

# The Ultralight Handbook

From the editors of **BACKPACKER** Magazine

**30**  
Tips and Gear  
to Make Switching  
Easy



# ULTRALIGHT OR BUST

**A 10-step plan for getting your base pack weight under 15 pounds.**

- By Michael Lanza

Going light is a bit like marriage: It's a multifaceted contract that requires your constant commitment. Cheat just a little bit, and your hike—and especially your shoulders—will suffer. But stick to these rules, and you'll quickly find a new comfort level with 15-mile days.

### Step 1

## *Question Everything*

The only way to make ultralight work is to ditch your standard gear list and your gotta-have-my-coffee-press 'tude. A checklist tricks you into bringing gear you don't need—like a tent in the Sierra—and the attitude distorts the hard choices you'll have to make to trim the last five pounds. For your next trip, start from scratch and select only the gear that's absolutely critical for the conditions you'll face. If in doubt, leave it out.

### Step 2

## *Weigh It All*

It'll open your eyes to the surprisingly heavy items—like a filter or first aid kit — and to the little things that individually weigh next to nothing but together add up to something real. Allow yourself a luxury item (recommendation: a comfortable sleeping pad), but otherwise eliminate or substitute with a ruthless eye for fat and duplication. Example: Swap your knife for a razor blade, which is just as effective in most medical situations.

### Step 3

## *Rethink Shelter*

This is the place to make a major dent: Most serious ULers carry tarps that weigh less than a pound without stakes and guylines. If you need a three-season tent for bugs or heavy rain, try the superlight Big Agnes Seedhouse SL2 (2 pounds, 14 ounces; \$319). Or split the difference with a tent that pitches with just rainfly, poles, and footprint. On the AT and Long Trail, plan to sleep in the shelters that appear almost every 8 miles, unless it's a busy weekend.

## THE SKILLS

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### Step 4

## Change Your Bedding

Old thinking: Choose a sleeping bag for the lowest temps you might encounter. New thinking: Aim for the middle, and wear more clothes if a cold snap hits. Hard-core fastpackers hit the trail predawn—typically the coldest hour of the night—when they start feeling chilled in their lightweight bags. You can also lose pad weight (and bulk) without sacrificing comfort: Carry a short model and place your empty pack under your feet.

### Step 5

## Layer Down

Another tired maxim: Carry extra clothing. Sure, you want to be cozy and safe, but thick down in July is overkill. Choose layers based on the forecast, and don't double up (no wind jacket and rain shell). For three-season trips, your shell should weigh under a pound; the lightest are a mere 8 ounces. Pack a midweight long-sleeve top, one synthetic T, lightweight shorts and pants, a light down jacket (10-12 ounces.), two pairs of socks and underwear, two hats (for sun and warmth), and (maybe) light gloves and rain pants.

### Step 6

## Improve Your Diet

This is a hard sell for caffeine junkies, but do you really need a hot drink (or meal) in summer? Even the lightest stoves add ounces, especially when you tally fuel and cooking-gear ballast. Leave it home in favor of peanut butter, tortillas, cheese, jerky, pepperoni, dried fruits, nuts, sesame sticks, and peanut M&Ms—all of which are satisfying, nutritious, and packed with calories. And that extra food you always carry? Skip it. Even remote trails are usually within a day's hike of a road, and hunger would take weeks to kill you. Besides, when's the last time you ran out of chow on a trip?

### Step 7

## Ditch the Map

Hiking without a topo (and guidebook) isn't sane everywhere, but many trails are so well marked that no seasoned hiker could get lost. If you must carry a map, trim the superfluous parts. If you're thru-hiking, carry only the section you need between resupplies—and find the lightest version available. The set of 13 maps from Tom Harrison covers the entire JMT and weighs just three ounces, about the same weight as the *Trails*

## THE SKILLS

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*Illustrated* map of Yosemite, which covers just a fraction.

