



How I Got This Way

Practical Backpacking Advice

by: Glenn Roberts

Whether you're getting ready for your first backpacking trip, or have been doing this a while and want to carry a lighter load, you'll need to understand some of the logic of choosing gear. That logic is based on how gear works within the context of a trip; the trip, not the gear, is what matters. Gear is simply a means to the end of having a fun, safe trip. I'll use my own gear choices (which skew toward lightweight) for a typical weekend trip in the Ohio-Kentucky-Indiana region as a framework.

First, a disclaimer: There is no requirement that you use lightweight gear. If, for whatever reason, you prefer to use heavier gear, that's fine. Properly-chosen gear should become so convenient for you that its use becomes second nature, so the journey stays in the foreground. What works best for you may be completely different than what works best for me – and we are both correct. It's the trip, not the gear, that matters.

Next, a warning: The first (and maybe only) rule of backpacking gear is, "If you really need it, take it." Putting yourself at risk is never an acceptable way to lighten your pack. Your gear must keep you warm, dry, fed, and hydrated under the worst conditions you would expect on the trip.

Finally, an observation: the best way to hike lighter, if you're overweight, is to lose weight (I constantly fight that battle, too.) Reducing body weight is just like reducing pack weight, and probably healthier.

So, how much can you comfortably carry? One commonly-quoted rule of thumb is that you can carry a fourth of your body weight comfortably and the absolute limit would be a third of your body weight. I think that's generally true, but we need to discuss "body weight." Let's imagine two six-foot tall men, one weighing a hundred and eighty pounds and active, the other a two-hundred-twenty pound couch potato. Applying the rule would say that the fit man could comfortably carry a forty-five pound load but the couch potato could comfortably carry a fifty-five pound load. Does that really make sense? We're really talking about your "ideal" weight: the recommended weight for a person your height and build, in reasonably good shape. The load you can carry includes your gear, supplies, and your excess body weight.

Let's take another look at those two men. If the ideal weight for each is one hundred eighty pounds, then a forty-five pound load (including the loaded pack and excess body weight) would be the maximum load each could comfortably carry. The fit man could probably manage this easily, but the

couch potato is already carrying forty pounds of excess weight, which means his gear and supplies couldn't exceed five pounds. However, backpacking is great exercise, so (if his doctor agrees) he could start backpacking in gentle terrain right away if he was willing to carry the maximum load of sixty pounds (a third of his ideal weight. After deducting his forty pounds of excess weight, he would need to keep his pack at twenty pounds. As he loses weight, this load will become more comfortable. (I know this from experience.)

A quick way to reduce your pack weight is to hike with a partner, and share gear; each of you carries half the shared gear. Since I don't have much experience with sharing gear, I'll leave it at that and assume that you're hiking alone, too.

To move toward a lighter, more minimalist style, you have to ask yourself three questions about everything you consider taking:

1. Is it essential to keep me warm, dry, fed and hydrated in the worst conditions I expect to encounter?
2. If not, will it earn its way in comfort or convenience?
3. How much does it weigh?

Weight is the last question in the list on purpose, and is considered only after you've determined that you actually do want to take that particular piece of gear.

The next time you get home from a trip, try this as you unpack. Put the things you actually used and the essentials you may not have used (rain gear, first aid kit, toilet paper, and such) in one pile. Put the things you didn't use in a second pile. On your next trip, don't take the second pile.

Once you've done that, the next step isn't buying new gear. It's looking at what is left in the first pile and deciding if you can leave any of that stuff out by modifying your technique or deciding it's a luxury you don't really want to carry. For example, by cooking more simply and eating from a pot, you won't need to take a full set of pots, a frying pan, a whisk, separate dinnerware, and soap for cleanup. Drink water, and you don't need beverage mixes or a cup. Plan your water stops, determine the most water you'll need to carry, and you may not need that second water bottle. And, if you're comfortable not changing clothes for a couple of days, you may not need that change of clothes.

