

Going Light

Slimming down your gear to go faster and farther



SCOTT HARDER

Ultralight hiking is all the rage these days. By taking a hard look at what you carry into the backcountry, you can lighten your load and go faster and farther. A tent or bivy sack (not pictured) completes the slimmed-down assortment.

BY SCOTT HARDER

The light-and-fast style of hiking and climbing is all the rage these days—open just about any hiking or climbing magazine, or browse any gear store, and you're likely to find something to reduce your load and increase your speed. Lightweight tents, micro-light jackets, titanium spoons. It's all designed to help you go lighter and go farther.

Nearly all of us have overpacked at one time or another. At least I have. I'd prepare for a long trip for 2 to 3 days and end up with a 50- to 60-pound pack, loaded to the brim with stuff that I *might* need. I always filled my

backpack because an empty spot inside must mean I'd forgotten something. After a few trips like that (which were painful at best) I knew I must be doing something wrong.

So I went through my pack, piece by piece. Many obscure things I found that were larger and heavier than needed included items like my first aid kit, kitchen kit and knife. All of these things can be paired down to minimal weight with new light items like a compact first aid kit and pocketknives that only contain a blade and have a simple plastic housing. (First aid training—which weighs nothing—is a crucial part of any first aid kit.) Kitchen kits can also weigh a lot, since they're built to

organize your loose items, and have many unnecessary pockets and features that can start to add weight. Think about using plastic Ziploc bags to organize your stuff—they're cheap, easy to use, and you can see exactly what's inside them. But the main things that weigh people down are all the little things that you think are essentials. You certainly shouldn't neglect to bring the 10 essentials, but don't let it turn into the 24 essentials. Go through your stuff and eliminate duplicated items, things that are heavier than average. Titanium is a great way to shave down the weight, but a higher price always follows.

One essential item to have when reducing weight is a scale. Make sure

you have an accurate digital scale that can measure ounces—Softfield Technology in Ontario (www.softfield.com) sells a variety of reasonably priced digital scales. Don't be afraid to weigh everything you have and compare them to similar items online. Also remember that vendors' "packaged weight" is sometimes different than the real world weight. Make a list of all your items and the weight of each, and start to analyze where you think you can shave weight and not have to spend a whole lot of money.

When at all possible, pack items that serve multiple functions—no need for a camp chair if you're happy sitting on your sleeping pad; some trekking poles double as camera monopods. Also, hiking alone increases per-person weight. Bring a buddy along and split up the tent.

My original pack volume was 5,200 cubic inches and averaged about 50 pounds for an overnight backpacking trip. My goal was to lighten the load by eliminating some of the heavier core

Cheap and Light

Five inexpensive tips for lightening your load

- Try cheap, light, flip-flop sandals for camp shoes.
- Bring an old Cool Whip container as a food bowl.
- Doing a multi-day, base camp-style hike? Leave the day pack at home, empty your backpack in camp and use that as a day pack.
- Leave the stuff sacks at home. Your pack will pack better, and this weight saving idea won't cost you a cent.
- A synthetic pack towel will run you less than a ten-spot and is lighter and more absorbent than a cotton hand towel.

—Allison Woods

items and get the pack down to 35 pounds inside a 3,000 cubic inch pack. I started with things like my sleeping bag, tent, sleeping pad, backpack, and cooking hardware.

There are always some disadvantages to hiking light, especially giving up some of those luxury items that you learned to love over the years. This means that thick, comfy mattress pad, your heavily padded backpack, the large 4-liter pot, and the roomy three-person tent you used for two people. It's not that difficult to get used to this new style of hiking, since the payoff is generally worth it in the end. Would you rather bring a thick novel and a lounge chair? Just remember you might be too exhausted to enjoy the view from camp.

Also think about your boots. Many of us like big, sturdy boots, but if you look for something lighter these days you may be surprised. One rule of thumb is that one pound on the feet is equal to five pounds on the back. Trading in those 4-pound boots for a pair of 2-pound light-hikers could decrease your pack weight by almost 10 pounds!

Sleeping Bag

When I got my first bag, it was a 20-degree synthetic bag that weighed about 4 pounds. It kept me warm, and I was warned about how down bags in the Northwest were taboo. Synthetic bags don't compress nearly as much as down bags do, but they have the advantage of insulating even when wet. Down is worthless if the insulation gets damp. Plenty of things have changed now. One of the best things to come

along is DWR (durable water repellent) fabric finish. This finish can last seasons and will not allow water in, but lets perspiration out. You can find this technology in many new three-season and four-season down bags.

