



Start Birding

Birdwatching Classes and individual tuition

What to wear through the seasons

Introduction

The biggest challenge for British birdwatchers is how to stay comfortable, safe and warm in a chaotic and unpredictable climate. Our rapidly changing weather systems often cause rucksack packing nightmares. It would be a shame to allow the weather to spoil your trip, especially when it can be the bad weather that brings in the most interesting birds. Remember that birdwatching is like hunting, not hiking. It involves a lot of standing and sitting and not much heat generation. The secret is in the planning and the layering. If in doubt, contact linda@startbirding.co.uk for advice.

This handout will prepare you for the birdwatching year ahead and will give you some useful tips to ensure that you enjoy your birding in safety and comfort, whatever the weather.

What to wear and what not to wear

Never wear denim jeans: jeans will not keep you warm and if they get wet, they will be impossible to dry out. Even in dry weather, jeans can wick water from the surrounding vegetation and soon become very wet. In the autumn, winter and early spring, getting your clothing wet can easily lead to hypothermia.

If you are joining a Start Birding group trip and you are wearing jeans, then this will be risk-assessed before the start of the walk. You may feel that you will be ok but if your jeans get wet in the middle of a trip then the route and time spent outdoors will have to be adjusted to keep you safe. This could affect the quality of the trip for the rest of the group.

Always think layers: wear or carry layers whatever the season and always carry gloves. Bad weather on a summer's day on moorland, or on the coast, can be as cold as a winter's day. Wearing gloves will enable you to enjoy your birdwatching for much longer.

Your torso

Better to layer up thin base layers than to wear thick clothing. This traps more air, is less draughty and allows better movement. I recommend silk, thermal and merino wool base layers with layered microfleece tops. Keep your body core warm to improve your circulation and to allow blood to flow to your hands and feet. A gillet provides extra core heat.

In summer, if wearing a vest top, take something to cover your arms such as a loose-fitting long-sleeved shirt in case you feel the cold or need protection from the sun.

Your legs

In most seasons you'll need to wear a base layer under your trousers such as tights, silk or thermal leggings. Gauge this by the lowest temperature forecast for the day, windchill, how many miles of fast walking you're likely to do or whether you'll be sitting still in a hide. You'll feel the cold more acutely if you're sitting still and you'll easily overheat if you're walking quickly.

Wear walking trousers from an outdoors shop. These will dry quickly if you're caught in a shower. If wearing shorts in summer, carry something to cover your legs in case of sunburn or wear zip-off walking trousers.

Your extremities

Think about the places where the veins and arteries are close to the surface of your skin. This is your neck, wrists and ankles. These places, and your head, are where you're going to lose most of your body heat. Take the following items with you.

- A warm hat (or a sun hat in summer)
- A good scarf and a spare in winter. I recommend a fleecy snood and a scarf over the top to properly insulate your neck during cold and windy weather
- Wrist warmers. You can make these by cutting the feet off old socks
- A pair of lined, waterproof gloves
- Warm, comfortable walking socks layered over your leggings

I advise that you always take a spare pair of gloves and socks and a spare scarf. If you get very wet then switching to dry clothes will warm you up more quickly. Remember that you're a birdwatcher so your hands will be open to all elements. Invest in a good high-tech pair of waterproof gloves that allow you to feel the focusing wheel on your binoculars. Some makes of ski glove are light enough to use with binoculars. You can purchase silk inner gloves to keep your hands warm. Always tuck your scarf inside your coat to keep it dry.

NB: You can buy handwarmer pads but please consider the environmental cost when making a purchase.

Your footwear

I advise that you wear sturdy shoes at all times unless you know you are only going to walk on the beach or on a well-defined path. Skimping on footwear could limit your options if you want to move to another site later or if the weather changes unexpectedly. If it rains, walking boots have suitable soles to prevent slipping. They will also protect your feet and ankles when walking over rocks, pebbles etc.

Outer clothing

Your outer layer should be chosen well. Wear a suitable, waterproof, windproof and breathable coat, with a hood, to keep you dry on the inside (from rain and perspiration). Colour is important. A bright red coat will make you conspicuous. When upgrading, choose hunting or birdwatching jackets rather than those designed for walking. These are manufactured for activities that are not generating heat. They are quieter and come in muted colours. Birdwatching magazines can give you tips and advice about various outdoor products in their regular reviews. A coat with padded hand warmer pockets is ideal to keep your hands warm when you're not using your binoculars.

Always take waterproof over-trousers. These can also be used to keep out the wind if you are feeling cold on a blustery winter's day. Again, aim to buy clothing that doesn't make too much noise when walking as you will disturb the birds.

Essential birdwatching accessories

- Binoculars (see my binocular handout before you buy)
- First aid kit
- Anti-bacterial wipes
- Sunscreen of the appropriate factor (but keep it off your lenses)
- Insect repellent (be very careful not to get Deet on your binoculars as it will react with the lenses and binocular body)
- Bite cream or tea tree oil
- Plenty of water (essential in cold dry weather too) and something to eat.
- Flask of hot coffee, tea or soup (a slimline unbreakable flask is recommended)
- Lens cloth (see the binocular guide on how to clean your lenses)
- Tissues (for your nose and your eyes – not your binoculars)
- Map of the area
- Mobile phone with a weather app.
- A whistle for solo trips - learn the international whistle signal, 3 successive blasts