After you make those changes, and try them on a couple of trips, you can buy lighter gear if you want. The goal, as you choose your gear, is to strike the balance of weight, comfort, function, and cost that's right for you. You will have to make a set of compromises as you lighten your load, balancing one factor against another. My gear, which I describe below, represents an ideal balance for me; your ideal balance might lead you to different, but equally valid, gear choices. You'll also notice that I have a

bias toward five brands (MSR, Thermarest, Outdoor Research, Merrell, and Osprey), but there are also a lot of other good brands to choose from; my bias is based on my own preferences, and yours may be different.

GEAR SELECTION

Hiking Poles: I use a pair of MSR Talus TR-3 adjustable hiking poles to ease the pressure on my knees on downhill stretches, and to provide stability hiking in broken terrain or crossing a stream. They also keep my arms working, which prevents my hands from swelling as they would if my arms just hung. (The pair weighs just over a pound, but since they rest on the ground, I don't count them in the pack weight.)

Tent: My tent of choice is an MSR Hubba NX one-person tent. I pack the inner tent and fly in separate Osprey Ultralight Dry Sacks, to separate a potentially wet fly from a dry inner; the poles and stakes have their own stuff sacks to make packing easier. The upper half of the tent body is all mesh, which makes it ideal for summer hiking in the hot, muggy eastern states. Pitched without the fly, it is as close to sleeping under the stars, bug-free, as you'll ever come. It is also free-standing, which makes it easier to use in rocky soil, and the side entry is very convenient. Its aerodynamic shape is remarkably stable in the wind. I can store all my summer gear inside the tent with me. The vestibule is large enough that I can stow a large amount of wet gear in it and carefully cook in it if it is raining. I can also use the fly and poles without the inner tent to make a lunch shelter in the rain or to keep the inner tent dry when I pitch it in the rain. I only bring the footprint if I know I'll be camping on muddy ground.

Sleeping system: My sleeping system starts with a seventy-two inch long Thermarest NeoAir All Season (R-4.9) inflatable air mattress. I use my clothing and rain gear in a stuff sack as my pillow.

In the summer, I use a forty degree Thermarest Auriga (now called Corus) down quilt instead of a sleeping bag. Below fifty degrees, I switch from the Auriga to a twenty-five degree Thermarest Antares down sleeping bag, with a full draft collar and hood. The Antares is somewhat unique, since it doesn't have any down in the bottom; it attaches to my sleeping pad, which provides the bottom insulation.

Kitchen and food: I prefer a simple kitchen to match my simple menus. I carry an MSR MicroRocket stove, which comes with a piezo igniter. I use an MSR Titan Kettle as my pot, mug, and bowl; an MSR Titan Spoon is the only utensil I need. The fuel canister, stove, igniter and towel stow neatly inside the pot, and the spoon's handle slides through the pour spout. I also carry an AntiGravityGear Pouch Cozy, a small PackTowl, and a bear-bag kit (fifty feet of 1.8mm utility line, tied to a small aluminum carabiner, packed inside a small bag.) This kitchen and my food store in an Osprey Ultralight Dry Sack.

My typical summer breakfast is granola bars, and winter breakfast is instant oatmeal. Supper is a freeze-dried entrée. My hot breakfast and supper are prepared by adding boiling water to the food packet, and placing it inside the insulated pouch cozy to keep it hot while it “cooks.” If I want tea, I boil a second pot of water. Snacks and lunch are a combination of trail mix, granola bars, dried fruit, and beef jerky – no pot needed. Cleanup is easy: dry the pot and spoon, and put the empty packets in my trash bag.

Water: Naturally, you won’t carry all the water you need for the whole trip; you’ll filter as you go, and only need to carry enough water to stay hydrated between water sources. If you consistently arrive at a water source with more than a liter of water, consider carrying a liter less, to save two pounds.

I use an MSR Autoflow gravity filter, and carry filtered water in a wide-mouth one-liter Nalgene hard-sided bottle. To use the filter, I simply open the wide mouth of the “dirty” water reservoir bag, dip it into the source, and scoop up some water. I seal the bag with the dry-bag style closure, attach the filter, attach my water bottle to the other end, hang it in a tree and let gravity do the rest. The four-liter dirty water bag also allows me to carry extra water over a dry stretch or to a campsite with no water source. The filter can be cleaned during a trip by a simple backflushing process. I also carry purification tablets, in case the filter clogs or I drop and break it.