### Step 8

## *Downsize Your Pack*

Your streamlined load should fit in a pack with about 3,000 cubic inches of capacity. And you no longer need an elaborate (read: heavy) suspension. Ultralight packs typically consist of a simple, lightly padded harness and a minimalist frame. They weigh six ounces to two pounds and comfortably carry up to 25 pounds.

### Step 9

## *Take Less Medicine*

Your kit should weigh no more than eight ounces: All you really need is antibiotic ointment, duct tape, a few gauze pads and bandages, a bit of blister treatment, and your WFA training (you got that, right?). In the field, sub what's available: sticks for SAM splints, a cold stream for an ice pack, a T-shirt for a dressing.

### Step 10

## *Empty Your Bottles*

Tradition holds that you need to carry two to three liters of water at all times. But at 2 pounds, 2 ounces per liter, water is one of the heaviest things you're schlepping. Instead, drink opportunistically. Along many mountain trails, you rarely need to carry more than a liter—if any. Elsewhere, check distances between sources and tank up just enough that you're nearly empty as you reach each one. Then guzzle away as you refill. Finally, forego a filter in favor of a lightweight water treatment like Aqua Mira.



# BE AN ULTRALIGHT GOURMET

**No, it's not an oxymoron. You, too, can say buh-bye to endless energy bars and instant rice glop—and eat like royalty for less than two pounds a day.**

- By Kristen Hostetter

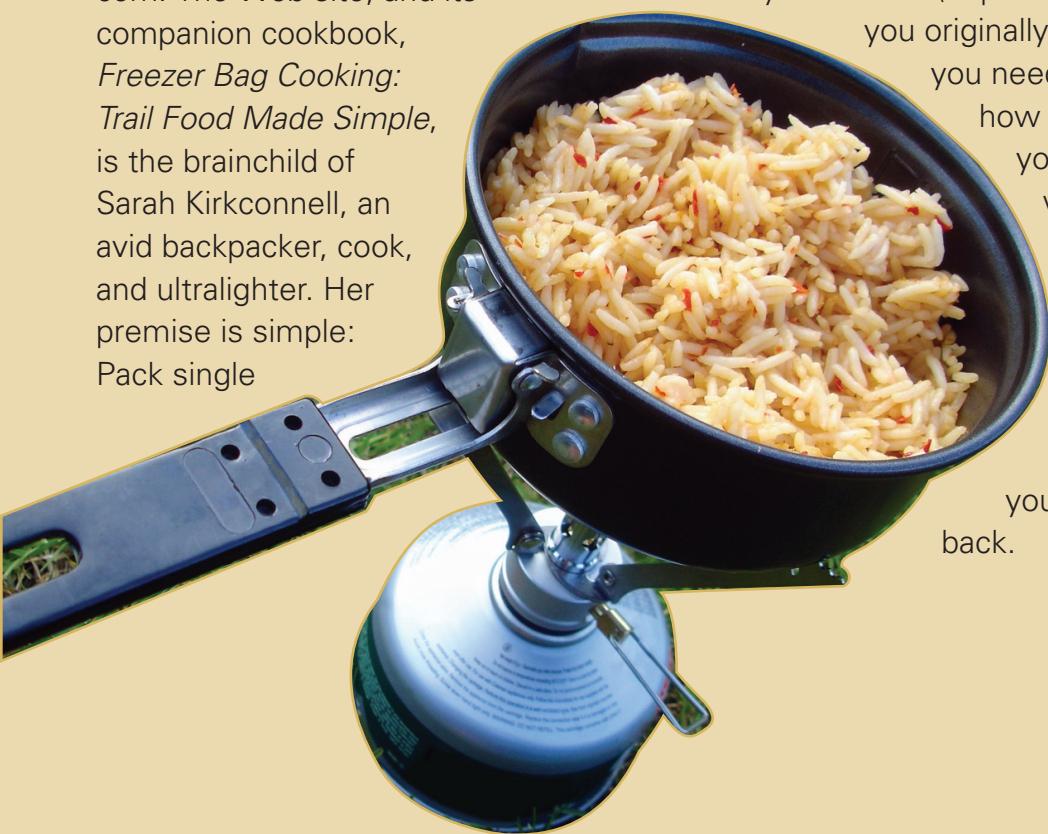
Going light is a bit like marriage: It's a multifaceted contract that requires your constant commitment. Cheat just a little bit, and your hike—and especially your shoulders—will suffer. But stick to these rules, and you'll quickly find a new comfort level with 15-mile days.

