

# Backcountry

**Snowshoers at Pan Point, Mount Rainier.  
Photo by John D'Onofrio.**



## The Gear Closet »

Turn Up the Heat  
**Combat the cold this winter with insulating layers**

As the mercury plunges and we march head-first into another Washington winter, it's time to bundle up. As Northwesterners are taught from a young age and transplants soon learn, the key to staying warm and dry while enjoying the outdoors is layering.

For winter day hikes, a light- or medium-weight midlayer and insulated soft-shell might provide just the right combination of warmth and element repellency you need. For snowshoe trips, winter backpacks, or anything exposing you to more of the elements, you have to consider heavier insulation, breathability, packability and heavier weather-resistance.

The ideal combination is one that allows you to vent or add or remove layers as you warm up and cool down through exertion and rest. Of course, with an endless selection of base, mid-, and outer layers in a variety of materials,

including fleece, wool, down, synthetic, hard and soft-shells—where does one start? Choosing quality gear that will perform through a variety of conditions and that will keep you comfortable enough to enjoy your time outside can be the real challenge.

For this feature, the *Washington Trails* Gear Team went straight to the source with several of today's top outdoor apparel companies to sample some of their best pieces of insulation gear—fleece, insulated soft-shells, and down and synthetic outerwear. Then it was into the field! With winter weather in full swing, the team hit the trails, slogged through the rain, the cold—and even some early-season snow—to put them all to the test.

Here are the team's top picks, and what they had to say:

## Eli Boschetto

with Gear Team members Cherie Bevers, Cheri Higman, Patrick Leahy and Matt Thyer

## Gear Tip »

### Winterize Your Camping Gear

Maybe you camp out each weekend, year round. If so, good for you! If not, be sure to give your gear a little TLC now to make sure it lasts through the winter and beyond.

#### Tents

Make sure it's dry! Before packing it away, set it up and let it dry out completely, then either pack it loosely in a large bag or hang it up. Clean the dirt off all poles and stakes and store them with the tent to avoid a frantic search come spring.

#### Backpacks

If it fits, wash your backpack in front-loading washing machines with cold water and gentle cleaners like Woolite or NixWax Tech Wash. If it's too large for a machine, hand-wash it with the same detergents. Hang upside down to dry (never machine dry) then store hanging up or lying flat.

#### Boots

Clean your boots and treat them with leather or fabric treatment. Be sure to dry them completely before storing (you may need to take out the footbeds). If your boots are older, consider going to the cobbler to get them re-soled.

"For layering up on chilly days, I turn to my **Mountain Hardwear Monkey Woman jacket**. This stretchy fleece has a wonderful soft knap, and proves itself as a warm and toasty mid-layer beneath a soft-shell jacket. The high knap is the key to the lightweight yet substantial insulation, trapping more warm air next to me than in similar, thinner models. Its ability to form-fit doesn't restrict movement—something that typically happens when layering insulation. It has a nice, sturdy construction and well-placed pockets to keep the hands warm; and I also found it's comfortable enough to sleep in, a big plus on overnight trips. The Monkey fleece is great by itself on the cool days, or worn under a shell on the really frosty ones. I would definitely recommend this jacket to anyone for cold-weather hiking and backpacking, as well as snowshoeing, skiing or snowboarding." [www.mountainhardwear.com](http://www.mountainhardwear.com), \$150

—Cherie Bevers

#### Mountain Hardwear Monkey Woman Jacket



"Outdoor Research has truly outdone themselves with their newest in down outerwear, the **OR Virtuoso Jacket**. Its ample room in the arms and torso allow for a lot of layering without restricting your movement. The Virtuoso is simply a versatile jacket: small enough to fit under your shell as you roll down the winter mountains on skis; ideal for the climber, as the hood allows for a helmet and the abrasion-resistant fabric is ideally placed on the shoulders and arms; and perfect for sitting around camp on a cold night. What I like most about this jacket is that although it is a light and can compress to a small size, it still provides warmth in alpine settings.