Rain Gear: I use an Osprey ultralight rain cover for my pack, and I pack all my gear in Osprey Ultralight Dry Sacks, for a second layer of protection. I use an Outdoor Research Helium II rain suit made of Pertex, a waterproof-breathable coating. This combination weighs less than a pound.

Clothing: You need the right clothing, but you don’t need to change clothes every day. Avoid cotton: it’s heavy, chills you when damp, and doesn’t dry easily. I dress in layers, and prefer to carry one or two thin synthetic layers, plus a down jacket or vest in cooler weather, and adjust to suit conditions. Synthetics dry quickly, usually just from the body heat you generate, and clean easily, even on the trail. Wool works as well as synthetics, but is a bit slower to dry and tends to shrink if it’s not carefully washed. Some will tell you that synthetic is better than wool and down because “it will keep you warm if you get it wet.” That’s nonsense; no material will keep you warm when it is soaking wet – the only solution is to develop the skill not to let it get that wet in the first place! I don’t like insulating garments with built-in water resistant shells; I’m already carrying rain gear, so the shell is unnecessary weight.

I wear Merrell Moab Ventilator trail shoes with Merrell Ridgepass hiking crew socks. If I know I’ll be wading across knee-deep streams, I take a pair of Merrell Cedrus Convertible sandals. (I could even hike in them, if my shoes failed.) My summer hiking outfit is Outdoor Research Sequence boxer briefs and Sequence or Echo T-shirt, Equinox shorts, and Helios wide-brimmed hat or Swift ball cap (to keep water off my glasses in the rain.) My spare clothing is spare socks, and perhaps a second T-shirt. My

rain pants can double as long pants, and my rain jacket doubles as a windbreaker. On a week-long trip, I might take spare shorts, T-shirt, and briefs, and change into clean clothes part way through the trip. If need be, I can wash the dirty clothes, and change back later. Clothing also stores in Osprey Ultralight Dry Sacks.

In colder weather, I add clothing layers. I often layer Outdoor Research Sequence midweight tights and zip neck top with my t-shirt and shorts for hiking; I might even switch from shorts to Outdoor Research Equinox convertible pants (the legs zip off to make them shorts.) For walking in the rain or snow, I use Outdoor Research Versaliner gloves (fleece gloves with Pertex shells) to keep my hands warm, and I replace my hat with an Outdoor Research Gradient beanie or Option balaclava. For insulating garments, I take an Outdoor Research Transcendent down vest or sweater, Incandescent hooded down jacket, or Neoplume insulated pants, depending on conditions. Outdoor Research Transcendent down-filled mittens inside my Revel Pertex mitten shells keep my hands warm, and I replace my hat with an Outdoor Research Gradient beanie or Option balaclava. I often sleep in the long johns and balaclava. I can also sleep in the down jacket and insulated pants if temperatures plunge unexpectedly low.

Odds and Ends: I take a small Nemo travel wallet (with cash, driver's license, medical insurance card, and credit card), my car keys, and my cell phone on the trail with me. Toilet paper in an Osprey Ultralight Dry Sack with an MSR Blizzard tent stake (used as a toilet trowel) and a small bottle of hand sanitizer let me answer nature's call. My map and Silva Starter compass store in an Osprey Map Wrap. My ThermaRest Z-Lite seat provides a dry, warm place to sit on breaks or in camp.

Your first aid kit shouldn't contain anything that you don't know how to use, and you shouldn't be going anywhere that might make such things a necessity. If you stick to well-traveled, established trails, the worst thing you're likely to encounter are cuts, scrapes, stings and aching muscles. For that, minimal knowledge and supplies will be adequate. (My kit is some bandaids, first aid cream, ibuprofen, tweezers, and moleskin, plus some Fiskars folding scissors.) If you go to remote, off-trail locations and limit-pushing activity, you'll need to take a more extensive kit, and to learn how to use everything in it.

