

# LIGHTWEIGHT BACKPACKING

By Margarite Hoefler • December, 2009

**A**re you considering backpacking for the first time? Or, are you very experienced but now find that it is physically difficult to carry all that stuff and still enjoy the trip? Well lucky you—a new age has dawned for backpacking with new materials, innovations and techniques. With so much information available on the Internet it can be overwhelming. This is a brief guide to get you started with your research. Your choice of gear will be dictated by considering some of the following questions:

1) What do you plan to do: Several nights in the Ozarks in summer and fall, **or** a full week in the high mountains out West, **or** walking the whole Appalachian Trail within one year?

2) What is your style: do you plan to run through 15 miles a day and only briefly sleep in camp, **or** is a 6 mile day and a comfortable camp more to your liking?

3) What are your priorities: are you most interested in taking time for photography or birding, **or** anxious to see everything possible with little stopping?

4) What kind of body do you have: are you a cold sleeper and get chilled easily, **or** are you always too hot when others are wrapping up?

## Regarding equipment

The first consideration is the shelter. It, more than anything, will dictate the size of pack you will need because of its bulk and high weight. There

always seems to be a compromise when it comes to weight vs. function.

■ If your priority is to get the absolutely lightest gear then a tarp is the staple of most lightweights. However it can have some disadvantages: bugs, difficult to set up for rain protection, colder. A tarp can be as light as 1 lb.

■ Very popular now are single walled waterproof tents. They are relatively light with lots of room and the added protection of a bug screen. However when the warmth generated from your body hits the cold tent surface, it is likely that condensation will happen—drips can rain down on you when you touch or shake the walls. How much water damage and whether it is a problem can depend on the weather and your tolerance for dealing with it. (Tarptent)

■ The traditional tent is made of two walls, and inner wall that is a breathable material to allow the moisture to go through it and condense on the waterproof outer wall. This allows more movement inside without getting wet. However these tend to be heavier, though a solo tent under 2 1/2 pounds can be found. (Big Agnes or REI)

■ Another category is a breathable/waterproof single walled tent, but because of the high cost, there is little information as to how well it works in all situations.

A lot of research and experimentation will need to be done to find the right level of weight vs. comfort with clothing.

Sleeping bags fall into two categories:

1) Down sleeping bags seem to be the norm because of their efficiency and low weight. They must be kept dry or they are useless. (Western Mountaineering)

2) Synthetic filled bags have more bulk and weight but can still be warm when wet.

Sleeping pads give protection from the cold ground.

■ Closed cell pads will not absorb water, are very light and indestructible, but may not be very comfortable.

■ Self-inflating pads offer more comfort but need to be protected from punctures.

I ended up taking a thin version of each to have a soft bed and sitting pad for around camp.

There is much to consider before purchasing a backpack:

■ Do not purchase a new pack until you have decided on the tent, sleeping bag and sleeping pad, clothes and stove/fuel. Calculate the cubic inches (ci) of your old pack or one you have available, fill it up and decide on the ci needed for the new equipment. For a week in the cold mountains 2 1/2 Yellow Pages books are close to the space and weight of the food you will carry.

■ Even if your full pack was down to a total of only 20 pounds, I would still recommend getting one with a padded hip belt. It distributes the

weight to the strongest muscles in the legs. Carrying that weight only on your shoulders is, in my opinion, not for the average person.

■ Pay attention to the recommended weight carrying capacity of the models you are considering. Exceeding them may result in an uncomfortable pack.

■ Volume is critical. As an example, to carry all I needed to keep my cold body warm, I needed 4000 ci. Most lightweights expect to utilize only 2000 to 3000 ci. Most companies list the volume by counting the outside pockets and the fully extended top when posting the specifications.

■ Judge your packs by what you actually need and will take; do not guess and expect it all to fit. My pack alone went from 5 1/2 pounds to less than 2 pounds (Six Moons Design-Comet).

Be aware that much of the lightweight equipment is manufactured by “mom and pop” shops that do not have a huge supply on hand. Call months ahead about availability and their return policy. Most lightweight equipment is only available online and needs to be purchased to try them on.

Much of the time there is a compromise in durability when going with the lighter gear because that is where the weight savings take place. Quality workmanship is still expected but so is care on the trail by the owner. No worries, chances are you will not start off with the perfect gear first time and be satisfied for the next 15 years. New materials are constantly being utilized for packs and tents that may be even lighter than today's.

The online community mostly uses

the term ‘baseweight’ meaning all your gear and your pack but not variable items like food, water and fuel. For a week long mountain trip I used to carry about 50 lbs with a baseweight of 35 lbs. By replacing all my major gear I reduced the pack to 30 lbs with a baseweight of 22 lbs. My back and feet were much happier. Realistically if a person was willing to do the research, and spend the money on quality gear to invest in a sport that they expect to last 10 years or more, one could get the baseweight to 15-20 lbs. Some extreme hikers can go out with 5-10 lbs. baseweight but that is not the goal for the average person. It is difficult to evaluate how comfortable and safe they are.

Which brings me to another issue. When discussion happens online it is difficult to know the perspective of the writer. A very fit 20 year old in the Sierra Nevada range of CA racing down the trails may not be the best resource of information for a 50 year old's vacation plans. Being a ‘cold’ person, when I have checked out some of the gear lists I realize that I would risk hypothermia with as little as they are taking. Know yourself; it is not a contest for the lowest weight. Hike your own hike. My little mascot, raggedy Andy, still goes in my pack even though he weighs 1 ounce.

You would be surprised how much weight reduction you can accomplish without even buying one item. Counting ounces really does work and it is a major technique that the lightweights use to make huge reductions. Get a scale and weigh socks and food and stuffsacks and everything.

Comfort is hard to quantify especially for a new person starting out. Lightweight should not mean a

compromise in safety! To be warm, dry, fed, hydrated, comfortable and SAFE is always the goal.

One of the best resources online is Lightweight Backpacking Magazine. Most of the information is available without spending the \$20 for a membership.

Research equipment on Backpack Gear Test—backpackgeartest.org. If you need specific questions answered, go to Yahoo Groups and join “Lightweight Backpacking.” (May I suggest you use an email that is not your primary address; you are likely to get spam from the message board sites.)

For the beginner here in KCOC I have several thorough articles gleaned from my 3 decades in the wilderness and would be happy to email or send them to you. They are:

- Language of Maps-prevention of getting lost
- Principles of Keeping Warm
- Wilderness Water Crossings
- Desert Backpacking and Hiking
- Boots
- Blister Care

If you would like a copy, contact me at [cimmaron\\_sun@yahoo.com](mailto:cimmaron_sun@yahoo.com).

Remember that lightening the load means taking all that you need for the expected situation but utilizing that 4 pound piece of gear between your ears for anything else that comes up. Do the homework at home and then get out and fully relax and enjoy the wilderness. The gear is not the point; it is only the tool to allow a safe and fun adventure.