

Tips for Backpacking Light

This guide is a compilation of tips and tricks gathered from different trips and treks taken in the past, inside and outside of scouting. It's just one view and there is plenty more to learn but should at least provide a background to begin reducing your backpack weight.

The best opportunity to cut the most weight from your trip is when selecting the three things that are the largest and heaviest items you will carry on any backpacking trip; your backpack, sleeping bag, and tent - the Big-3.

Choosing these three items wisely provides the greatest opportunity to shed the most weight. After that it is still possible to reduce significant amounts of additional weight but you must make many small reductions in many different places. You will need to think and be a little creative to cut significant weight beyond these three large items. There are a lot of tips here but first, consider the Big-3.

1. Backpack
2. Sleeping Bag
3. Tent

It's not too difficult to keep the combined weight of these items at about 10 to 12 pounds. This won't put you in the ultralight category but for a casual, occasional backpacker this is probably a good target. As you approach ultralight weights you also quickly approach ultra-expensive price tags.

Since you are usually hiking with a buddy, you will each carry half of the tent. My tent weighs slightly less than 6 pounds so my share is about 3 pounds. Combine that with a 3 pound sleeping bag (rated for 25 degrees) and a 5 pound backpack and the total is about 11 pounds.

The tent weight is determined by how large of a tent you want and what materials it is made from. The weight of your sleeping bag can be managed by your choice of fill material and the expected low temperatures you may encounter. The weight of your backpack can be managed by the volume of stuff you plan to carry. My tent is a little larger, rated for 3 people even though it is only used for two. It's a creature comfort I am willing to carry the extra weight for. My sleeping bag is synthetic fill and rated for 25 degrees. A bag with down fill would be lighter and more compressible but also more expensive. My backpack is a big one that can hold 90 liters. Put it all together and you get 11 pounds.

Ultralight purists would scoff at this weight but you need to balance comfort, cost, and the need to carry enough for you to be safe wherever you are headed. If you can get below 9 or 10 pounds though, that would be fantastic! Nice job. (4 lb. pack, 3 lb. tent, 2 lb. sleeping bag)

By the way, a bear canister, if you need it, would make it the Big- 4.

Everything Else

Now that the obvious areas for saving weight have been covered, it's time to get smart and examine other areas that make it possible to lighten the load even more and enjoy the outdoor experience that you are planning. This is where the real fun begins.

Your remaining gear choices will depend on several factors specific to your trip. How many days is your trip? What is the weather forecast? Do you really need that whole bottle of sun screen when just an ounce will be plenty?

Tip #1 Weigh Everything!

Get a digital scale that measures weight in grams, not just ounces. Weigh each piece of gear and write it down. Take the scale with you to the store when making purchases if it will help. Build a spreadsheet so you can see the effect of your choices and changes immediately. The heavy gear will jump off the page. Many more small differences will appear and will surprise you at the differences in items you would not expect to be much different from each other. It can be very enlightening and you will make much better decisions.

As you consider different items, ask yourself if it is an item you "need" or is an item you "want but could live without". Your choices will vary from trip to trip just as each trip varies from destination to destination. There is no such thing as a "one size-fits-all" gear list.

Tip #2 Learn how to adapt gear to multi-purpose use so you can leave single purpose gear at home.

Socks can be hand warmers. Backpack metal stays can be splints. Stuff sacks can be pillows. Learning how to **multi-task with fewer items and accomplish the same goals** will allow you to shed weight but remain safe.

Suppose you're going someplace where it usually rains in the afternoon then usually gets breezy and cool for the rest of the day. Of course you need the rain shell, but a lot of us have fleece sweaters and you might be tempted to bring one along for the cool evenings, as well as a jacket in case it gets even colder than expected or breezy. Yes, fleece is warm but not windproof, so you might cut weight by leaving the fleece at home and just taking the jacket and a rain shell.

Yes, you "might" do that. But...the best choice is to leave the windproof jacket at home and take just the fleece and rain shell. The fleece can be made windproof by layering it with the rain shell to create a warm jacket. This **gives the rain shell a dual purpose and trims weight** because the fleece is probably lighter than the jacket and less bulky in your pack. The fleece is also more comfortable to sleep in than a jacket which allows the fleece to be multipurpose as

well. Fleece dries very fast and sleeping in fleece may also allow you to carry a slightly lighter sleeping bag.

Tip #3 Pack No Cotton

If you haven't heard it enough already, here it is again. Cotton fabrics are NEVER a good choice for backpacking. Cotton fabrics are **much heavier** than synthetic fabrics. Much heavier. Dry cotton is heavy when compared to synthetics but wet cotton can be more than 10 times heavier than dry cotton. **Lighten your load and minimize bulk by leaving the cotton at home.**

Not only are synthetics extremely light weight, but they dry quickly and compress very small. That's not just a win-win situation it's a win-win-win situation in favor of synthetic clothing.

- Less weight
- Less bulk
- Faster to dry

Try not to take any more than 2 sets of clothes; the one that you are wearing and the one that is in your pack. Believe it or not, that is enough no matter how many days your trip is. If you are just going overnight then you don't even need to put any clothes in your backpack. Laundry can be done in a Ziploc bag and dried at night or on the back of your pack as you hike.