I especially like the pillow-pocket bonus feature that lets you turn this coat into a pillow using a handy internal pocket." [www.outdoorresearch.com](http://www.outdoorresearch.com), \$220

—Cheri Higman

#### OR Virtuoso Jacket



"If you're looking for a down vest that can actually hold up to some abuse while continuing to perform like new, then the **Mountain Hardwear Sub Zero Vest** is a solid choice. I've found that many down vests are made to be worn strictly as midlayers, under an outer shell. Not so with the Sub Zero, which can be worn as a midlayer or an outer layer, giving me the increased flexibility and resilience I prefer. The reinforced shoulders and chest can handle the incidental brushes with rock and ice or the constant chafing from pack straps without any durability worries. The cinching bottom hem and snug fit of the armholes help keep the wind at bay and add to exceptional heat retention. And since I like to keep the hand-warmer pockets free of clutter, I find the third chest pocket and fourth inner pocket to be very convenient for small items.

For high-activity colder days on the trail or the rock, extra core warmth for unexpected temperature drops, or even thrown over a sweater for a chilly walk downtown, this vest provides the versatility I look for." [www.mountainhardwear.com](http://www.mountainhardwear.com), \$130

—Patrick Leahy





"I had just about stopped wearing synthetic-filled gear years ago, primarily because the fill always wore down so fast and just collected at the bottom of the insulation channels.

But, since I have been wearing **Patagonia's Nano Puff Jacket** pretty much non-stop for months now, it might be time to give synthetic another chance. I wear it skiing, climbing, hiking, and just around the house or working outside. It weighs in at only slightly more than my favorite down jacket at 11.8 ounces and looks awesome. The best part is that the PrimaLoft One polyester insulation, combined with the brick pattern quilting, helps it maintain loft and stand up to hard wear, while the durable water repellent finish withstands Northwest weather, as well as being coated in mud and road grime. I've even worn it through rainy conditions without a shell, and while not completely waterproof, it kept me warm even when saturated. More than one friend has offered to wear this jacket for me!" [www.patagonia.com](http://www.patagonia.com), \$179

—Matt Thyer



**Patagonia Nano Puff Jacket**

"The first time I put on the **REI One Jacket**, I knew I had found my new favorite jacket. The brushed fleece interior is nice and soft, and keeps me warm and cozy, while the breathable Schoeller outer shell sheds the wind and rain like a pro. One of my favorite features is the pockets: deep hand pockets for all manner of items I want easily accessible without having to dig in my pack (gloves, beanie, camera, map, headlamp) and the stormproof chest pocket that carries my music and features a convenient cord port to route my earphones.

Best of all, the comfortable fit goes on easily over a baselayer and allows room for a heavier

midlayer on those chillier days, plus when the temps really plummet, I can still get my parka on over it and be comfortable without over-bulking. Swiss-based Schoeller also practices the highest degree of environmental standards in the production of their apparel, and that's a big plus for me. As such, the One jacket is now a standard on both my cold-weather hiking and around town days." [www.rei.com](http://www.rei.com), \$199

—Eli Boschetto



**REI One Jacket**

A trip to your local outdoors supplier can offer a bounty of combinations of winter layering and insulating apparel. Your best bet is to consult with one of the professionals there to see what will work best for you and your preferred winter activity. Whether you're a close-in hiker, avid snowshoer or alpine mountaineer, there are plenty of options to help keep you warm and comfy on the trails this winter.

The WTA Gear Team tested additional products from Arc'Teryx, Arborwear, Eddie Bauer, Goliath, Mountain Hardwear, Outdoor Research and Patagonia. To see more of the insulation gear tested by the WTA Gear Team, visit [www.wta.org/gear](http://www.wta.org/gear).♦

"I especially like the pillow-pocket bonus feature that lets you turn this coat into a pillow using a handy internal pocket."

## Sleeping Bags

To wash your bag before storing it, use a technical cleaner like NixWax Tech Wash in a large, front-loading washing machine. Never dry clean your bag or use a top-loading machine with a center spindle. Once it's clean, dry your bag on low heat. If you have a down bag, toss a couple tennis balls in with it to avoid clumping. Then pack it loosely in a large cotton or mesh bag, or hang it up for the winter.

## Sleeping Pads

Check for and repair any tears and leaks you might have in your inflatable sleeping pads. Once they're in working condition, store your inflatable pads fully inflated with the valve open. Though bulky, they can be stored upright in a closet or under a bed to save space.

## Hydration Gear

Make sure to completely dry both purifiers and the hydration systems (including the tubing). Remove and dry the purifier's filter, as well. Wash water bottles with warm, soapy water and dry out completely. If necessary, follow the manufacturer's instructions to clean the hydration system before storing it.

For more cleaning and storing tips, see [wta.org/hiking-info/basics/how-to-store-your-gear](http://wta.org/hiking-info/basics/how-to-store-your-gear).