



CHAPTER 15





Backpacking

"We are born wanderers, followers of obscure trails, or blazers of new ones. The mind, too, is a natural wanderer, ever seeking, and occasionally discovering, new ideas, fresh insights."

—Royal Robbins, U.S. mountaineer and climber whose interest in the outdoors was stimulated by Scouting



Nothing promises adventure so clearly as a pack loaded and ready for the trail. Add to it a group of like-minded friends and a well-considered plan, and you are almost certain to discover much more in the out-of-doors, and in yourself, than you had ever hoped to find. With a pack on your shoulders, you can go wherever your legs will take you. Use your navigation skills to find your way, and rely on your knowledge and experience to make the right decisions as your route leads you far from any road. Live simply and well with only the gear and provisions you've chosen to carry, and take pride in knowing how to keep yourself comfortable and well-fed. In the freedom of backpacking you will find yourself closer to the land, closer to your companions, and closer to the core of life itself.

What You Carry in Your Head

Backpacking well requires a good grasp of many outdoor skills. The gear and provisions you take along can make your travels easier. More important, though, is the knowledge you have in your head to keep yourself and those with you safe and to appreciate and protect the country through which you travel.

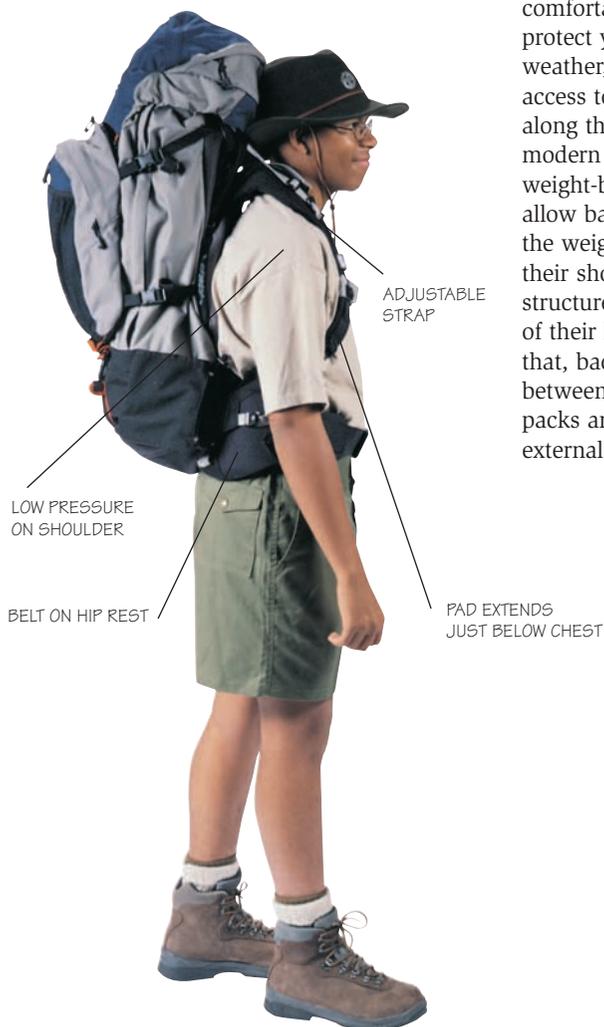
Every outdoor experience you have will add to your storehouse of backpacking know-how. Information found throughout the *Fieldbook* and on the *Fieldbook* Web site can guide you in preparing for your journeys and in making the most of your time on the trail. 

What You Carry on Your Back

In 1913 a man named Joseph Knowles went sans clothing into the New England woods where he claimed he was able to build a campfire, live on berries, kill a partridge and a bear, and use charcoal on birch bark to write accounts of his adventures. Perhaps somewhat fanciful, Knowles' experience does point out the fact that much of what backpackers carry today could just as well be left at home. The chapter titled "Gearing Up" will help you decide what you need for backpacking and what you don't. One item you are almost certain to require is, of course, a backpack.