I also take a Gerber LST Mini pocketknife, Windmill lighter, Petzl E+Lite headlamp, spare coin-cell batteries for the headlamp, tent pole repair sleeve, eyeglasses repair kit, and some UCO stormproof matches in a waterproof match safe. All of this stores in the same pouch as my first aid supplies.

Pack: I use an Osprey Exos 48 pack. The ventilated suspension is supportive and comfortable, and places the load on my hips. It has a single, large main compartment, stretch side pockets, a "shove-it" pocket, a large two-compartment lid pocket, two hipbelt pockets, and a hydration pocket (which I don't use.) It's light but roomy, and the suspension is beefy enough to carry twenty-five forty pounds comfortably

LIFE ON THE TRAIL

Packing the Pack: I organize my pack so that I rarely have to open it during the day. My water bottle and filter go into the side pockets of the pack. My map case and seat go into the shove-it pocket. My toilet kit, first aid kit, car keys, wallet, and cell phone (in a Ziploc bag) go into the lid compartment. My lunch and snacks go into the hipbelt pockets.

The things I won't need during the day go into the main compartment. I stuff the sleeping bag (in a dry sack, if it looks like rain) into the very bottom of the pack, with the sleeping pad and spare clothing on top of it. Tent poles go in the corner of the pack on the same side as the filter. Food and stove sit in the center of the pack, against my back and over my center of gravity. The tent fly and body, in separate stuff sacks, tuck in around the front of the pack, locking the food and stove in place. My rain jacket, pants, and pack cover go on the very top of the load, in a stuff sack, where I can get at them quickly.

On the trail: Mostly, the day is spent walking. During a full day of walking (about ten hours), I tend to stop about three times: mid-morning and mid-afternoon breaks of fifteen minutes to half an hour each, plus a lunch break of half an hour to forty-five minutes. At the morning and afternoon breaks, and at lunch, I take off my pack, unfold my seat, lean against something, relax, eat a snack and drink some water. I'll also take a couple of short, "standing" breaks every morning and afternoon, to catch my breath, take a drink of water, and perhaps adjust clothing layers as the temperature changes. These breaks rarely exceed two or three minutes.

So, in a ten-hour day, after accounting for various breaks, I'm left with about eight hours of actual walking. Depending on the terrain, I'll average somewhere around a mile to mile and a half an hour, so I usually plan each day's route for about ten miles. I could probably do fifteen miles a day, in nice weather on gentle terrain, walking about ten hours – but I don't want to do that. I prefer to enjoy myself, and I find that covering ten miles in eight hours of walking, from about seven in the morning until about five in the evening, leaves me pleasantly tired but not exhausted. It also allows me the time to slow down and enjoy the beauty of the area I'm walking through, and to set up camp before dark.

I'll refill my water bottle at each source I come to - unless I know the next source is only an hour away, and I've still got a half-full bottle. If I'm not camping near water, I'll carry from two to four extra quarts of water from the last source, enough for cooking and drinking until the next water source.

Camping: When I've finished hiking for the day and find a place to make camp, I first identify the tent area and the cooking area. If it's a designated campsite, there will be easily-distinguished areas for sleeping and cooking. Otherwise, I tend to choose a well-drained, flat, open area for my tent, and cook downwind from it. Then, I unpack.

My tent, at the top of the pack, is the first thing I unpack. Since even an apparently level spot will usually have a slight slope to it, I spread out my tent and lie down on it to figure out how to orient the tent so the slope is head-to-toe, not side to side. While I'm lying there, I look up into the trees for any dead branches that might decide to fall on my tent (and me) during the night. Then I pitch the tent.

Next, I remove the stove, food sack, water, and filter, and set them aside. I take out the sleeping pad, inflate it, and put it into the tent. Then I put my spare clothing and rain gear into the tent. (If it's chilly, I put on some warm clothing.) Next, the sleeping bag gets laid out on top of the sleeping pad to fluff a bit.

Finally, I unpack the small stuff. My headlamp goes on my head, my knife goes into my pocket, and the first aid and toilet kits go into a corner of the tent. My empty pack usually goes in the vestibule.

