

a practical & philosophical guide (with cartoons)

# ULTRALIGHT BACKPACKIN' TIPS

153 amazing & inexpensive  
tips for extremely lightweight camping



written & illustrated by  
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*The term  
ultralight backpacking  
has a  
very specific  
meaning.*

It defines the base weight  
of a fully loaded backpack  
at the start of a trip.

When you subtract the  
weight of the consumable  
items inside the pack  
(food, water & fuel),  
the remaining weight  
*must be under ten pounds*  
to be called ultralight!

**These first ten tips are a Manifesto, a proclamation of intent! Everything else in this book can be derived from these very simple ingredients.**

The intended goal of this book is to provide some clever insights on how to travel efficiently in the mountains with a *very* light backpack. The hush-hush secret to ultralight backpacking is that it's actually pretty easy, especially solving all the gear issues. The bigger challenge is embracing a new mind-set, and (hopefully) this book will balance these essential factors.

Focus on these initial ten points, and everything else will fall into place.

## **1. Get a scale**

This is rule number one, and it's absolutely essential. Do not proceed until this is solved. There is simply no way around it; weighing your gear is a prerequisite.

If you are an aspiring ultralight camper, this is the one and only tool that is truly required to get your pack weight to plummet. A simple digital postal scale has accuracy down to a tenth of an ounce, and knowing the weight of every single item is essential.

These are cheap and easy to find; a simple 5-pound digital postal scale from any office supply store is perfect. No need to pay more than 35 bucks, and there are good scales for as little as \$19.95.



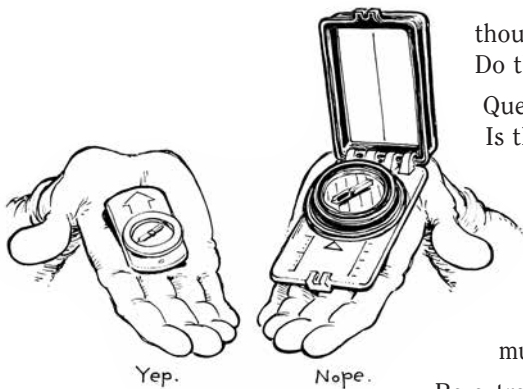
## **2. Comfortable and safe are vital!**

Anyone can go out into the mountains with a tiny amount of gear and suffer—it's easy to be cold, hungry, and ill prepared. You need to be warm at night, dry in the rain, well fed, and ready to deal with safety issues. Ultralight camping should be delightful, not stressful. The challenge is to succeed with only the gear that's absolutely needed (see tip 28).

The first-aid kit is a good metaphor for your lightweight camping mind-set. You would be foolish to travel without one, right? But what is *truly* required? What can you effectively improvise? There is a blurry line between TOO heavy and TOO light. You can still go out into the backcountry with a very light pack and be comfortable and safe (see tip 55).

## **3. Scrutinize everything!**

This entire book could get boiled down to those two words. Do NOT simply put stuff in your pack. Look at every single item, weigh it, document it, hold it in your hand, ponder it, brood on it, and meditate over it. Only after this mindful deliberation should you decide if this item comes along. This cautious



thought process happens for every single item! Do this every time you prep for an outing.

Questions to ask: Will I be fine without this? Is there a lighter option? Can this item serve more than one purpose; is it multiuse? Can I use something else and get the same results? A tent stake can hold your shelter down in the wind and also makes a pretty good trowel for digging a cat-hole, making it a true a multiuse option.

Be extremely meticulous with every decision—and every item. Weigh it, trim it down, and weigh it again.

You either need it or you don't. If you don't need it—it doesn't go in the pack.



#### 4. **Make your own stuff, and making it out of trash is always best!**

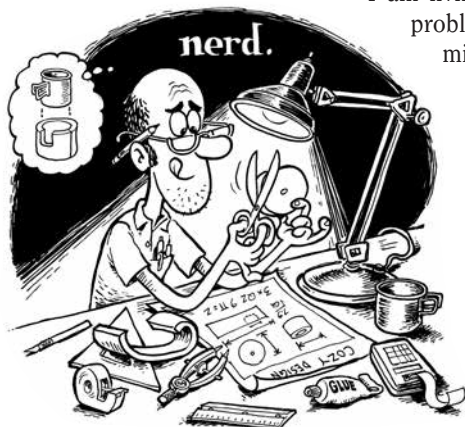
It's super fun to tinker with homemade designs and then put them to use in the backcountry. And quite often the lightest and simplest gear can be salvaged from the trash. The humble plastic water bottle is as light as it gets, and it's essentially free (see tip 102). And an aluminum cat food can pulled out of the garbage makes a very efficient ultralight alcohol stove (see tip 120).

There is a myth that ultralight camping is an expensive undertaking, but it just ain't true (see tip 30). Sure there are a few items where it's nice to purchase a high-quality piece of gear—titanium cookware is wonderfully light, but it comes at a high price. Would an old beer can with the top cut off serve the same purpose?

