



SUGGESTED CLOTHING FOR ALASKA WINTER & AURORA PHOTOGRAPHY TOURS

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

Overall philosophy: It's no fun being cold when you are trying to focus on creating something special or just enjoying the environment. There is no need to be. You've heard the saying and it's true: "There is no such thing as bad weather, just bad clothing."

Most people can drum up enough layers to keep their core warm. Feet and hands are big problem areas for photographers. Insulated coveralls, snowsuits, arctic parkas - the kind many snowmobilers and ice anglers use - will keep you warm for aurora shoots. They are just bulkier, heavier and harder to carry in luggage than high performance technical apparel and don't work well for layering or when being active. But if that's what you have, that's what you should bring.

This narrative is mostly for photographers who see themselves regularly participating in winter photography in cold places. Just like a high end camera system, it's a sizable investment to have a winter clothing system that performs well in a wide range of winter temperatures and conditions.

If you are already an avid skier, or participant in other muscle powered winter sports, or have done photography and workshops in places like Yellowstone and the Tetons in winter, you most likely already have what you need to function in Alaska in March.

My favorite brands for quality technical apparel for serious winter use 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. For boots, the big 2 are Sorel and Kamik. Yes they are more expensive than your typical Cabella's or L.L. Bean offerings. Unfortunately, as with cameras and lenses, quality and performance apparel means shelling out some \$\$\$. The same adage for virtually all outdoor gear still applies: weight, price, quality - pick 2.

March in most of Alaska is still a winter month. With increasing daylight the sun's warmth often takes the edge off the chill in the afternoon but it can still be well below zero at night. In our operating area, expect temperatures from -25F to 45F. These are ambient not wind chill values.

On a typical night of shooting aurora, averages are in the +10F to -10F range; cold enough to put a deep chill in you after being outside for 15 minutes. We generally only wander a few hundred yards at the most from the vehicle.

Shooting daytime landscapes and glacier features is more active, even when we take a helicopter to access the area.

Cotton undergarments are fine for inactive aurora shoots as long as you keep it dry from the elements and your own sweat. When wet from rain/snow or perspiration (yes you can sweat in the cold), cotton loses all of its insulating properties and it's heavy. **Long story short, cotton kills in a hypothermic environment** and is a poor choice for active winter photography.



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Layering is the best approach for maintaining comfort and core temperature and works best for both standing around on a cold night and for active shoot sessions. **The main ingredients for layering are non-cotton, moisture-wicking base layers, insulating layers and waterproof/breathable/windproof outer shells.**

Base layers: Long sleeved T shirts, or zip tops and bottoms of Merino wool or Capilene are great choices.

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

Insulating bottom layers: Legs don't need as much insulation as the upper body needs but even for a zero degree night you should have thick winter weight fleece/soft shell pants or a one-piece fleece suit (my favorite) underneath bombproof outer shell pants.

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 and when standing around in or sitting in snow. Your top shell should have a hood and armpit zips are really nice for thermo-regulation when active. They should fit loose enough for 2-3 layers underneath. For bottom shells, bibs are the warmest and keep snow from going down your butt in deep snow but not all that critical. I prefer full or at least half zip pants that can easily be donned and removed without removing boots.

Down Jacket: When the sky is clear, the temperature takes a nose dive and you are standing around blazing away at Lady A dancing in the sky, nothing beats a heavy-weight down jacket for warmth. A mid to heavy weight, high quality down fill jacket (700 fill or higher) with hood works great. Make sure it's big enough to get 2 insulating layers underneath without causing restricted movement or the down to compress. Expect a good down jacket adequate for Alaska to be 1.5-2 pounds total weight and cost around \$350-\$500. (Ouch!)

Boots: A waterproof insulated winter boot is a must. Be wary of temperature ratings for boots. Boots rated for -20F will NOT keep your feet warm even at 0 degrees if you are just standing around - most likely the case for aurora shooting. If you can afford to, go for -40 boots. The key to keeping feet warm is putting as much as possible between the bottom of your feet and the snow. Size your boots so you can get thick socks in them without cutting off circulation. (That will make your feet colder.)