Backpack

A good backpack will ride easily on your shoulders, sit comfortably on your hips, protect your gear from the weather, and provide easy access to things you need along the way. Nearly all modern backpacks have weight-bearing hip belts that allow backpackers to shift the weight of pack loads from their shoulders to the bone structure and strong muscles of their hips and legs. Beyond that, backpackers can choose between internal-frame packs and those with external frames.





Invention of the Modern Backpack

An American inventor named Merriam patented the load-bearing hip belt in 1886. However, the widespread use of belts to transfer the weight of a pack load had to wait until after World War II, when aircraft riveters and welders turned their skills from building fighter planes and bombers to manufacturing aluminum canoes and pack frames. Before long, lightweight frames outfitted with hip belts and nylon packs had transformed backpacking into an activity accessible to almost anyone eager to lace up a pair of hiking boots and set off on a trail.

Internal-Frame Pack

Stiff metal or plastic *stays* positioned inside a pack act as its frame, providing structural rigidity for transferring the weight of the pack load to the hip belt. With their compact shapes and snug fit, internal-frame packs are ideal for travel through heavy brush, in steep terrain, and while snowshoeing or cross-country skiing. They also are comfortable on open trails. Some are outfitted with removable top flaps or rear compartments that can be converted into day packs for hikes from a base camp.

External-Frame Pack

The weight distribution principles of an external-frame pack are essentially the same as for a pack with an internal frame, but because the frame is on the outside of the bag it can be larger and more rigid, and can efficiently transfer the weight from the shoulder straps to the hip belt. Most external frames also provide room for lashing on a sleeping bag or tent.



Internal-frame pack



External-frame pack



Loading a Pack

Once you've determined what to carry, the next step in preparing for a backpacking trip is to pack everything for the trail. Frequently used items can go in the pockets of your clothing or pockets on the outside of your pack—your pocketknife, compass, map, water bottle, sunscreen, insect repellent, personal first-aid kit, and perhaps a notebook and pencil. Stow your tarp or tent where you can reach it without digging through everything else; on a stormy day, you might want to get a shelter up quickly.

Equipment you won't need until you have made camp can go deeper in your pack, but rain gear, a fleece or wool sweater, clean socks, and food for the trail should ride where you can easily reach them. Reserve at least one pack pocket for your fuel containers so that they will be isolated from the rest of your supplies.

Anything you carry on the outside of the pack—cup, water bottle, cook pot, etc.—should be securely tied, strapped, or clipped in place so that nothing can swing or fall off.

If you will be hiking on open trails, arrange the contents of your pack so that its center of gravity is high and close to your back. For cross-country hiking, skiing, or snowshoeing, trade a little comfort for a lot of stability by placing heavier gear in the bottom of the pack and thus lowering the center of gravity. In either case, pad the front of the pack's interior with a layer of clothing to provide extra cushioning against your back.

Most backpacks will shield your gear from light showers, but heavy rains might seep through the pack fabric. Carry a waterproof nylon rain

Prepack your clothing and food in stuff sacks to protect them from the elements and to organize your pack. A few nylon sacks with drawstrings and a handful of self-sealing plastic bags will do the trick.



cover sized to the shape of your pack, and slip it on when the weather turns bad. It's a good idea to put the cover in place when you leave your pack outside during the night, too. If you're caught on the trail without a rain cover, you can use one of the large plastic trash bags you have along for stashing litter. Cut a slit in one side of the bag, then cover the pack and tuck the loose ends of the bag beneath the straps or under the frame in a way that leaves the shoulder straps free. Some outdoor travelers make their packs completely watertight by lining the compartments with trash bags and sealing their food and gear inside.

Hoisting and Carrying a Pack

An effective way to get a pack on your shoulders is to enlist the aid of a partner who can lift the load while you slip your arms through the shoulder straps. Return the favor by hoisting your buddy's pack.

