



Wool comes from sheep like these. Looking at this flock, it is easy to see which sheep I identify with. (Mark Rackay/Special to the Montrose Daily Press)

Coming full circle with wool

It is amazing to me just how many times things have gone full circle in my lifetime. From fishing tackle, hunting equipment, ammunition and clothing, everything new and improved, eventually comes back to where it started. One such thing is wool.

Back in the 1960s, most of my winter wardrobe consisted of wool. From a wool beanie, mittens, snow pants, all the way to long underwear, my clothes were made of wool. The wool I wore kept me warm, but it had many drawbacks.

The old wool looked like it was made from yarn constructed from floor sweepings from the barbershop. Wearing it next to your skin kept you warm but it always felt itchy and irritating. The wool long johns provided me with plenty of exercise because I was constantly scratching my legs.

The old wool did a great job of keeping me warm. It also did a fine job of keeping its insulating quality, even when wet. When it got wet was the beginning of the biggest problem: the smell. I walked around smelling like a sheep dog that fell in the pond behind the barn. I might add, the wetness also kicked up the itching to a new level. Just one snowball with those mittens, and they were wet enough to start all that itching and stinking.

Many fine clothing lines, like Pendleton, Hudson and



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

Sorel used wool. These outdoor clothes were very expensive for their time but the quality was so good, the clothes seemed to wear forever.

During the half century of my outdoor career, I have seen many "new and improved" materials and clothing lines come and go. Goose down became very popular, especially with the ski crowd. People loved down because it was very lightweight and provided great warmth. There are still many items of down available.

The drawback for down was its lack of insulation when it got wet. The down would clump up inside the fabric and just about all insulation quality was gone. Some of the down had a terrible smell, like off of a duck farm in a rainstorm, when it got wet.

Next came the synthetic down materials. Polar Holofil is one that comes to mind. It provided much of the insulation properties of down, did not get affected by moisture and did not have the horrible smell when wet.

I have tried just about every type of long underwear available over the years. When stand hunting in Kansas, during the late season, you learn about cold (well below zero) and the effects of wind and wind chill. My favorite set of long underwear is probably a set of military Polar Tec, heavyweight.

I bought this set of Polar Tec at a surplus store. This is one of the many types the Army issues to soldiers who face arctic conditions. I have used this set on several trips now, with no complaints about smell, itchy or loss of heat when wet. They are made of Merino wool.

Sheep's wool is the most common and widely available type of wool. It is the wool most people think of when they think of wool. There are several types of sheep's wool, such as Melton, Shetland, Loden, Lamb's wool, and of course, Merino.

Merino wool comes from Merino sheep, which primarily hail from the mountainous regions of New Zealand, Australia and South Africa. The Merino is the oldest sheep breed in the world.

These sheep were first bred in Iberia, and then brought to South Africa by way of Spain in 1789 and eventually found their way to the United States. Merinos are different than other sheep breeds in most areas including the meat they produce.

The Merino carcass is smaller than regular sheep because they

are not bred for meat quality but for their wool production. What Merino meat that is consumed usually comes from mature sheep rather than lambs provided by other breeds.

What we as outdoor persons are mostly interested in is the wool production. An adult male can give 5.5 kilograms of fleece per year, while a ewe can give more than 7 kg. They must be shorn at least once a year because their wool does not stop growing.

Merino wool is really soft, and not scratchy like regular wool. The fibers of Merino wool are much finer than the wool of standard sheep. It is also lightweight for the amount of warmth it provides, making it a perfect material for outdoor clothing.

The simple fact that wool retains much of its insulating properties when wet is a lifesaving feature. Merino wool can absorb up to 30% of its weight in water and still feel dry to the touch. The lanolin present in Merino wool has antimicrobial properties that kill the bacteria in sweat and moisture that creates odors. In other words, you won't walk around smelling like a wet dog.

The smaller size of the fibers of Merino wool makes the fabric much softer than traditional wool. That translates to no longer having the constant itching problem against your skin. The itching is something I no longer have to deal with.

All of my winter socks are made of Merino wool. They had worn well and are very comfortable. The comfort of 100% Merino over a blend with synthetics is worth the extra costs.

I recently purchased a battle sweater. These sweaters were made famous by British Special Forces and are made from 100% Merino wool. The sweater has a compression fit and I wear it over my base layer on the coldest or windiest days. The sweater has far exceeded my wildest expectations for wool and I am looking more towards Merino for my outdoor clothes in the base and middle layers. The outside layers will remain Gore-Tex or a similar water repellant material.

Coming back to wool in my outdoor clothing was kind of a surprise, albeit a pleasant one. You can bet I will be getting more Merino wool clothing as time goes on. I sure am glad the smell and all the itching did not come full circle with it.

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