Next, I go filter water (if I didn't do that at the last water stop.) Then I take the food bag, seat, and filtered water to the cooking area. I position the seat to take advantage of any view. I set up my stove beside my seat, and light it. I put a pot of water on to boil, and open the supper food pack. When the water boils, I turn off the stove, prepare dinner, sit back, eat, and enjoy the evening.

After supper, I clean up, pack the kitchen, bag the trash in a Ziploc bag, and hang the food and trash bag from a tree limb. Unless I'm in bear country, it just needs to be high enough to keep the raccoons, mice, and skunks out of it. Eventually, I take the rest of my gear and head for the tent. I sit down on the sleeping pad, take off my shoes and put them alongside the pad in the tent, swing my feet into the tent, and get into the sleeping bag. I arrange my water bottle and other items around my head, put my headlamp and glasses in the tent's mesh pocket, position my pillow, and go to bed.

You notice I don't mention sitting around a campfire. I never light one when I'm on my own (though I will sometimes participate if I can't talk a group I'm with out of it.) Leave No Trace principles aside, fires are just too much like work. You have to gather wood (hard to find in a well-used campsite) and arrange the fire. Then you have to light it – not always easy, especially in the wind or the rain. When you leave the next morning, you have to be sure that the fire is “cold” out – the ashes must be cold to the touch. This requires three or four quarts of water – eight pounds, plus the weight of the extra containers – which you have to carry from the creek. (A group can split this weight, of course.) If you made a dry camp, that creek was usually at the bottom of a hill. You'll also need three quarts for the dry camp – another six pounds. Did I mention that you'll usually have to carry all of it up a hill?

In the morning, I wake up and let the air out of my sleeping pad while lying on it. I grab my pack and stuff the sleeping bag into the bottom. I roll up the sleeping pad, and put it into the pack. Finally, I load all the remaining gear and water bottles into my pack, set it outside the tent, swivel my legs out the door, put on my shoes, and stand up.

I retrieve the food bag and remove that day's breakfast, lunch, and snacks. I put the food bag back in the pack, and put my lunch and snacks in outside pack pockets. I take off any clothes I won't be wearing while I hike, and store them in the pack. (In cool weather, I'll often start the day's hike wearing long underwear with my shorts and T-shirt. Usually, by the first rest stop, I'll take them off and put them back in the pack.) Then I take the tent down, and finish packing. (If the tent is wet, I do this after breakfast, too, so it can dry a bit.) I boil water (if necessary) and eat breakfast, refill my water bottle, finish packing, put the pack on, and start walking – it usually takes less than an hour from the time I wake up.

THE QUESTIONS I DIDN'T ANSWER

“How much should my loaded pack weigh? How much does yours weigh?” The answer depends on a few variables: how long you'll be out, how much food and water you need to carry, and what temperatures you'll encounter. The longer the trip, the more food and stove fuel you'll have to carry (estimate one to two pounds of food per day, and a four ounce fuel canister per five days.) The longer and colder the trip, the more clothing you will need.

The answer also depends on your budget. This is often summed up as “Light, cheap, good – pick two.” With a reasonable budget, and some discipline about what you bring, you can probably keep your load under twenty-five pounds for a summer weekend. (I carry seventeen or eighteen pounds for such a trip.)

FINAL THOUGHT

Remember, it's not about the gear. Properly chosen gear should fade into the background and free you for the important part: enjoying the trip, and experiencing the full pleasure that backpacking in a wonderful (or even ordinary) place can give you. And now, like any good backpacking trip, we've ended up right back where we started. Happy hiking!

Glenn Roberts is a Guide for Outdoor Adventure Connection. He is a recreational backpacker; He goes out there to have fun, not to prove anything to anyone. Glenn has led youth trips, was a Scoutmaster and a volunteer for a troubled teens program. Glenn is a gearhead, so don't be afraid to ask him about gear and equipment. Glenn, who is in his mid-60s, provides insight and perspective for older hikers, whether they are just taking up backpacking or looking for ways to continue to participate.