#### 5. **It's okay to be nerdy**

I am living proof of this credo. I delight in the quirky problem solving required when wrestling with all the minutia of my pack weight. I encourage you to dig deep and fully accept your inner nerd. It's okay to obsess about half an ounce. I encourage that attitude! I enjoy using my finely crafted do-it-yourself gear in the mountains.

I fully recognize how dorky all this can be, and I acknowledge that I fit every stereotype of the weirdo zealot. But it's fun, and fun counts for a lot. I take great pride wearing my homemade rain skirt in among a team of burly men!



## 6. Try something new every time you go camping

Don't be content with achieving a homeostasis; you should unceasingly be evolving toward a goal of greater efficiency, comfort, and lighter weight. There will always be some new and interesting thing or technique you can test. Challenge yourself with every outing. If you try something and it doesn't work quite as well as you hoped—*so what!* You learned something valuable by trying. Always try something new, *ALWAYS!*

## 7. Simply take less stuff!

The easiest way to get an item's weight down to zero is simply NOT to put it in the pack. Yes, this means leaving stuff behind. This is harder than you think. There may be an item (or a bunch of them) that you have simply *always* carried with you, and it might be an ingrained routine to just toss that thing in your pack. Be very self-aware whenever this happens. Question your mind-set: Are you clinging to old habits?

Go through every item you might want to bring and truly ask yourself: *Will I be okay without this thing?*

This answer should be either YES or NO—never maybe.

## 8. Know the difference between wants and needs

You actually *NEED* very little. Food, water, and oxygen are obvious. So are warmth, comfort, and peace of mind. But we are all too easily swayed by our *WANTS*, especially me!

Some things, like the backpack, are obviously required. But what about the tent? Is that something you *WANT* or *NEED*? These are decidedly different, and it can be a challenging human exercise to attempt to separate them from each other. Can you replace the thing you *WANT* with a something you truly *NEED*? Is there an option that's lighter, cheaper, simpler, or multiuse? Can it be nixed entirely? It should be easy to ditch the tent and replace it with a tarp, but all too often this decision can be fraught with emotion.

I have a beautiful camping knife. I love this elegantly crafted tool. I feel a very real *WANT* associated with my well-designed (and expensive) toy. This is a good item to truly scrutinize with ultralight eyes.

Are you hypnotized into believing you *NEED* a knife when all you really do is *WANT* a knife? (See tip 53.)

Personally I've found that a 0.1-ounce single-edge razor blade, void of frills and charisma, solves my need for a sharp thing in the mountains. Thus the beautiful knife stays at home, and that liberation feels good!

## 9. Cut stuff off your gear



The quintessential plastic soda bottle has a lid, and under that lid is a little plastic ring. That extra piece of plastic went on in the factory, and it serves no purpose after you first open the bottle. Use a tiny pair of wire cutters (or your fingernails) and get that thing off. The paltry weight is obviously insignificant in the grand scheme of things. But to me it's more of a mind-set. If you dedicate yourself to these (seemingly) inconsequential items, you are setting yourself up with a heightened level of overall standards. This mind-set will trickle up and influence the big stuff too.

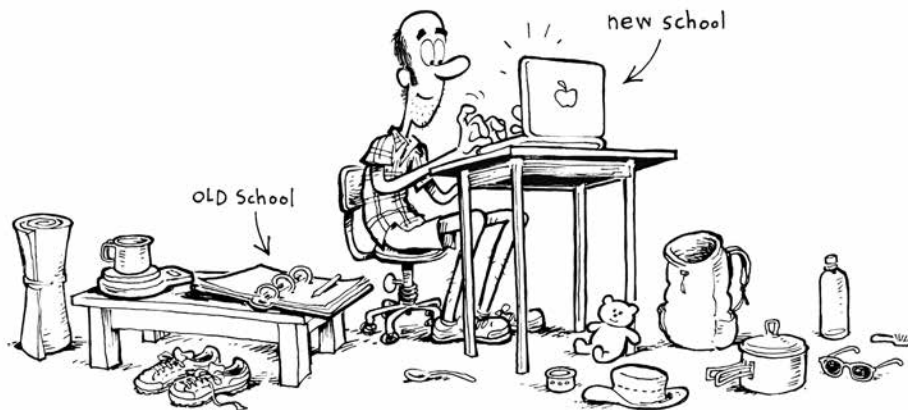
Get a pair of scissors and trim off anything you can, and then reweigh things. The act of shaving off small extraneous stuff will really reinforce your goal. Your backpack, no matter the make or model, can always use a little trimming (see tip 62). Get a razor blade, and go to town on it!

## 10. Document your gear

One system involves a three-ring binder and a pencil, and every piece of camping gear gets weighed and noted. The other involves a computerized spreadsheet (see tip 19).

Yes, everything gets weighed on a scale, and all these numbers get written down. This may sound totally nerdy, but this deliberate act makes it very easy to take only what's really needed. And while you're at it, go ahead and write the weight right on each piece of gear with a Sharpie.

The simple act of weighing your gear creates a resolve and focus that'll force you to really think about every piece of gear. Record the totals, and make sure to add a column titled "Why" for each item. If you can't answer "why" you need something—don't take it!



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