



BACKPACKING

"A Walk In The Woods"

A GUIDE TO BACKPACKING GEAR

Compiled by
Dale Owens

Dale Owens Backpacking Guide

When I went to Philmont to participate in Walking Woodbadge, I had never before been backpacking more than a few miles and a single night. I discovered I had much to learn. I learned much while on Walking Woodbadge, but knew I must learn more. I read a book by Colin Fletcher entitled The Complete Walker III. What I had learned at Philmont was confirmed and much new knowledge was added. I heartily recommend to each of the readers of this “Guide” that you obtain a copy of The Complete Walker III and read it before you take your first extended backpacking trip. The book is without equal. It is 668 pages in length, so it is not an evening read. But, it is well worth the time and effort. It also contains a twenty page index so it will continue to be useful long after you have pursued it’s pages.

My intention is not to rewrite the book, but merely to whet your appetite for it and for backpacking in general. I know of no better way to enjoy God’s creation than to go backpacking. There you will find yourself far from civilization and able to experience something of the majesty of the world around us.

Mostly I want to concentrate my efforts on the equipment needed to successfully backpack. Some few comments will be made on other issues, but before a person can backpack, he must have proper equipment.

Colin Fletcher organized his book by describing the “House on Your Back”. He then broke it down into its various components. I will follow the same plan.

Before we delve into the house and it’s components, consider

Weight.

The rules are:

1. If you need something, take it.
2. Pare away relentlessly at the weight of every item.

Notice the key word here is “need.” Not just that someone else has an item. Or that it is the latest and greatest among backpacking gear. But that you “need” it. Then remember that you want the lightest version possible.

A backpacker, especially a younger one, should not carry more than 25% of his body weight. This will limit boys to the essentials and not allow them to carry much more than they truly need.

Cost.

A word here about cost. Buy the best you can afford—and then step up to next best item. This might mean you can't buy all you want or need immediately. But what it does mean, is that you buy quality over quantity. It took me several years to obtain all of my present gear and will probably take a few more to get everything I want. Allow me to repeat myself, buy quality over quantity.

Colin Fletcher put it this way: “The only really satisfactory way to approach the price problem is to ignore it. Good equipment always seems expensive, but whenever you find yourself scowling at a price tag in a store try to remember that out in the wilds, where money is meaningless, the failure of a single item can easily ruin a trip. It may even endanger your life.” Enough said.

Since this is true, what are the essential items to purchase first? (Things you can't presently afford can be borrowed, rented or temporarily done without.)

Essentials.

Obviously, some things are absolutely necessary to go backpacking.

1. A backpack.
2. Boots.
3. A sleeping bag.
4. Rain gear.
5. A tent.

Most other items can be put off until a later date. Also, a word to parents: if your son is still not fully-grown physically, do not feel you must buy the best of things he will soon outgrow. Buy less expensive gear that is serviceable for shorter backpacking trips and wait until a major expedition such as a Philmont Trek to buy the more expensive items.

Just a word about conditioning. Get in shape. Actually that is three words. A backpacking trip will lose much of its enjoyment if you hurt the whole trip. The best way to get in shape for backpacking is to hike short then longer distances with a backpack loaded as you would for a backpacking trip.

On to the House on Your Back.

The Foundation.

The cornerstone of the house on your back are your feet and their footwear, and the cornerstone is a good pair of

BOOTS.

There are five basic categories of boots:

1. Sneakers.
2. Running shoes.
3. Lightweight hiking boots.
4. Midweight hiking boots.
5. Traditional or heavy weight hiking boots.

Sneakers or running shoes (with high tops if available) are sufficient for most weekend hiking trips we take as a Scout Troop. Lightweight or midweight hiking boots are sufficient for trips to Philmont. Midweight boots are necessary for heavier boys carrying heavier loads, but lightweight boots are generally acceptable. The heavy weight boot is too heavy for our uses and the expense is considerable.

I will be quoting prices from the 1996 Campmor catalogue and the 1996 Backpacker Gear Guide so you can have an idea of cost. Prices will vary from place to place, so shop around. Also, every store will not carry every brand, so be diligent in your selection and you can enjoy the boots for several years—unless of course you outgrow them.

Prices for boots range from around \$30 for the lightweights to over \$400 for the better heavy weights. Some of the better brands are Asolo, Danner, Hi-Tec, Merrell, Nike, Raichie and Vasque. A good pair of hiking boots can be purchased for around \$100.