So how can you follow the rules and still make a gourmet meal that doesn't weigh you down like too much foie gras? We've found the Holy Grail, and it comes in the form of a freezer bag—or, rather, on freezerbagcooking.com. The Web site, and its companion cookbook, *Freezer Bag Cooking: Trail Food Made Simple*, is the brainchild of Sarah Kirkconnell, an avid backpacker, cook, and ultralighter. Her premise is simple: Pack single

portions of dehydrated meals into quart-size freezer bags. In camp, add boiling water, stir (with a spoon, to avoid fork punctures), insulate your baggie, let sit, then chow down.

Since you “cook” and eat right out of the bag, there's no dish duty (just add the baggies to your garbage) and no need to pack anything other than one boiling vessel. There's no simmering. No watched pots. Kirkconnell's technique, combined with the right gear and your favorite trail-adapted recipes, could slash your food weight by about half (depending on how you originally pack). All

you need to know is how to dehydrate your grub, what meals to put on your menu, and which ounces to count. Once you bag it, you'll never turn back.



## THE GEAR

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**This five-piece kitchen weighs only 13.3 ounces and cranks out gourmet eats.** - By Kristen Hostetter

### Antigravity Gear Caldera Kitchen

This alcohol stove system has it all: utter simplicity. Wispy weight. An ingenious packing system. It's a tiny burner, made from a V-8 can nestled inside a Pepsi can, that burns denatured alcohol. But what makes the Caldera unique is the way the system is integrated: The aluminum windscreen forms a rigid cone, which holds the 3-cup nonstick aluminum pot perfectly suspended over the burner—and efficiently captures the alcohol's BTUs. (We used less than 16 ounces of fuel on a five-day trip for two.) Boil times averaged about 8 minutes, and the whole system packs away into an insulated 1-quart, lidded plastic container, which doubles as a bowl, coffee cup, and cooking cozy. As tested, it weighs a scant 10 ounces. **\$73, (910) 794-3308, [antigravitygear.com](http://antigravitygear.com).**



### 32-ounce Gatorade Bottle

Skip the Nalgene bottle and reach into your recycle bin for one of these. One empty bottle weighs only 0.11 ounces—that's 2 ounces less than a regular Lexan Nalgene. Gatorade bottles are impressively strong: You'll get at least three months of use out of them, and then you can recycle them.

### FBC (Freezer Bag Cooking) Fabric Cozies

These pouches, made from Mylar and polyester, weigh just 1.5 ounces, are sized perfectly for a quart-sized ziplock bag, and act like a portable oven. Just add hot water to the bag and snuggle it into the cozy, which cooks a dehydrated meal in under 10 minutes. **\$14, [freezerbagcooking.com](http://freezerbagcooking.com).**

### Jetboil Jetset Spoon

There are lots of spoons and sporks out there, but this 0.4-ouncer is in a league of its own. The handle is long enough for eating out of a zip-top bag without getting gunked up, but it collapses into a neat 5 inches. Set of three includes fork and spatula. **\$20, (888) 611-9905, [jetboil.com](http://jetboil.com).**

### Fozzil Thinkflat Bowl

This clever item—it packs flat, but morphs into a bowl with four corner snaps—pulled triple duty on a recent trip in Colorado's Holy Cross Wilderness. First, it provided a handy receptacle for our soft-sided bag cozies. Second, it made a great cutting board for slicing cheddar at lunchtime. And third, it became a functional butt pad on wet, cold logs. And all at 1.3 ounces. Just rinse before you eat (or sit). **\$5, [Fozzils.com](http://Fozzils.com).**

# THE RECIPES

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## Three tasty dinners – the freezer bag away.