To get into a pack on your own, loosen the shoulder straps, then grasp them and lift the pack waist high. Rest the bottom of the pack on your thigh and slip an arm through the appropriate shoulder strap. As you do so, smoothly swing the pack onto your back and slip your other arm through the remaining strap. Lean a little forward at the waist to hoist your pack into position, buckle and tighten the hip belt, and adjust the shoulder straps so that when you stand upright most of the pack's weight rides on your hips.



Many packs have additional straps to stabilize the load or compress it closer to your back. Play around with these straps to see if they improve the way the pack feels.



Hitting the Trail

Hiking with a backpack can be much different from walking without one. A pack on your shoulders alters your sense of balance. Its weight puts extra strain on your feet, ankles, and knees, especially when you're pounding downhill. Begin each day's journey by stretching to warm up and loosen your muscles, then hike slowly at first to allow your pack to settle into place. Match clothing layers to changing weather conditions, check your feet for hot spots, drink plenty of water, and adjust the way your pack is riding on your hips and shoulders. When taking breaks, do so on durable surfaces off the trail—rocks, sandy areas, dry grasses—rather than on vegetation that could suffer from being trampled.

Over the course of a long hike, the straps and belt on your pack might make your shoulders and hips sore, especially if you're lean and don't have a great deal of natural padding on your bones. Ease any discomfort by occasionally adjusting the pack straps to shift the weight of the load. You also can use a couple of socks for padding by folding them over the hip belt or tucking them under your shoulder straps.

Setting a reasonable pace will enable everyone to enjoy a trek. Position slower hikers near the front where they can more easily maintain a steady stride. Stronger backpackers can carry a greater proportion of group gear, though no one should be made to feel inferior for toting a light load, or superior for enduring a heavier pack.

Hiking Sticks and Trekking Poles

The hiking stick has long been a symbol of the traveler. It swings comfortably in your hand, giving balance and rhythm to your pace. Use it to push back branches or brush. A hiking stick can be especially useful when you are wading a stream; added to your own two legs, a stick will give you the stability of a tripod. (For more on stream crossings, see the chapter titled "Mountain Travel.")

Some backpackers like to use a pair of trekking poles for balance and to reduce weight on their knees, much as a skier uses ski poles. Telescoping poles can be adjusted in length or collapsed and strapped out of the way on your pack. Be kind to the environment by using blunt, rubber-tipped poles that minimize impact on trail margins.





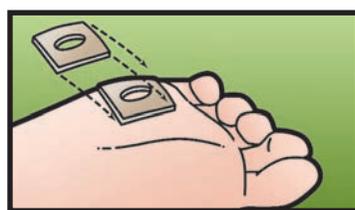
If you have a history of blisters forming at particular locations on your foot, try reinforcing the areas with moleskin or gel pads before you start hiking.

Preventing Blisters

Blisters develop when skin is irritated, usually by friction or heat. For outdoor travelers, blisters on the feet are the most common. Prevent them by wearing boots or hiking shoes that fit well, and by breaking in your footwear before a trek, and by changing into dry socks whenever your feet become damp. Many hikers find success in deterring blisters by wearing two pairs of socks—a thin liner sock of a synthetic material (not cotton), and a thick wool hiking sock.

Treating Blisters

A *hot spot* is a warning that a blister might be forming. Treat a hot spot or blister as soon as you notice it. Gel pads can be taped directly over a hot spot or blister to reduce friction and speed healing. Follow the instructions on the package. To treat a hot spot or blister with moleskin, cut the moleskin into the shape of a doughnut and fit it around the injury to shield it from further rubbing. Used together, a gel pad and a moleskin doughnut can provide maximum relief for hot spots and blisters. Change bandages every day to keep wounds clean and to avoid infection.