If possible buy boots that are lined with Gore-Tex since they are waterproof. If not, put a waterproofing treatment such as Nikwax on them. Not only will it keep the feet drier, it will also lengthen the life of the boot.

If you take good care of your boots they will last much longer and be more serviceable. When you return from a hike, clean the boots and be sure they are dry. Otherwise, you risk mildew damage and the boots will not last long. When drying boots, do not dry them under intense heat, but let them air dry—*slowly*. If they are wet inside, stuff them with loosely with newspaper. *Never* put wet boots close to a fire or other direct heat source.

SOCKS.

Two pair of socks should be worn while hiking. An inner thin layer such as polypropylene and heavier wool socks as an outer layer. This system wicks moisture away from the feet. This will prevent blisters and sore feet by keeping the feet drier. Socks range in price from \$3 to \$9 a pair. Two sets of socks are generally all that are necessary.

GAITERS.

Gaiters help keep feet dry when walking through wet grass, wading shallow streams and hiking in the snow. They accomplish this by covering the top of the boot and keeping water from

coming in over the top of the boot. They also are great for walking through high, prickly grasses. Gaiters come in two basic styles. Zipper closures or velcro closures. The velcro are more dependable and thus more desirable. Gaiters range in price from \$20 to \$45. While gaiters are nice to have, they certainly are not a necessity.

WALKING STAFF.

Walking staffs have numerous uses. They help maintain a steady walking rhythm. They provide stability when traversing rough terrain or crossing streams. They provide a means to prop up a pack while resting—or a tired hiker. Walking staffs can be made from a sturdy branch of a tree. Or they can be purchased. Whichever you choose, use it wisely. It is a walking staff, not a sword. If you choose to purchase one, they range in price from \$40 to \$80.

As in all the components of the house on your back, Mr. Fletcher spends many pages on Foundations, so you can discover much more from his book. I have indicated how many pages next to each component.

Pack.

Packs come in all shapes and sizes. The fanny pack is small (200 - 400 cubic inches) and is useful for day hikes or side trips. It is most helpful in keeping much used small items close at hand. I keep such things as my compass, monocular, knife, flashlight, glasses and other necessary items in mine.

Backpacks come in two basic types: external frame packs and internal frame packs. Both types come with a shoulder harness, sternum strap and hip belt. The better the hip belt, the easier it will be to carry heavy loads. It is amazing how the sternum strap reduces shoulder fatigue.

At this point owners of each type of pack part company. There is great controversy over which type is better. I will attempt to give the highlights of external Frame Pack.

As the name suggests, the frame is on the outside of the pack. Or, the pack attaches to the frame. Most external frame packs come with multiple pockets and are easy to organize. They lend themselves to having items attached to the outside of the pack, so generally more can be carried with an external frame pack. They are best suited to hiking on established trails as opposed to cross country hiking. (Boy Scouts generally hike on trails.) Most come in either a top loader or panel loader style. External frame packs need to be loaded so the heavier items are at the top. The walking posture is more upright with an external frame back.

INTERNAL FRAME PACK.

The frame here is on the inside of the pack and can be fitted to the individual. Most internal frame packs come with either one huge compartment or two at most. This makes it more difficult to organize. Everything must fit inside the pack, so the load has to be more carefully considered. They are excellent for hiking off trails since they are more stable. If fitted properly, they are more comfortable to carry. They also have many more adjustments available. Internal

frame packs require the heavier items to be placed lower and toward the front of the pack. The walking posture is more bent over than an external frame pack. Since they hug the back closer, they are generally hotter to carry.

Whichever type of pack is selected, they must be fitted properly to the individual. If not, backpacking will be a chore not an adventure.

A final word. The best external frame pack can be purchased for about the same price as a low priced or medium priced internal frame pack.

External frame packs are made by Camp Trails, Coleman, Jansport (I think the best), Kelty, REI and Trailwise. They range in price from \$40 for beginner packs to \$200.

Internal frame backs are made by Gregory, Jansport, Kelty, Lowe Alpine, REI and The North Face. All are good, but the Gregory and The North Face are probably the best. They range in price from \$150 to \$475.

PACK COVER.

A good pack cover costs from \$20 to \$25 and is essential. Packs are not waterproof and wet gear is never desirable.

Kitchen. (132 pages.)

FOOD.

