Battling with the elements is something that every amateur astronomer has to learn about. Having to contend with ice, winds and light pollution, only then to have your observing session cut short by cloud can be infuriating. So, of necessity, you have to learn to make the very best use of the observing time that you have. Half the battle is preparation. Here we offer a few quick tips on preparing to observe — information that could be useful to anyone longing for that next clear night.

Firstly, at 3 a.m. we are not at our best and it’s easy to forget what caught our eye when we last browsed The Webb Society handbooks. So, on cloudy nights make a list of the objects that you want to see, in order of priority. Use an atlas, planisphere or planetarium software such as the excellent Skymap to determine at what time of night they will be visible. Alternatively, plan your evening’s observing using software such as SACREP a shareware package from the Saguaro Astronomical Club web page to obtain a list of objects of the type that you are most interested in. When creating an observing list, remember to take your surroundings into account. Is the view limited in any direction by street lights or nearby trees and houses?

It’s also useful to mark on your list the atlas page on which each object can be found, particularly if you are using something like the SAO Star Atlas or Uranometria, where each page covers only a small part of the sky. It’s also worth grading each object on a scale
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of 1 to 3 – 1 for bright objects, 3 for nights when you push the envelope, 2 for average nights.

Unexpected clear nights can creep up on you, so keep your scope ready to go. Make sure equipment is well maintained, batteries are charged and eyepieces and filters are close to hand or packed and ready to go. Keep a checklist or plan of what you need – and use it!

Be sure you have to hand a torch fitted with a deep-red filter and a spare set of batteries and bulbs. Some are made from thermoplastics which become hard on cold nights and are impossible to switch on. It is also worthwhile checking how your rechargeable batteries respond to low temperatures. Some batteries and LCD displays are useless when things get really chilly.

As most active observers know, always show respect for the weather. If it’s cold, dress as if you were off on a polar expedition – two pairs of socks, jogging bottoms over thick trousers, a t-shirt, fleece, padded shirt, coat, scarf, hat and gloves. Possibly even a balaclava. Ski jackets, gloves, boots or trousers are also winners. Consider taking an old telephone directory in a plastic bag with you. Standing on it will insulate your feet from the ground, keeping them a lot warmer – sounds silly but it works!

Figure 3.1 What the well-dressed observer is wearing.
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