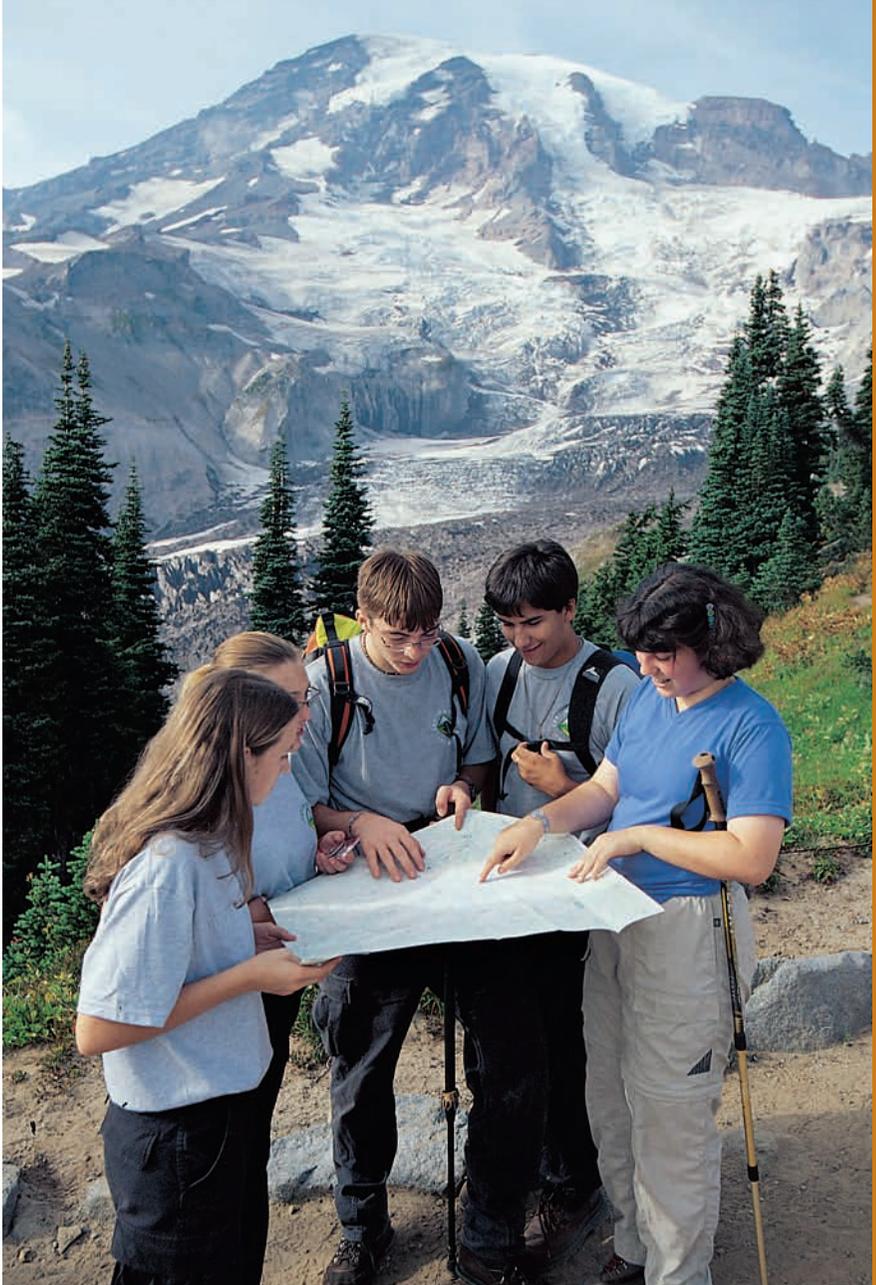
A hot spot is a warning that a blister might be forming. As soon as you notice it, treat a hot spot or blister with a “doughnut bandage” to relieve the pressure on your skin.



Leave No Trace Backpacking

Just as carrying a lightweight pack can make your outdoor adventures easier and leave you with more time and energy for enjoying your surroundings, following the principles of Leave No Trace can ensure that your impact on the land is as insignificant as possible.

For more on backpacking responsibly, see the “Leaving No Trace” section of this book.