- By Kristen Hostetter

### *Beef Stroganoff*

Serves one: 5.5 oz.

Combine in a quart-size ziplock:

**1 package beef-flavored Ramen (including seasoning packet)**

**¼ cup dehydrated ground beef**

**¼ cup mixed dehydrated veggies**

**1 tsp. paprika**

**Dash of cayenne pepper**

Individual packet of cream cheese (equal to about a tablespoon; grab one at your favorite bagel shop)

Salt and pepper to taste

In camp Add about 1 ½ cups boiling water to baggie. Squish it around and let it rest in a cozy for 10 minutes or so, until the burger is tender. Stir in cream cheese.

### *American Chop Suey*

Serves one: 4.5 oz.

Make a double batch of this at home. Have it for dinner with your family, then dehydrate half for your next few backpacking trips.

**1 Tbs. olive oil**

**1 lb. lean ground beef**

**1 28-oz. can crushed tomatoes**

**1 6-oz. can tomato paste**

**1 chopped onion**

**1 chopped bell pepper (any color)**

**2 Tbs. dried oregano**

**2 Tbs. dried basil**

**1 tsp. crushed red pepper**

**¾ lb. elbow noodles**

**Salt and pepper to taste**

**Optional: cubed cheese, any kind**

At home Heat oil and gently sauté the onion and pepper until onion is translucent. Add the meat and brown thoroughly, breaking it up as you go with a wooden spoon. Drain off accumulated fat. Add the spices, then tomatoes, and

## THE RECIPES

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simmer for about 15 minutes. Meanwhile, cook the pasta till al dente and drain. Let the sauce cool, then spread it on the dehydrator trays. (If you don't have tray liners, cut wax paper to fit the shape of your trays.) Spread the cooled macaroni on separate trays, making sure it doesn't stick together (rinsing with cool water first helps). Dehydrate both components until they're brittle (about 6 hours or overnight). When done, combine 1 cup macaroni and 1 cup sauce in a 1-quart ziplock.

In camp Add about 2 cups boiling water to the bag, squish it around, and let it rest in a cozy for about 10 minutes, or until everything is tender. Top with cubed cheese.



### *Spicy Curry Noodle Bowl*

Serves one: 6 oz.

**1 serving of Asian cellophane noodles (They typically come in large bricks. Break off a 3- by 6-inch chunk.)**

¼ cup dehydrated meat of your choice (burger or chicken)

¼ cup dehydrated mixed veggies

1 Tbs. curry

1 Tbs. cumin

1 Tbs. coriander

1 Tbs. garam masala

½ tsp. ground ginger

2 Tbs. coconut cream powder

2 Tbs. dry milk

Dash of cayenne

Salt and pepper to taste

Handful of cashews

In camp Add about 1 ½ cups boiling water to baggie. Squish it around and let it rest in a cozy for 10 minutes, or until everything is tender. Top with cashews.



# THE RECIPES

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## READER RECIPE CONTEST

### And the Winner Is . . .

Our online call for entries yielded some yummy results. The true champion? Karla Coreil of Port Allen, Louisiana, who came up with a lunch idea that has all the right ingredients: It's easy, fast, light—and big on flavor and nutrition.

## *Mom's Carlsbad Spread*

16 oz. canned diced tomatoes, with juice

2 cups garbanzo beans, drained and rinsed (1 can)

½ cup lemon juice (about 2 to 3 large lemons)

5 garlic cloves

4 Tbs. chopped fresh basil (or use 1 Tbs. dried)

2 Tbs. extra virgin olive oil

2 roasted sweet peppers

At home Combine all ingredients in a food processor and puree until smooth.

Spread the mixture on dehydrator trays and dry for about 8 hours or until crumbly. Divide mixture into four ziplocks and break down the pieces as much as you can by squeezing the bag (this will speed along the rehydrating process).