Food is pretty much individual taste. Considerations include cost, convenience in preparation, weight, nutritional value, personal preference in taste and flavor. Backpacking food generally consists of freeze dried and dehydrated. Freeze dried is easier to prepare, is available in a wide variety of meals and is light weight. It also is more expensive. Dehydrated food is cheaper, light weight, but more complicated to prepare. The cost of freeze dried meals range from about \$4 to \$9 for two people.

POTS.

The best set of pots is the MSR XPD Cooking system with heat exchanger. It is rather expensive, but will last a lifetime and contains all that is needed to prepare meals on the trail. The heat exchanger reduces the cooking time considerably, especially in cold weather. This reduces the amount of fuel used, thus a person doesn't have to carry as much. The price is around \$50.

EATING UTENSILS.

All that is needed on the trail is a dish, a cup and a spoon. The dish and cup can be combined by having a Sierra Cup. This sounds spartan, but really is all that is required. If a knife is required, you have one in your pocket knife.

STOVES.

The best stoves are the MSR Whisperlite Internationale and the MSR XGK. Both come highly recommended by nearly everyone. The Whisperlite sells for about \$60 while the XGK is about \$80. Both are fuel efficient and burn hot.

A key to a good stove is reliability. MSR stoves are very reliable, and can be repaired in the field if necessary. They are safe if used properly.

Another quality stove is the Peak I, although it is very difficult to use in cold weather and is heavier than the MSR stoves. It sells for about \$60.

The stoves mentioned above burn white gas, or Coleman Fuel.

Another type of stove is propane. They are easier to use and are less expensive, but the fuel canisters are heavy and empty canisters must be packed out. They sell for about \$20.

Stoves must be lit. So, matches in a waterproof container must be carried.

A word about stove safety. All stoves are safe if used properly. Colin Fletcher has this to say about safety:

1. Don't be afraid of any stove. But each time you touch one, exercise meticulous care in every little act.
2. Never have your face over a lit stove.
3. Beware of big pots.
4. Beware of sleeping bags near stoves.
5. Don't cook in your tent.

Bedroom.

ROOF/TENT.

Tents come in all shapes and sizes. Backpacking tents are best if they are one or two person tents due to the weight of larger tents. High quality tents are made by Eureka, Jansport, Kelty, Quest, REI, Sierra Designs, The North Face and others. Tents range in price from \$100 on sale to over \$1000 depending on quality and size. Do not buy a cheap tent. Save until you can afford to buy a quality tent. A good quality tent can be purchased for under \$200. There is nothing worse than spending a wet night because a cheap tent leaked.

After each use of a tent, clean it and make sure it is dry. If a tent is put up wet, it will mildew quickly and be of no use.

A ground cloth is a necessity. It need not be anything but an inexpensive sheet of plastic, but it is vital to keep a tent floor dry.

SLEEPING BAG.

Sleeping bags are two types: down and synthetic filled.

Down bags are lighter in weight and warmer per pound than synthetic filled bags. However, they are much more expensive, useless when wet and much more difficult to care for. They are exclusively of the mummy style. Down bags cost from \$200 to \$800 depending on the temperature rating. Quality bags can be purchased from Feathered Friends, REI and The North Face.

Synthetic bags are heavier, carry a higher temperature rating per pound, but still insulate when wet. They are easier to care for and cost less. The mummy style costs a little more, but sleep warmer. Synthetic bags cost from \$30 to \$300.

Don't skimp on a sleeping bag. This is one of the essential items needed for backpacking. An inadequate sleeping bag makes a miserable trip. A good bag can be purchased for under \$200.

Sleeping bags should be aired after each use. They should not be stored compressed, but preferably hung to retain loft.

SLEEPING PADS.

The best is the Therm-a-Rest by Cascade designs. They range in price from \$45 to \$120, depending on the size. A good sleeping pad not only makes sleeping on the ground more comfortable, they also act as good insulation from cold. They seem expensive, but are well worth the cost when sleeping on exceptionally cold or rocky ground. While not an essential item, it should be high on the priority list.

Another choice is closed cell foam. It is less comfortable and is bulkier, but is less expensive. The cost is \$10 to \$30.

Clothes Closet.

One of my favorite quotes is from this section of Colin Fletcher's book. "*Shorts.* I have long been a wholeheartedly bigoted devotee—so much so that I often find myself wearing shorts until the temperature drops into the low thirties or the wind develops a really keen cutting edge." My kind of guy!

