



The Worst Thing to Wear in Shoulder Season and Winter in the Catskills

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Every year in the Catskills, during shoulder season and winter, a predictable chain of events unfolds.

A mild parking lot.

A reasonable forecast.

A short route.

Ordinary clothing.

Two hours later, someone is shivering above 3,000 feet with wet legs, numb feet, and diminishing control.

The trail did not change suddenly. The weather did not shift dramatically. The mountains behaved exactly as mountains behave.

The clothing failed.

Commonly, in these situations, hikers are wearing sneakers and jeans. Inappropriate clothing accelerates heat loss and reduces traction at the exact moment elevation, wind, and moisture begin to compound.

Let's break down exactly how that cascade works in the Catskills.

Why People Show Up in Sneakers and Jeans

Most hikers who show up in sneakers and jeans are not reckless—they are uninformed.

They live in towns and cities where sneakers are the go-to footwear for daily life. They easily walk miles on pavement in them. They work and travel in jeans. Both feel durable and comfortable.



Outdoor marketing rarely challenges that assumption. Sneaker packaging does not carry mountain warnings. Denim labels do not mention freeze-thaw cycles. Weather apps display town forecasts. Search results focus on mileage and views.

A beginner planning a hike sees distance, elevation gain, and a few photos. They see people smiling on summits with clear skies as the backdrop. They see captions that say "Great day out."

They do not see the physics lesson.

The mental leap from sidewalk to summit feels small. The Catskills sit close to major population centers, and the peaks look modest compared to larger ranges. Trailheads feel accessible, and accessibility lowers perceived consequences.

That perception shapes clothing decisions.

The Parking Lot Illusion

The parking lot creates false confidence.

Forty-five degrees in town feels mild with the sun warming the asphalt. Jackets unzip. Gloves stay in the car. The first hundred yards feel comfortable.

Then the climb begins.

Elevation strips temperature. Wind builds on ridges. Shade holds cold in ravines. Freeze-thaw cycles create slush at lower elevations and hard ice higher up. Water runs across rock faces. Snow patches linger in protected areas.

Within a mile, the environment shifts, and clothing chosen for comfort in a parking lot begins absorbing moisture. Once absorption begins, recovery becomes difficult.

The Effects of Elevation in the Catskills

The Catskills rise quickly. Many popular hikes gain 1,500 to 2,500 feet over short distances. Temperature drops several degrees as elevation increases, and wind speed escalates across exposed sections. Wind chill magnifies heat loss.

Freeze-thaw cycles define shoulder season as daytime warmth melts snow into slush, and nighttime cold refreezes that slush into ice. The trail surface becomes mixed terrain: mud, water, ice, rock, packed snow. Each surface challenges traction.

Moisture remains constant—on the ground, in the air, and in the form of sweat from exertion. Clothing that absorbs moisture quickly becomes a liability.

How Sneakers React Above 3,000 Feet

Sneakers prioritize breathability and flexibility. Mesh uppers absorb meltwater quickly. Slush penetrates through seams. Foam midsoles retain moisture, and fabric linings hold dampness against socks.

Wet socks conduct heat away from feet, reducing circulation, and numbness follows.

Numb feet cause diminished dexterity and decreased balance, which translates into less stable on ice.

Sneaker outsoles often feature shallow tread patterns optimized for dry surfaces. They are not designed for ice and frozen rock surfaces that reduce friction. Slips become unavoidable and increase muscular tension, which raises energy expenditure. Expending energy increases sweat production, introducing more moisture into clothing.

Microspikes rely on structured footwear to remain stable. Soft uppers flex under tension; heel cups shift, and chains move unevenly— all lead to decreased traction.

Snowshoe bindings compress sneakers and force moisture inward. Each step drives water through the mesh, saturating

feet throughout the climb.

Wet footwear accelerates loss of body heat because water conducts heat away from the body 25 times faster than air.

The Impact of Wet Jeans

Denim is made up of cotton fibers, and cotton readily absorbs water, holding moisture against the skin. Once saturated, it loses insulating value and is slow to dry in cold air.

Exertion from climbing alone generates sweat, and cotton captures that sweat. But slush and wet brush add external moisture, increasing fabric weight on legs. Heavier legs require more effort to move, in turn generating more sweat in a vicious cycle.

Wind moves through saturated denim at elevation. And when evaporation pulls heat from the skin, the body compensates through shivering, which burns energy and depletes endurance.

As the temperature drops higher on the mountain, wet denim stiffens. In colder conditions, moisture within fibers begins to freeze, and fabric loses flexibility. As a result, strides shorten, and movement becomes inefficient. Inefficient movement accelerates fatigue.

