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GEARING UP

Thursday, September 22, 2005

Gear Junkie: Cloth defies elements -- and condiments

By [STEPHEN REGENOLD](#)
SPECIAL TO THE POST-INTELLIGENCER

The stretchy, nylon-based fabric used in the Cloudveil Switchback jacket is designed to mimic the smooth shell of a beetle. It also takes cues from cabbage leaves and insect wings, and it is coated with millions upon millions of infinitesimal grains of silicon.

Though it looks fairly normal, this jacket is representative of a new breed of outdoor product that incorporates a nanotechnology feature from fabric manufacturer Schoeller Switzerland called NanoSphere.

The company pitches NanoSphere as a wonder product of sorts that is water- and dirt-repellent, anti-adhesive and self-cleaning -- the same qualities found in nature with beetle shells, lotus leaves, cabbage, honeybee wings and other creations.

To copy the intricate, burred structures found on the surface of leaves, wings or shells, Schoeller coats its NanoSphere fabric with particles of silicon that are 100 times smaller than a common virus. NanoSphere's microscopic, three-dimensional surface repels everything from water and dirt to honey, red wine, oil and ketchup, according to Schoeller literature.

I put these claims to the test with the Cloudveil Switchback jacket and fresh bottles of ketchup and mustard. Squirting some of each on my sleeve, I proceeded to rub the concoction together up and down my arm in an orange sludge. While it did not simply run off the fabric and fall on the floor as some Schoeller literature seemed to portend, the condiments did appear to sit on the surface of the fabric.

After letting it congeal for a couple minutes, the ketchup and mustard still did not soak in or adhere to the NanoSphere fabric in any way. Indeed, after running a bit of water on the jacket's sleeve to wash away the mess, the fabric was clean as new. It also was completely odor free, even when I stuck my nose right up to the sleeve for a sniff.

For some further testing, I took my bike out one muddy day to let the jacket get nice and splattered. Again, the mud stuck on the fabric as you'd expect, but with a simple swipe of a wet cloth, it wiped clean.

Fabrics that incorporate Schoeller's NanoSphere coating are currently

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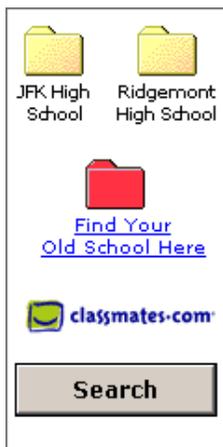
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used in the making of backpacks, shells, shirts, pants and other products from companies including Cloudveil, Granite Gear, Mammut, Outdoor Research, Beyond Fleece and Westcomb.

Granite Gear's new Latitude Vapor backpack, another product I looked at for this test, uses NanoSphere on its stretchy exterior paneling.

A new nanotechnology Schoeller announced earlier this year allows NanoSphere to be applied to cotton and natural-fiber-blend textiles. Watch for this feature to soon move beyond the outdoors industry for use on ties, dress shirts, pants, skirts and other workaday apparel.

Stephen Regenold is a Minneapolis freelance writer and the founding editor of the climbing magazine Vertical Jones. Contact him at sregenold@hotmail.com.

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