

# The big chill

You can only enjoy winter riding if you're the right temperature.

Iditabike champion **Andy Heading** explains how to dress to beat the cold



## THE EXPERT



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**R**iding 1,100 miles across Alaska in mid-winter teaches several important lessons – like taking extra gloves, how to have a pee (answer: very fast), and why you shouldn't howl back at wolves. But after 26 days of the infamous Iditabike, in temperatures that regularly dipped to –50 degrees centigrade and below, the one that surprised me most was that cycling through a UK winter is just as big a challenge.

As I once tried explaining to an incredulous Alaskan, I've been more uncomfortable on a November ride around the Peak District than I'd ever been on his home turf. The difference, of course, is the type of cold. In Alaska, it's dry; in the UK, it's usually wet – that creeping, clammy sort of cold, often combined with driving rain, that gets right into your bones. But the principles of how to handle both types are the same.

### Don't get too hot

First lesson is temperature management. Every arctic bike-racer is haunted by the Inuit saying 'You sweat, you die.' Of course, that's unlikely to happen even in the depths of a UK winter, but the science is the same: heat loss from a wet body is dramatically faster than from a dry one. In Alaska, being wet with sweat when the wind gathers pace and the temperature drops could kill unless shelter is found quickly and clothing can be dried. In the UK, as every cyclist knows, it can lead to extreme discomfort at best, and hypothermia at worst.

For winter biking in either environment, the answer

is two-fold: use layers and ventilate effectively in a bid to stay as dry as possible. Layers trap the warm air generated by cycling effort and create a micro-climate around the body. The secret is to regulate that climate by using breathable and sweat-wicking fabrics, and by simply unzipping layers or removing them altogether. As any Alaskan will tell you, the trick to surviving 50-below is knowing when to take clothes *off*.

### Hands, feet and head

For the extremities – hands and feet especially – serious sub-zero temperatures present a whole new challenge. The body's natural reaction to freezing conditions is to direct blood towards the major organs, leaving fingers and toes susceptible to frostbite unless blood flow is maintained.

Most Alaskan cyclists wear winter boots at least a size and a half bigger than normal, allowing extra socks to be worn with enough room to maintain the 'warm-air' layer. Cleats are triple-insulated with duct tape, foam cut-outs and extra insoles in a bid to slow heat conduction through the metalwork. In emergencies, chemical heat-pack sachets can be slipped inside the sock layers, but the most effective way to save toes is to jog alongside the bike for a few hundred metres, forcing the feet to flex and restoring blood circulation.

For hands, motorcycle-style gauntlets called 'pogies' are a favoured piece of kit. They slip over the bars and create a wind-shelter – sometimes also being designed to hold snack bags and allow mid-ride feeding. Choosing

Photos: Andy Heading

between mittens or gloves involves a compromise between dexterity and warmth. Gloves obviously allow a greater range of movement, but their larger surface area allows faster heat loss, and fingers tend to feel colder when separated in gloves. Most riders use a thin base-layer glove and then overmitts inside their pogies.

Cycle helmets are a rare sight on Alaska's winter trails, despite the risk of falling onto ice. Most cyclists wear a windproof, fleece-lined hat with ear-flaps and a draw-string, coupled with a fleece neck-tube. As a way of 'dumping' excess heat, pulling off your hat for a few minutes – or even seconds – is highly effective. However, frostbite of nose, ears and chin is a danger, despite the micro-climate caused by constant breathing. Waxy, white skin is a sure sign that things are starting to get too cold, and extra layers need to be added. Alaskan snowmobile racers – who regularly clock speeds well over 100mph – favour duct tape applied to nose and cheeks to prevent wind-chill injury, and it's common knowledge that Alaskan beards are often allowed to grow long for their wind-proofing attributes!

### Warm and dry

It's not just while moving that bodies need protecting. Pausing for a rest at  $-35^{\circ}\text{C}$  is the time you'll most appreciate your down-filled jacket. Exercise has stopped, the warmth is seeping out of your body, and now it's vital to add that extra layer to keep valuable heat in. And it's not just clothing that maintains warmth. Another wise saying from the far north is that 'a good meal is worth more than a good overcoat'. Before experiencing an Alaskan winter for the first time, I'd assumed this meant that heat ingested with a piping-hot meal would warm from 'inside out'. Not so – it's simply that food kick-starts the mini-furnace that is our metabolism. Many times I've been huddled in a bivvy-bag at minus 40 or below and raided a carefully-stashed bag of trail mix, and soon felt a glow of warmth as the system cranked into gear. Good hydration is equally important in the cold as in the heat, but often overlooked.

So why is biking through a UK winter an even bigger challenge than Iditabike? Well, because it involves staying dry from the outside too. As the temperature hovers around zero, the combination of heavy rain, a lashing of sleet and a headwind can quickly turn a pleasant day out into something much more serious. Having just returned from the Original Mountain Marathon in Borrowdale, I can testify to the challenge of staying comfortable in bleak UK conditions – and it's not easy. The answer is to invest in good quality, breathable outerwear to keep the worst of the UK's weather at bay, but to remember the principles of arctic biking to keep things warm and toasty on the inside.

**"I've been more uncomfortable on a November ride around the Peak District than I've ever been in Alaska"**

## ANDY'S WINTER WARDROBE

### FOR ALASKA

#### SWEAT-WICKING THERMAL BASE LAYERS

THERMAL TOPS AS A MID LAYER  
LYCRA FLEECE TIGHTS WITH WINDPROOF KNEE AND THIGH PANELS

WINDPROOF, FLEECE-LINED JACKET  
WINDPROOF, FLEECE-LINED OVERTROUSERS

DOWN-FILLED PARKA COAT  
BALACLAVA AND FLEECE NECK-TUBES

WINDPROOF HAT WITH EAR-FLAPS  
LINER GLOVES, FLEECE MITTS AND EXTRA-LARGE DOWN-FILLED OVER-MITTS

THERMAL LINER SOCKS, PLUS THICKER SOCKS

WINTER HIKING OR CYCLING BOOTS, RATED TO  $-40^{\circ}\text{C}$

### FOR THE UK

#### SWEAT-WICKING THERMAL TOP AS BASE LAYER

THERMAL BIB TIGHTS  
LINER GLOVES

WINTER BOOTS AND THERMAL LINER SOCKS

BALACLAVA, BEANIE HAT OR BUFF BENEATH HELMET/NECK WARMER

PLUS, WEATHER-DEPENDENT:

IF WET: BREATHABLE WATERPROOF JACKET AND GLOVES, PORELLE DRY SOCKS

IF DRY: GILET OR WINDPROOF JACKET, FLEECE GLOVES/MITTS