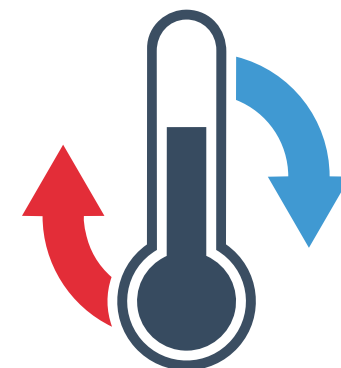
The Hypothermia Cascade

Hypothermia develops through cumulative heat loss. Since water is efficient at conducting heat away from the body, wet footwear and saturated denim accelerate that loss.

The cascade often unfolds like this:

Climb begins.
Body warms.
Sweat develops.
Mesh and cotton absorb moisture.
Slush enters shoes.
Wind exposure increases.
Pace slows on ice.
Energy expenditure rises.
Rest break begins.
Heat production drops.
Shivering starts.

Mild hypothermia presents as persistent shivering, clumsiness, and slower reaction time. Coordination declines subtly, while decision-making degrades.



Moderate hypothermia includes intense shivering, confusion, slurred speech, and stumbling gait. Dexterity diminishes, and managing gear becomes difficult.

At this stage, self-rescue capacity declines sharply.

Sneakers and jeans directly contribute to this progression by accelerating moisture retention and reducing thermal efficiency.

Injury Risk Multiplies

Cold conditions reduce muscle responsiveness. Wet footwear reduces traction. Slips occur more frequently, increasing the risk of sprain or fracture.

Ankle injuries become more common on uneven, icy terrain. Cold fingers struggle with phone screens and zippers. Managing even minor injury becomes complex when dexterity declines.

Reduced movement accelerates cooling.

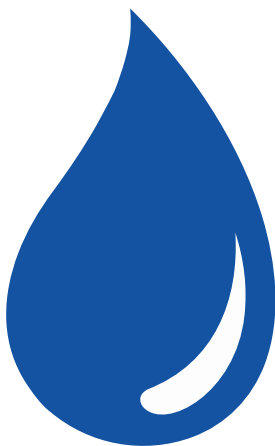
Injury and exposure often intersect.

Energy Mathematics

Water adds weight.

Denim saturated with meltwater can carry significant additional mass. Every added pound increases caloric demand, and fatigue sets in faster.

Fatigue reduces pace, which in turn lowers heat generation. As heat loss continues, the body burns energy attempting to maintain core temperature. Once energy reserves decline, core temperature begins to drop, and hypothermia sets in.



Why This Pattern Repeats

The Catskills appear manageable.

Short drive.

Short mileage.

Familiar names.

Optimism fills the information gap. People assume mild conditions will persist throughout the hike, and choose clothing for comfort over performance.

Rescue teams respond repeatedly during shoulder season to slips on ice and cases of exposure. Clothing rarely appears dramatic—it appears ordinary.

Ordinary clothing in extraordinary terrain creates predictable outcomes.

Financial Reality and Practical Upgrades

Specialty outdoor gear is expensive, and premium branding drives prices upward. Effective protection requires function, not luxury.

Core priorities for functional outdoor gear include:

- Waterproof or water-resistant footwear.
- Insulating socks made from wool or synthetic materials.
- Base layers that move moisture away from skin.
- Insulating mid layers that retain warmth when damp.
- Wind blocking outer layers.
- Traction devices compatible with structured footwear.

Entry-level gear meets these criteria at a reasonable cost when purchased intentionally. Planning gear purchases spreads the expense over time. Borrowing equipment for first winter hikes remains common.

Moisture management and insulation matter more than brand name.

The Point of No Return

Once sneakers become saturated and denim absorbs moisture, reversal becomes difficult mid-hike. Drying options are limited in cold wind conditions. Body heat struggles to overcome evaporative cooling.

At that moment, the hike shifts from recreation to thermal management.

Feet numb.

Legs chill.

Shivering increases.

Decision-making slows.

The mountain continues behaving as mountains behave.

The Takeaway

Shoulder season and winter in the Catskills demand clothing that manages moisture, preserves warmth, and maintains traction across mixed terrain.

- Sneakers and jeans absorb water, lose insulation when wet, reduce traction on ice, and accelerate heat loss.
- The parking lot rarely reveals that reality—elevation does.
- Clothing determines whether the day ends at the car or in a rescue report.
- Choose materials that respect mountain physics.
- The Catskills reward preparation and punish moisture.
- Sneakers and jeans belong in town.
- The mountain decides everything else.