Extended Backpacking Treks

Have you ever reached the end of a weekend camping trip and wished you didn't have to go home? Have you ever looked out over ranges of mountains that seemed to invite you to hike all the way to the horizon and beyond? Ever wanted a challenge that would put your backcountry skills to a real test? If your answer to these questions is yes, you and your group might be ready for an extended backpacking trek.

Terrific challenges await long-distance backpackers on famous footpaths including the Appalachian Trail, Pacific Crest Trail, and Continental Divide Trail. Of course, you can plot an extended trek anywhere in the country by studying maps, finding interesting hiking trails, and figuring out ways to link them into a continuous route.

The Rhythm of a Long Hike

The first days of a long backpacking trip are a time of adjustment as you and your companions get used to carrying your packs, the hours of walking, and the rigors of spending all of your time outdoors. Along with the excitement of the adventure, you might even have some doubts about the wisdom of so distant a goal.



However, changes will begin to occur as soon as you take your first step. As the miles roll beneath your boots, calluses will form to protect your once-tender feet. You will gradually become accustomed to the weight on your shoulders. The routines of camp chores will become quick and efficient. Your legs and heart will strengthen, and before long you will find yourselves settling into the rhythm of motion of long-distance hikers.



Food for Extended Treks

Just as your mind and muscles become attuned to long stretches of trail, your digestive tract will become streamlined and more efficient. The food you carry on an extended trek will differ little from what you take on any backpacking trek, though you might find yourself hungry for greater volumes of food in the later stages of a journey. Scrutinize your food lists with weight of ingredients in mind, and make sure that nothing in your pack will spoil before you can use it.

For more on selecting and preparing food for backpacking trips, see the chapter titled “Outdoor Menus.”

Resupplying

When a trek will keep you on the trail more than a week, it’s unlikely you will be able to carry all the provisions and fuel you will need. Some routes come close enough to towns for you to shop at a grocery store for the menu items you need. If that isn’t possible, two other ways to resupply are *trailhead rendezvous* and *mail drops*.

Whichever of these two methods you choose, gather and pack supplies for the entire trek before you leave home. Use sturdy cardboard boxes reinforced with strong tape. Line the interior of each box with a large plastic trash bag and stow your provisions inside. Don't seal the box until absolutely necessary. That way you or your support crew can add last-minute items.

Trailhead Rendezvous

Unless your trek takes you into the heart of a huge wilderness area, you probably will cross roads now and then where you can arrange to meet up with leaders of your Scout unit or other reliable adults. They can bring the food and stove fuel you need for the next leg of your journey.

Mail Drop

Mail drops are particularly effective when you hike a long trail far from home. Research the route ahead of time and find post offices to which you can send parcels to yourself. (Ask a postmaster to explain the packing and mailing regulations you should follow.) You also can contact park and forest rangers who might know of addresses within parks to which you can mail your provisions.

Time the shipment of mail drops so that your boxes will have plenty of time to arrive, then schedule your pickups for hours you are certain the post offices will be open. Keep in mind that most are closed on Saturday afternoons, Sundays, and holidays, and those in remote areas also might have limited hours during the week. When you're hungry, tired, and eager to get into your next box of food, there's nothing more frustrating than reaching a post office just after it has closed for the weekend.





A Final Word on Backpacking

Regardless of your destination, the real joy of any adventure is the journey itself. Allow yourself plenty of time to delight in every aspect of a trip. Don't be in such a hurry that you can't stop to watch the wildlife, study the flowers, and take in the beauty of the landscape through which you are passing.

*"What do you suppose
will satisfy the soul,
except to walk free and
own no superior?"*

—Walt Whitman (1819–1892),
American author and poet

Few adventures can compare to the experience of Philmont Scout Ranch in northern New Mexico. Older Scouts and Venturers can backpack or ride horses over Philmont's 137,000 acres of rugged, mountainous terrain and enjoy a variety of exciting programs in back-country camps.