Tip #4 Convertible Pants are good multi-taskers

Convertible pants allow you to leave your shorts AND long pants both at home. Even more weight can be trimmed by purchasing two pairs of convertible pants and leaving one pair of the legs at home. Now you can attach the one pair of legs to whichever pair of shorts you are wearing. You have the equivalent of two pair of shorts and two pair of long pants with no more weight and bulk than two pair of synthetic shorts and some leggings.

Tip #5 Repackage liquids into smaller bottles

If you don't need full bottles of soap, bug spray, and sunscreen then they should each be repackaged into smaller squeeze bottles (1, 2, or 4 oz. size with flip top dropper) and stored in Ziploc bags to insure against leaks. Don't take an entire bottle when you or your group only needs part of it. If it is something shared among your group then make sure only one or at most two people carry it. Determine how much the group needs and only take that amount.

Walmart sells an **unscented time release bug spray** that applies like sunscreen and lasts 8 hours. Unscented is a nice attribute when venturing into bear country. It should still be bear-bagged at night but anything that helps you to not smell like bear food can only be good.

Many scouts use Camp Suds for soap but I prefer a product called, “**Dr. Bronner’s Unscented Pure Castile Soap**”. A couple of drops go a long way and this soap is a very popular choice for backpacking. Both are good soaps and biodegradable but that just means bacteria will eventually break them down. Until that occurs it is still bad for soap to get into backcountry water supplies. An algae bloom can result which can be toxic for aquatic life. So do not rinse dishes, laundry, or yourself close to water. Remember leave no trace and keep the grey water at least 200 feet from lakes and streams.

There are many places online that sell reliable flip top bottles that don’t leak. Find some and repackage your soap, sunscreen, and repellants into them. Many retail stores carry the Coughlan’s brand of bottles in the camping gear section but I have not found this brand of bottles to be reliable and **do not recommend** them. Test everything before hitting the trail.

Tip #6 Pillows are heavy

Leave the pillow at home and take just a travel pillow **case** with you. At night, stuff the pillow case with clothes and use that as a pillow. A pillow can be heavier than you think. Weigh it and see. I have a small travel pillow that weighs 8 ounces (1/2 pound). It also adds unnecessary bulk in your pack. Take nothing larger than a **travel** pillow case otherwise you might not have enough clothes to adequately stuff it and make a comfortable pillow. Stuff it with rain gear and fleece. You could use spare clothes except in bear country if you cooked in them. Put the softer clothes or fleece on the face-side of the pillow on top of the rain gear.

Tip #7 Mesh is lighter and easier to use than nylon stuff sacks

Use mesh dunk bags instead of nylon stuff sacks. Surprisingly, dunk bags are quite a bit lighter than nylon stuff sacks and because they are mesh, it is much easier and faster to find what you are looking for. A square foot of nylon mesh is 40% lighter than a square foot of typical nylon.

Tip #8 HDPE Water Bottles are lighter

Water bottles (like Nalgene or Camelbak) that are made from HDPE plastic are quite a bit lighter than the hard plastic bottles made of Lexan or Tritan from the same manufacturers. The HDPE plastic is no less durable and is universally accepted as a safer food grade plastic.

Tip #9 Multi-tools are too heavy

Leave the multi-tool at home. Even though they are multi-taskers, they aren’t tasks that you need. A small single blade folding knife is adequate. The only thing you may need a knife for is to open food pouches. A small blade is still adequate to cut rope or make tinder. I have a multi-tool and also a single blade Gerber folding knife. The multi-tool weighs 8.5 ounces. The small Gerber weighs just 1/2 ounce; an 8 ounce difference. That alone would be enough

to let you bring your camp pillow along and still have something to cut with. My choice though would be to leave both the multi-tool and the pillow at home and save a whole pound.

Tip #10 Bring just a bowl and a spoon

A plastic butter tub works well for a bowl and is usually lighter than a mess kit bowl. Don't bring a complete mess kit on a trip. The only part that is needed is a bowl. "Maybe" a plastic cup too. The only utensil needed is a spoon. A long handle spoon makes eating pouch foods easier.

Tip #11 Learn how to hold trekking poles correctly

Use a pair and not just a single hiking staff. Wooden staffs might look "cool" but they are heavy and do not provide the same benefit that a good light pair of hiking poles provides.

Poles are worth every penny. Lighten the load on your knees by learning to **use your trekking pole wrist straps correctly**. The intuitive way to hold a trekking pole — reaching through the strap and grabbing the handle — is in fact the wrong way to hold it. Here are a couple of ways to describe the correct way.

- a. Hold the end of the strap and let the pole dangle in the air.
- b. Put your hand through the strap and then move down to grab the pole handle.

OR

- a. Hold the strap horizontally away from the vertical pole.
- b. Insert your other hand into the strap from "below" then grab the handle of the pole.

The fabric of the strap crosses the back of your hand parallel to your watch and also passes between your palm and the pole handle. The strap now supports the weight of your arm and doesn't require you to maintain a tight grip on the pole. Do not clutch the pole in a death grip as you might when skiing.

