Suggestions for Coping with Winterseeds (aka Cold Weather Appleseeds)

Having spent a very enjoyable weekend at an Appleseed Instructors Known Distance Clinic held northeast of Palmer, Alaska over October 13 & 14, I have some suggestions for successful rifle marksmanship in subfreezing weather. We hold Appleseed clinics rain or shine, hot or cold. And with the extended forecast calling for low temperatures to 15 degrees over the 20th & 21st, I have the following to suggestions beyond the conventional advice to dress in layers, wear a hat & gloves and keep hydrated, which all remain essential, of course. I’ll start at ground level and work my way up. I am not suggesting that a participant has to run out and buy all these things to attend, but in Alaska many of us have accumulated these kinds of things over the years and if you have them available yourself or could borrow them for a weekend that they may a good idea to bring along. I was trained many years ago that a margin of comfort equals a margin of safety in this environment.

1. Insulated boots with a wool & synthetic sock combination are vital. I recommend Sorel or other ‘Shoe Pac’ designs or well-insulated hunting boots. Warm, but not clumsy is the goal here. 100% synthetic fabric liner socks to wick moisture away from the feet and a medium to heavy wool outer sock like ‘Smart Wools’ or the equivalent work very well. I recently tried some ‘Darn Tough’ brand – they were great. Cold feet are miserable.
2. I was comfortable with a 3 layer approach on the lower body. This means ‘long johns’, pants and over-pants. I wore a borrowed pair of Carhart canvas duck insulated bibs and they were great. Snow pants or bibs would be fine too as long as they do not restrict movement into seated / kneeling and prone positions.
3. On the upper body, I found 3 layers plus an outer layer for wind resistance worked well. Again, warm, but not too bulky is better. A hooded coat is great as the hood can be flipped down and out of the way while in position. Trust me, though, a cotton hoodie by itself will not be enough for 9 hour day outside in an Alaskan October.
4. The head and neck need a bit of special attention in these conditions as shooting is a ‘still’ activity, but the insulating gear must not interfere with a good cheek weld, as you will learn. I used a fleece ‘neck gaiter’ and it was dandy. A warm ski cap or similar that covers the ears goes without saying, right? I found that a fleece balaclava was a bit too bulky and lead to some inconsistent groups when it got somewhat in the way.
5. Hands need special consideration as you will need both dexterity and warmth. Thin and snug liner gloves under a looser outer glove or mitten worked well. I used full grain leather work gloves that I could pull off and leave the liner on without fussing to be a good combo. Loose fitting ski mittens would be great over the liners too.
6. Sometimes, say when preparing a magazine, even the liners have to come off. I found the small hand warmer packets, such as Grabber brand or Little Hotties, essential to keeping the numbing cold at bay. They can be tucked into gloves or wrist to help your hands re-warm after working ungloved. Bring an adequate supply as you may find that a pair in the hip pockets, coat pockets or in the top of your socks or even in your boots to be a great addition. They last several hours, but may need to replenished to last through the day. Please plan accordingly.
7. If you have a small propane ‘sport’ or outdoor heater, please bring it. One per every four or five shooters would be a great addition to the line, but we’ll make do with what comes. Having one of these on your table can help make sure you don’t have to take a warming break in your car or the clubhouse and miss a course of fire and the related instruction. Brands are Coleman (I have 2 which I have used for years) or Mr. Heater / Buddy. Also, you can bring them along when we circle up for lunch and you’ll stay nice and toasty warm while we present the events of April 19th, 1775.
8. Light weight ‘Space Blankets’ will be a great way to ‘wrap up and warm up’ at lunch too. Bring if you’ve got them.
9. A thermos full of a hot beverage and maybe a second with some hot soup for lunch is also a wonderful idea.

Well, that’s a lot, but I hope its food for thought. It will be well worth the trouble when you earn that blue, icicle-adorned ‘Winterseed’ Rifleman’s Patch. I look forward to seeing all of you on the line.

Fisherdawg

Aka – Wally Thomas