Sleeping Pad

You can lose a few ounces, perhaps a pound, if you switch from a standard-size inflatable pad to a shorter, lighter



Weight loss program: the author's pack after slimming down. A nearly 50-pound pack was reduced to one weighing under 35 pounds.

version. Some folks use inexpensive, rigid foam pads to save a little weight, but unless you sleep on your back, you might find the diminished comfort not worth the weight savings.

Tent

This is the big one for a lot of us. Many of us refuse to give up our comfy four-season tent that weighs in excess of 7 pounds, but in the end it hurts you more during the day than the comfort

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it provides at night. A four-season tent is a nice luxury, but if you only hike in summer, it's overkill. A good, lightweight three-season tent (see "Gear We've Tried," July 2005 *Washington Trails*) is sufficient for most hikers who spend time in the Cascades and Olympics. Many tents made today offer the option of setting up only the rain fly and an optional ground cloth for times when a full tent isn't necessary.

Other options include packing a lightweight tarp-and-line setup—this involves some skill in setting up a shelter using a pair of trekking poles. A more expensive option, one that's useful if you do a lot of solo hiking, is to purchase a bivouac or "bivy" sack. New, superlight bivy sacks weigh under 2 pounds, and have a built-in apparatus that gives you a little bit of headroom.

Stove and Pot

Stoves are getting lighter all the time, but if you're using a standard liquid fuel stove, you're probably carrying more stove than you need. For anything but four-season use, canister or alcohol stoves will serve you well, and save you a load of weight. Canister stoves are light and cheap, boil water quickly, but still allow for simmering. Alcohol stoves (like the homemade "pop can stove") are even lighter, cheaper and simpler, but don't simmer as well as canister stoves and take longer to boil water. Try ditching the stove altogether and relying on foods that don't require cooking, though don't be surprised if one no-cook trip satisfies that curiosity. Don't plan to rely on campfires—they scar the fragile landscape, and aren't allowed in most high-country regions of the Cascades and Olympics.

A titanium pot and spoon can save you some weight, but don't imagine that a whole array of titanium spoons, tea pots, colanders and such will save you weight. The only thing gear like that is liable to lighten is your wallet.

Food

Food is one of the 10 essentials, and you should always bring a bit more food than you need in case of an



Put your pack on a diet: Weighing every item you carry is an important step when slimming your pack weight. Tent, stove and water treatment are areas to shed pounds.

emergency. Still, you can reduce the weight of food necessary for an overnight trip. Forsake the can of Vienna Sausages for more lightweight fare—powdered hummus is a light, high-protein food. Focus on high-energy foods that give you more bang per ounce, like energy bars, dried fruits and gorp. Prepackaged, dehydrated meals are now available in an endless array of choices and prices. These meals have the advantage of cooking quickly to reduce the amount of fuel you'll need to carry. Oh, and all you coffee hounds: leave the espresso maker at home. A mix of Folger's instant Caffe Latte supplemented with a teaspoon of instant espresso makes a fair substitute for your daily latte.

Water

Obviously, you can't eliminate water from your pack, but you can change how you think about treating and storing it. Water filters aren't a huge burden in the weight department, but if you want to trim additional ounces, consider a lighter method to treat your

water. Katadyn Micropur MP1 Drinking Water Tablets are the only tablet method approved by the EPA for treating water (Iodine doesn't kill cryptosporidium) and are very lightweight. Try bringing along lemonade or other drink powders if you don't like the taste, which is similar to municipal water. Or consider MSR's MIOX electronic water purification system, which uses two camera batteries and table salt to purify water and gives the same taste to the water as the tablets. The process can take more time than pumping, and the hefty price tag (\$129.95) is another consideration. But it weighs a mere 3.5 ounces. Also, when hiking, consider treating water more often and thus carrying less water at one time. Whenever you treat water, drink up before topping off containers.

Clothing

Look for a lightweight down jacket that has a DWR finish, and only bring a shell jacket instead of adding a fleece jacket. Down jackets compress better than fleece and can always be regulated for heat. They also make a comfy pillow or extra insulation for cold nights.

Trekking Poles

Poles themselves won't reduce your pack weight, but they will help redistribute the weight you carry. Poles can help take some of the weight off your legs, and aid in propelling you up the mountain. When shopping for poles, look for sturdy but lightweight versions.

Conclusions

This is just a start for anyone looking to lighten their load on overnight backpacking trips. By applying these tips, you can plan to reduce that 50-pound pack to 35 pounds or less. After that, you can go out and buy your new 3,000 cubic inch overnight pack (saving another 2 to 3 pounds) and still have room for Thai food and that novel you've been meaning to read! ♦

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