long underwear
Regular layers: REI & Arc'teryx synthetic quick-dry hiking pants
Insulating: Outdoor Research fleece pants with draw cord waist
Outer shell: Outdoor Research Helium II rain pants

Socks: Wright double layer mid-calf high hiking socks
REI or Darn Tough wool blend insulating socks



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Boots: La Sportiva Ultra-Raptor ankle-high GTX hiking boots
Xtra-Tuf knee high rubber boots

Gaiters: Outdoor Research Helium

Extremities

Gloves: Outdoor Research fleece liner gloves
Red Head brand stretchy wool fingerless gloves
Z-Packs Vertice ultra light rain mittens

Hats: -ight knit wool blend ski hat that goes over ears and ties under the chin
Buff light weight, stretchy and soft helmet liner beanie