



# Protection from the Elements

*Always willing to lend a hand, a group of Nahant, Mass., firefighters volunteered to help us test foul-weather gear. Donning a test jacket and trousers, each volunteer was hosed down for 60 seconds, from head to toe, to test waterproofness.*

*Foulies tested with earth, wind, and water—we had to stop at fire.*

All foul-weather gear is not created equal. Before plopping down hundreds of dollars for a mid-range jacket and bibbed trousers, it is a good idea to give the gear a thorough inspection, paying particular attention to a few key features.

That is exactly what *Practical Sailor* testers did with the sets of foul-weather gear we received for testing from seven manufacturers.

A quality set of foul-weather gear must, above all, be warm, dry, and comfortable. The bibs should have wide, easily adjustable shoulder straps that don't cut into the wearer. The brimmed hood should be a visible color and have reflective material attached. Its peak should be semi-rigid to deflect water, and it should have a drawstring to cinch it around the wearer's face. The hood should be easily deployed, stowed, and secured. The jacket should be breathable, have integrated vents, and be water-tight at the neck and wrists. It should have adequate reflective material in places that could be visible in a man-

*Gill Key West*

overboard situa-

tion—like the hood, shoulders, and the top of the back.

The trousers should feature abrasion padding on high-stress areas like the knees and seat, and should be water-tight at the ankles. Zippers should be high-quality, durable, and big enough to grasp with chilled fingers. The garments must have shoulder swing room, and while they should be form-fitting, they should still be able to accommodate a fleece or other midlayer beneath. The material must be windproof and waterproof, yet breathable.

Other areas of concern include the garment's ease of donning and doffing; pocket design and location; loops for attaching knives; special pouches for handheld electronics; and fast-adjust buckles on trouser shoulder straps. (See "Buyer's Checklist," page 25 for more information.)

## WHAT WE TESTED

Each foul-weather set we tested consisted of a jacket and a pair of bib trousers suitable for coastal cruising and light offshore sailing. All test suits were priced under \$500 for the full kit, which by industry standards is middle grade—the next step can easily reach \$1,000. The participating manufacturers were: Gill International, Gul, Helly Hansen, Henri Lloyd, Ronstan, Slam, and Third Reef from West Marine. The Gill, Helly, Gul, and West Marine suits are tailored for men, while the others are unisex.

Gear-maker Atlantis recently rejoined the ranks of foulie makers, but at test time, its new product line was not yet fully developed. Products were requested from Musto but were not provided. We hope to test gear from both of these manufacturers for a future update.

All of the test jackets had fluorescent yellow hoods for high visibility in all conditions, and all offered high-cut collars for good face protection. However, it was clear from the test's outset that some were of higher-quality materials and had superior workmanship. These differences were evident in the wind- and water-resistance tests: The higher-quality garments performed nearer to "windproof" and "waterproof," while the others were merely resistant to the elements. We also found—as we did in the boat shoes tests in 2007—that there is no standard for sizing. All test products were size men's large, but some were a bit snug and others were too loose.

All seven manufacturers that participated produce quality foul-weather gear, some excelling in areas where others apparently focus less attention, and vice versa.

**GILL**

The Key West OS5J jacket and OS5T bib trousers are evidence that Gill has mastered the art of crafting high-performance foul-weather gear.

Testers found only a few things to complain about on the Gill gear: It was a bit roomy (but offered plenty of room for a fleece or other midlayer to be worn beneath it), and the trouser zipper is not a two-way zipper. Also the jacket slash pockets lack the protection of a flap that cargo pockets typically have. Gill claims that the zipper is waterproof, but our experience with "waterproof zippers" has left us skeptical that they will keep pocket contents totally dry.

Other than that nitpicking, the Gill gear gets four stars—or three dots, according to Gill's rating system. (Three dots mean the gear is for coastal and offshore use with high breathability and high durability.)

The Gill bibs are rugged with thick shoulder straps fitted with heavy-duty velcro that can be adjusted in seconds—no need to fuss with buckles or snaps. They have a reinforced seat and knees for abrasion protection. The jacket's hood and its beefy zippers function easily, even with cold hands. Its taped seams and adjustable cuffs with inner seals successfully kept water out during our field tests. The jacket has plenty of pockets, including zippered internal pockets and fleece-lined handwarmer pockets. Although the trousers lack a waist adjustment, they do have fleece-lined pockets and a water-tight cargo pocket.

The Key West jacket is available in red, yellow, silver, and black, while the bibs come in only gray. The jacket has Reflexite reflective patches at the shoulder/arm seam and at the center of the chest. Both the jacket and trouser are available in women's fit. (Look for a review of women's foulie gear in an upcoming issue.)



*To test each garment's resistance to abrasion and wear, testers scooped across a gravel parking lot first on their bellies and then on their backs.*

**How We Tested**

Field tests were conducted to measure such factors as wind and water resistance, durability of materials, quality of fasteners, functionality of hoods and pockets, and the long-term durability of velcro closures. The tests included:

**Abrasion-resistance Test:** Testers donned each suit and crawled 100 feet over gravel on both the belly and the back, then examined the garments for wear.

**Water-resistance Tests:** Testers wore each suit under an outdoor shower for five minutes to determine whether the hood, neck closures, and extremity fasteners would keep out the water. Then testers were sprayed with a firehouse hose for 60 seconds on full stream. The jackets and trousers were examined for leaks. A third water test saw jacket-clad testers immerse a properly adjusted jacket sleeve in a bucket of water for 60 seconds to test the watertightness of the inner cuff.

**Wind-resistance Test:** Wearing only the foulie jacket and trousers (no shirt, pants, or long johns), testers stood for two minutes before a very powerful fan designed for use by fire departments to eject smoke from buildings. (It's here that having proper waist adjustments came into play.)

**Zipper and Fastener Tests:** All primary zippers were zipped up and down 40 times each to determine whether they could withstand heavy-duty use and still operate smoothly. The zippers were examined for size (some have small tabs that make handling them with cold fingers or gloved hands a hardship); construction quality, and non-corrosive materials or coatings. Velcro fasteners were opened and closed 200 times each. Testers noted whether the velcro lost its ability to adhere.

**Reflectivity Test:** Each set was taken into a dark room where a flashlight was used to examine the reflective properties of each manufacturer's hood and reflective tabs, patches, and piping. Reflective devices with prismatic construction showed a tendency to perform better.

**Wearability Test:** Testers wore each foul-weather suit for a minimum of six hours aboard a boat to assess overall comfort and wearability. This test highlighted such features as narrow shoulder straps that cut into the wearer; jacket zippers that scraped the neck when completely fastened; a need for cargo pockets; and the breathability of construction materials.