In camp Add equal parts water (cold is fine) to each bag, stir, and let sit for 5 to 10 minutes. Serve on pita, tortillas, or bagels. Makes 4 servings.

# CUT WINTER WEIGHT

Four ways to pack light and stay warm.

- By Michael Lanza

Even with global warming, winters still get cold in much of the country, and fear of freezing often motivates hikers to overload their packs with clothing and gear. But just because there are 10 inches of fresh snow on the ground doesn't mean you need to equip for the Arctic. Try these weight-saving tips to keep your pack three-season light.

## *Downsize your shell*

Leave the bulky, insulated waterproof/breathable jacket at home. It's fine for windy chairlifts, but too warm for winter hiking and snowshoeing. With lighter materials and spare designs, today's hooded shells weighing about 16 to 24 ounces are ideal for winters in the lower 48—and all you'll need to wear over a base layer when moving on snowy, windy days.

## *Adjust your layers*

Build insulation with multiple lightweight layers that work together instead of heavier layers worn alone. Slip a midweight fleece (vest or jacket) over a long-sleeve base layer when on the go. Retain heat during rest breaks by adding a hoodless puffy jacket weighing 1.5 pounds or less. In camp, wear insulated booties.

## *Fine-tune your sleep*

Bring only as much bag as you need. Warm sleepers should select a bag rated for the nighttime lows, while human popsicles should aim for a rating 10°F to 15°F lower. Use two pads for ground insulation: a full-length foam pad underneath a shorter inflatable mattress.

## *Save your stove*

Pack liquid-fuel stoves (e.g., white gas) for winter trips. Unlike canister cookers, they don't sputter when temperatures dip below freezing. Bring 10 fluid ounces of white gas per person per day if you need to melt snow, and half that amount if water is available. Stick with lightweight, one-pot meals that require only hot water.



# THE METHOD

## Sucking all the moisture out of your food is the key to eating well and eating light.

- By Kristin Hostetter

Because most food weight is water weight, it's impossible to really go ultralight gourmet without investing in a basic food dehydrator, which won't set you back more than 50 bucks. With these tips, you can transform your favorite at-home meals into featherweight, just-add-water trail delicacies.

### • **Precook and dry your pasta.**

You'll save substantial cooking time in camp, not to mention fuel and weight. Simply cook your pasta al dente at home, then spread it on dehydrator trays and let it go for a couple of hours until brittle. In camp, add boiling water, then cover and let sit for a few minutes.

### • **Feed your inner carnivore.**

Start with lean ground beef, turkey, or chicken. Brown it along with any seasoning you like. Suggestions: Asian (curry, cumin, coriander) or Italian (oregano, basil, thyme). When the mixture is browned, rinse it under hot water to remove residual fat, then dehydrate until the nuggets are very hard (about five hours). Break the meat up into fine particles for easier rehydrating.

### • **Get saucy.**

Maybe it's your famous red pepper and Vidalia onion sauce. Or Grandma's Bolognese. Whatever the condiment, you can probably dehydrate it. All you need are plastic tray liners and a dehydrator. Spread the sauce in a very thin layer and let it rip for 8–10 hours, until it becomes a featherweight leather. Add hot water, and eat.

# NUMBER CRUNCHING

**Want to be a die-hard ultralighter? You'd better get OCD about counting ounces—especially when it comes to food.**

- **Know your appetite.**

Keep notes on exactly how much, say, pasta you pack per meal, and whether or not it leaves you satisfied, hungry, or toting out leftovers. A common mistake is to cook too much food—and nobody wants to deal with a sodden garbage bag full of uneaten rice and beans.

- **Read the labels.**

Backpackers can't afford to haul around empty calories that don't pack a nutritional punch. Look for high protein, carb, fat, and vitamin contents; steer clear of overwhelming sodium and lengthy lists of mysterious chemicals and additives.

- **Invest in a scale.**

How can you possibly lighten your load without being able to compare the weights of individual items? Don't trust manufacturer weights; they are often overly optimistic.