RAIN GEAR.

Gore-Tex is the best material for a rain suit, but is most expensive. A Gore-Tex rain suit can cost up to \$250 each for jacket and pants.

A serviceable alternative is a water resistant wind suit, costing about \$20 each for jacket and pants.

A poncho for backpacking retails for about \$20. This is an attractive alternative, but doesn't provide the warmth of a rain suit in a cold, mountain shower.

HATS.

A hat with a full brim to provide protection from the sun and rain is necessary and relatively inexpensive. They also keep debris out of your hair and protect your head from swinging branches.

COLD WEATHER CLOTHING.

The most effective cold weather clothing is fleece made from polartec, covered by a wind suit. However, regular warm clothing will suffice if kept dry. The most efficient clothing system is layering. Layers go on with colder weather and come off with warmer weather.

A warm hat, such as a wool stocking cap and gloves are essential for staying warm. A hat of this type should also be worn while sleeping in very cold weather. If your feet get cold at night, put on a hat. Sounds strange, but it works.

A balaclava may be substituted for a warm hat. It has the added advantage of keeping the face and neck warm. Personally, I wear a wool hat and a neck gaiter. It accomplishes the same purpose and is more versatile.

Furniture

This category encompasses all of the other equipment necessary to go backpacking. Some of this is necessary, some a luxury.

FLASHLIGHT.

A flashlight is a necessity. Not a large flashlight such as a Mag Lite 4 D cell. But rather a small AA or AAA flashlight will suffice. They are much smaller and lighter and therefore more conducive to backpacking. A Mini Mag Lite with 2 AA batteries sells for around \$10. A Mini Mag Lite with 2 AAA batteries is about the same price, but is smaller. I carry a Mini Mag and also a Solitaire with 1 AAA battery for a spare. There are many other brands available. Just be sure you buy quality here. One with a metal housing is best. Also buy one that turns on by twisting, not a push button since a push button could accidentally get turned on while in your pack and be useless by nightfall. A headstrap can be purchased for around \$5 that converts the small AA or AAA flashlights into a headlamp.

Many prefer a headlamp. Here especially buy quality. The less expensive are just not adequate and malfunction easily. A good headlamp costs \$20 or more.

CANDLE LANTERN.

Candle lanterns are nice to have, but certainly not a necessity. They add a soft glow to an otherwise dark campsite and are lightweight and long lasting. If used *very carefully* they can warm a tent before bed and upon waking. *Never, never* go to sleep with one lit. Not only is there the danger of fire if accidentally knocked over, but carbon monoxide poisoning is a very real possibility under some conditions. The cost is between \$15 and \$20.

CAMERA.

An expensive camera is not necessary. The disposable kind work well. They are inexpensive, lightweight and no large loss if lost or broken.

BINOCULARS.

Buy the lightweight ones. Or better yet, I think, buy a monocular. Buy quality. They are more durable and function better. Prices range from \$50 for a quality monocular to \$200 for binoculars. Not necessary, but a real joy to have.

SUN GLASSES.

A hat with a brim will eliminate the need for sunglasses on the trail, but sitting at a campsite in bright sunlight without sun glasses is misery. Buy what pleases you, but buy polarized lenses.

KNIFE.

Again, personal taste will dictate your choice. Buy quality. Buy one with at least two blades. The Swiss Army knife is helpful with scissors, can openers, screwdrivers and other tools. A good knife will cost \$25 to \$100 but will last a lifetime. Attach a lanyard to it and your belt and you will never lose it.

A sheath knife is not only not needed, it is against Boy Scout policy.

COMPASS.

A compass is necessary when backpacking. At least two members of a hiking crew must have one. They range in price from around \$10 to \$50. A Silva Explorer Type 3 is probably the best type for all around compass work. Often they are not used, but are vital in the backcountry.

THERMOMETER.

Certainly not a necessity. But I have grown to love mine. I usually record the temperature before retiring at night and upon waking in the morning. Brings back fond memories when looking over notes from previous campouts. Cost is minimal and care must be taken to avoid breakage, even those enclosed in a metal case.

ALTIMETER.

Fun to have, but a pretty expensive toy.

CHAIR.