Tip #12 Tyvek tent footprint and/or dining fly

A very light yet durable tarp or tent footprint can be made with a piece of Tyvek house wrap. For use as a dining fly simply add grommets at the corners and middle of the edges. Use hiking poles to support it and parachute cord to guy it out.

Tip #13 A soaked pack is a heavier pack

When it is raining, open your pack as little as possible. Every time you open your pack or take the cover off, a bit more rain will soak in. This wetness builds up and weighs you down.

Store all of your snacks and heavy-use items in pockets or on the outside of the pack to minimize this effect.

Tip #14 Don't go crazy with the carabiners.

Most everything should be "in" your pack anyway. Don't bring more than 1 or 2 carabiners. They can be used to hang wet clothes on your pack or to carry a water bottle with you while on a side trip without a backpack.

Tip #15 Para cord

Twenty feet should be plenty. It's light and very useful, but remember, you're not climbing Everest. Twenty feet is enough. Can use it to guy out a tent or dining fly, make a boot lace, or lash gear to your pack. Choose a bright color so you can see it without tripping.

Tip #16 Trash compactor bag

Cheap insurance to protect your sleeping bag and keep it dry while in your pack.

Tip #17 Carry a small repair kit.

- One or two single-use tubes of Super Glue
- Sleep pad puncture repair kit
- Cable ties (3)
- Heavy duty sewing needle and thread (or dental floss)
- Duct tape (2 feet, wrapped around a pencil or trekking pole)
- Safety pin (1)
- Wire paper clip (1)

Don't forget duct tape can be used to prevent a blister if a hot spot begins to develop on a foot.

Tip #18 Water Scoop

Platypus style water bags and hydration bladders can be difficult to fill if a running water source is not available or if the water source is too shallow. One remedy is to cut the top off of a cheap plastic platypus style ½ liter bag and use the bag as a scoop. The scoop adds virtually no weight but greatly improves the task of collecting water in some circumstances.

Tip #19 Pre-filter water "floaties" with a metal mesh coffee filter

Pour water through a metal screen coffee filter to remove any "floaties" that might be present in a low flow water situation. This helps prevent your water filter from clogging. A metal

screen coffee filter is light and durable. A paper coffee filter can also be used but may not be as convenient or as durable.

Tip #20 Cathole Trowel Etiquette

If you are the person carrying the cathole trowel for the group, demand that when someone returns the trowel to you, **they must hold the blade in their full hand and offer you the handle.** This will prevent people from poking the trowel into the pile while they cover the waste. If they forget ... they get to carry the trowel. (I'd carry the blade part in a plastic bag anyway instead of in contact with my backpack)

Tip #21 Sit Pad

Don't sit on your pack, especially if you have a hydration bladder, platypus bottles, or anything squeezable or crushable inside. You could damage your water filter or stove or food. You could also squeeze sunscreen everywhere inside your pack. Yuck.

A cheap pad for sitting on (especially when everything is wet) can be made by cutting off a section of a closed cell foam sleep pad. Cut off a piece sized to fit in your pack. This can also help protect the pack contents from water or to protect your back from protruding objects.

A sit pad also gives you something to stand on when washing yourself. Hmm, sounds like a multi-tasker.

Tip #22 Cheap, Lightweight Wash Basin

This is purely a convenience item but carries almost no weight. Give this a try as a way to help clean yourself and make you more comfortable at night.

Cut off a one-gallon plastic milk jug and use the bottom half as a basin. It can fit over the end of your sleeping bag in your backpack. Fill it with water and use it for laundry or personal hygiene when you are near water. Remember leave no trace principles. Don't use it within 200 feet of a water source.

Tip #23 One-Gallon Washing Machine

Use a one-gallon Ziploc freezer bag to wash clothing in. Put in one garment or a pair of socks, add water, and seal it up. Squeeze the water around and shake it up. Drain the water and hang up the garment to dry or wear it. Could add 2 or 3 drops of soap then wash, drain, and rinse with fresh water. Remember to wash at least 200 ft from a water source if using soap.

Tip #24 Personal Hygiene

- Carry a small bottle of hand sanitizer in your pocket and use it frequently.
- Carry a small bottle of isopropyl alcohol and some cotton balls. Soak the cotton with the alcohol and give yourself a rub down at night under the arms, feet and groin area. You'll be amazed at how dirty the cotton becomes - yes, that all came off you - and how much better you feel afterwards. It makes for a light weight to carry but has big benefits. Once a day is good enough. Using alcohol too frequently will dry your skin and could cause irritation.
- Carry a bandana and a small bottle of biodegradable soap to give yourself an occasional sponge bath -- at least your face, underarms, groin, and feet. This reduces chafing, odors, and bacteria. You'll sleep better if you're not so sticky everywhere. Consider including in your pack a wash basin cut from a plastic 1-gallon jug.

Tip #25 Wrist Watch

Good to have something that you can use to pace yourself especially if nightfall will be coming into play. Also nice to have something you can see in the middle of the night without a flashlight.