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 even colder feet. I use thin wool liner socks and thick wool insulating socks. Both pairs are blended with a stretchy material that makes them more comfortable.



Gaiters: This lightweight item is indispensable! A good pair of waterproof breathable knee high gaiters go a long way to keeping feet warm and dry in deep snow. Outer shells go over gaiters for maximum protection from deep snow,.

Hats: This is also something else I like to layer. For serious cold, you need a windproof hat that wraps under your chin, or a balaclava that keeps your face warm. My outer jackets have hoods that serve as an extra layer over my hat. A cheap, loose knit “beanie” is not a good choice.

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. Layering is still important with hands too. Medium weight, waterproof/windproof mittens that fit loose enough to maintain circulation will keep your hands warmer than any glove. Mittens work by allowing your fingers to exchange body heat. Having your hands in liner gloves underneath mittens don’t allow for heat exchange between your fingers and your hands can be colder. Hand warmers inside your mittens are great. Cheap wool mittens that don’t keep out snow and wind are poor choices. Mittens are great for walking and standing around but limit camera operation.

Really lightweight liner gloves by themselves don’t keep my hands warm with temperatures below 35F. A critical consideration for liner gloves is they are even the slightest bit snug, your hands will get cold quick.

For camera operation I use windproof wool or heavy fleece 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. When they do get cold, I place chemical hand warmers in the palms and just use that heat to warm up my fingertips. You can also get rechargeable battery operated hand warmers from Amazon. When really cold or when I’m walking, I put my hands in big mittens or put waterproof/windproof shell mittens over my fingerless gloves. Leather and especially neoprene gloves are poor choices for serious cold.

I’ve tried special “photographer” gloves from Vallerret. They worked great at near freezing temps but when it got down below 20F they were not warm at all and my own system I’ve used long before they came along works better.

Traction devices: Bring your own if you have them. We carry an assortment of sizes for participants to use if needed. We use Kahtoola micro-spikes.

Headlamp: Most quality shoots will involve walking to, returning from, setting up, or taking down in very low light. Having a headlamp with red-light capability is helpful for not blinding other photographers and gives sufficient light to conduct camera operation. For walking down the trail for maximum visibility, one can then switch to white light.

Gardener Pad or small piece of closed cell foam: Something small and light that is easily carried in your pack. A 2’x1.5’ scrap piece of closed cell foam is worth its weight in gold. This can keep heat robbing snow and cold ground from your knees and bum, or feet. Getting your feet off the snow for aurora shooting will keep your feet even warmer.



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SUGGESTED APPAREL LIST FOR MARCH ALASKA TOURS AND WORKSHOPS

This is what I use to stay warm and dry for aurora and Alaska winter landscapes

Upper Body

Base layer: Long sleeve Patagonia Capilene light weight.

Insulating layers:

Expedition weight Capilene, zipper top

Soft shell: Arc'teryx pile jacket

Lightweight synthetic jackets with hoods: 2-Patagonia Nano Puff (easily fit over each other)

Down parka with hood (850 fill or higher)

Outer Shell - Waterproof/breathable Patagonia Calcite parka (not worn over down coat but for wet/windy conditions)

Lower body

Base layers: Patagonia ultra light Capilene long johns

Insulating layer: Heavy weight fleece pants with draw cord waist

One-piece fleece suit: Kokatat Habanero - goes under my fleece pants for extra warmth

Outer shell - Waterproof/breathable pants/snow bibs: Patagonia Stormstride pants

Socks: Wright double layer calf high liner socks

REI heavy wool blend insulating socks

Boots: Standing in extreme cold: Sorel Caribou; Active: Columbia Bugaboos

Gaiters: Outdoor Research Expedition Crocodile

Extremities

Gloves: Outdoor Research wool fingerless gloves

Outdoor Research fleece mittens and waterproof shell

Hats: Outdoor Research wind bloc balaclava

Tight knit wool blend ski hat that goes over ears and ties under the chin

Musher hat: Outdoor Research Whitefish hat.