Some of us just have to have the comforts of home to be able to enjoy backpacking. I personally carry a chair. Folding stools are also available. Colin Fletcher likes to sit on the ground with his pack as a back rest. Fold up stools are also available. A small piece of closed cell foam will serve to keep your clothes dry when sitting on wet ground. Cost is minimal to about \$30.

Kits – First Aid, Repair, Toilet

FIRST AID KIT.

Every backpacker should carry a personal first aid kit. Someone in the crew should carry a more elaborate one. Vital in time of need. Hopefully, they will not be needed, but are essential. I am listing the contents of mine as an example. Yours might be smaller or larger depending on personal needs.

BACKPACKING FIRST AID KIT.

Advil - Pain or fever.

Tums - Stomach acid, altitude sickness.

Benadryl - Antihistamine. Itch & allergic reactions. Can make drowsy.

Imodium A-D - 2 mg Caplet Diarrhea.

Eye Drops - Allergy or foreign objects, i.e. dirt.

Mycitracin Ointment - Antibiotic plus pain reliever. Good for cuts, bites, raw skin between legs.

Hydrocortisone Anti-itch Creme (0.5%) - Bites, allergy, skin rash, raw bottoms.

Roll of Tape

Mole Skin

Band-aids

Gauze pads - Large 4 square. Keep in place with tape or Ace Wrap.

Ace Wrap - 2 for bandaging or sprains.

Scissors

Tweezers

Safety pins - Point digs out splinters, and use with Ace Wrap, and use with cloth for arm sling.

Quarters - phone calls.

REPAIR KIT.

A basic repair kit should contain a needle and thread, safety pins, spare parts for your pack, duct tape, buttons and anything else you might need. Generally, you can fit this in an empty film canister.

TOILET KIT.

A toilet kit should contain an all purpose biodegradable soap, like Camp Suds, a wash cloth and towel, tooth paste and brush, toilet tissue, comb, mirror, insect repellent and sun screen. Other items might make you more comfortable, but the above should take care of most needs.

Miscellaneous Items

READING MATERIAL.

On those days when you are forced to stay in your tent due to bad weather, nothing livens up the day like a good book. It need be only a paperback, but something you enjoy. Many people like to carry a Bible or New Testament to read during quiet moments.

GAMES.

Travel sets of chess or checkers or a deck of playing cards can while away time also. Some wag once said he always carried a deck of cards in his emergency kit in case he got lost. In that event, he would simply start playing solitaire and within minutes someone would be looking over his shoulder telling him which card to play next.

PLASTIC BAGS.

Plastic bags are useful for many things. They are vital for keeping spare clothing and other items dry. A change of clothes, socks and items that would be damaged by rain need to be kept in plastic bags.

WHISTLE.

This should be a part of your emergency kit. It is much easier to blow a whistle than yelling when lost. The sound carries much further also.

NYLON CORD.

Many and varied are the uses for the ubiquitous nylon cord. It can be used as a belt for holding up your pants, for a clothes line, spare boot laces, tent guy lines, sundry repairs and just for plain fun. I love knots and a short piece of cord is all that is needed for an afternoon occupation.

Check List.

Colin Fletcher has a check list of 157 items. My own only contains 62 items. However many items you plan to take on a backpacking or camping trip, always use the list so nothing will be forgotten. List everything. Omit nothing from the list, even if you don't take everything with you on any particular trip.

Mail Order Stores.

There are many more mail order stores out there; I only list the largest of the group.

Campmor, EMS (Eastern Mountain Sports), REI (Recreational Equipment Inc.), The North Face.

Recommended Reading List

Fletcher, Colin—The Complete Walker III

Townsend, Chris—The Backpacker's Handbook

----- Boy Scouts of America Handbook for Boys

----- Boy Scouts of America Fieldbook

Lentz, Martha—Mountaineering First Aid

----- Philmont Field Guide

Fletcher, Colin—The Man Who Walked Through Time

Fletcher, Colin—The Secret Worlds of Colin Fletcher

Cass, William—Return to the Summit of Scouting

Murphy, Lawrence—Philmont, A History of New Mexico's Cimarron Country

Poppenhouse, Jerry—Philmont, Where Spirits Soar

This list is not exhaustive, but is a list of books I have read and recommend. The books are listed in order of importance from my perspective.

I also highly recommend the periodical, Backpacker, the Magazine of Wilderness Travel.

If you only read one item from this list, read Colin Fletcher's The Complete Walker, III. It contains a wealth of information and is very enjoyable to read.