

SHOPPING TIPS FOR BACKPACKING GEAR

You do not have to spend a fortune equipping your scout for hiking and backpacking. While there is a wide range of options, prices and quality, here is some of what I have learned from my own experience.

10 ESSENTIALS

Pocket knife: no sheathed knives. Closing pocket knife only. Basic: Boy Scout knife. Better: Swiss Army Knife with extras (scissors, screw driver, tweezers)

First Aid Kit: Home made is best and cheapest. Should include moleskin (blisters), band-aids, medical tape, sterile gauze, mouth-barrier device (for CPR), latex gloves, antiseptic, small scissors (unless knife has one). Should also include paper and pencil for accident info.

Extra clothes: I'll cover this in a separate clothes section.

Rain Gear: Cotton is not rain gear! It is terrible for hiking. If it gets wet it is heavy and dries very slowly. Cheap and practical is a lightweight plastic poncho. Otherwise, get a waterproof rain jacket with a hood.

Flashlight: Headlamps are handy but any small, lightweight flashlight will do.

Trail food: I will also cover food in another section.

Water: Lightweight is the key to a water bottle. 1 liter bottle is a good size. Nalgene bottles are tough, light and easy to fill but plastic canteens are also fine.

Matches: Lighters aren't very good. Strike anywhere stick matches are best if kept in a cheap waterproof match case (even a ziplock bag will work for this).

Sunscreen: High SPF. When hiking over snow you can get a serious burn if not protected.

Map & compass: Maps of hikes can be purchased at GI Joe's or R.E.I.. There is also mapping software (TOPO 3D) where you can print your own maps. Any basic compass will do. Every boy should have a compass and a map of each hike they go on because if they ever get lost it could save their life.

OTHER DAY HIKE REQUIRED ITEMS

Day pack: Should be large enough to fit all required items inside. Day packs are far more comfortable if they have a hip belt which takes the weight off the shoulders. For multi-day backpack trips it is better to bring a smaller lightweight day pack which is easier to fit into the larger backpack. This allows for backpacking to a base camp and still having a small day pack for excursions.

Hiking boots: This is the single most important piece of equipment you can get for your scout! Great fitting hiking boots will *dramatically* reduce the chance of getting blisters, sprained ankles, knee strain and all kinds of other nasty things. It is easy to say it isn't worth buying hiking boots when they just grow out of them in a year but I can not stress how important it is to get past that way of thinking and just bite the bullet. Prices vary widely but you can get decent boots for reasonable prices.

Hiking socks: Thick tall hiking socks keep the feet padded and reduce rubbing. Even better is to buy thin polypropylene liner socks and a mid thick hiking sock which really reduces blisters. The socks rub together instead of boot and skin. Either way, buy the socks first and then wear them when boot shopping!

Sun hat: Baseball cap is fine but a bandana hanging out the back will keep the back of the neck from sunburn. Better still are fully brimmed army hats that pack light and small.

Sunglasses: Hiking on snow can cause snow blindness without sunglasses.

Fleece jacket: This is another extremely important piece of gear. Unlike cotton, fleece is warmer, lighter and dries much more quickly. In the art of clothes layering, a fleece jacket is the main source for warmth.

Insect repellent: Personally, 100% DEET is the only thing I have found that has any effect at all on bugs. Even so, I prefer long pants and a long sleeved shirt to bug juice unless it is just too hot or too buggy. For serious bug haters, a mesh head covering can also be a sanity saver. These work best over a baseball cap so the mesh sticks out from your face a few inches.

Toilet Paper: Not much to say here except keep it in a ziplock bag in case of rain.

Plastic shovel: Sporting good stores sell small, plastic scoop shovels about 8 inches long that are perfect for a variety of things, including digging a hole for human waste if necessary.

OPTIONAL ITEMS FOR DAY HIKES

Altimeter: Used for monitoring your elevation. Combined with a map and compass, you can find your way through almost anything. Altimeters come built into watches or stand-alone like a compass. Great tool for when they ask "how much farther to that ridge"?

GPS: Also a great tool if you know how to use it but they are battery operated so knowing how to use a compass is more reliable.

Water filter: An incredibly important tool. All water must be purified before drinking these days and a filter is the most efficient way to purify. I like the MSR Sweetwater but there are all kinds of filters out there. Every patrol should have their own filter.

Gaiters: These are waterproof wraps that cover the top of the hiking boot and go all the way up to the knee. Not essential but great for spring hiking in mud or snow.

Hiking poles: Similar to ski poles but with springs on the shafts they can cushion the knees coming down a mountain. Also great for balance with a full backpack on while hiking or fording streams.

REQUIRED PERSONAL ITEMS FOR MULTI-DAY BACKPACK TRIPS

Backpack: Next to boots, this is the second most important piece of equipment you can invest in. A pack that fits poorly will turn a backpack trip into a miserable experience. Get the help of an expert when shopping for a backpack. Even if you don't buy one there, the staff at R.E.I. are very good at fitting packs. Make sure you buy one with a hip belt (places the weight on the hips and off the shoulders) and make sure the pack is the right length for the torso. Keep in mind all the other items that must fit into the pack so don't get one too tiny. Some packs have lots of pockets, some you stuff everything inside. Again, get some input from someone with real knowledge.

Waterproof pack cover: Backpacks don't fit inside backpacking tents. If it pours rain all night long or even while you are hiking, you need to protect your pack and its contents from getting soaked. Sporting good stores make backpack covers that pack up small and light. Even a Hefty garbage bag will do but is harder to fit over the pack while hiking.

Sleeping bag: This is a tough one. For starters, find one that rolls up tight and small. NO FLANNEL! The selection is huge so again, seek advice from an expert. Look for one that will stay warm down to around 15 degrees, packs up small and is lightweight.

Sleeping pad: Basic – 4 foot strip of blue foam pad. A bit more comfortable is a self-inflating pad. All pads can be bulky so look for comfort in the smallest, lightest one you can find.

Fire Starter: Should be a 10 Essential. A utility candle or commercial fire starter pellet can really help if the wood isn't real dry.

Mess kit: This is personal choice but here is my experience. Forks are worthless. A spoon can always be used like a fork. Any spoon will do but a lexan spoon won't get too hot and is lighter than metal. Scout knives cover the knife part of things so I only bring a lexan spoon when backpacking. A cheap plastic bowl like Tupperware or Rubbermaid is my choice of bowl/plate. I used to have a great Lion King bowl we got from a cereal offer but it got thrown away much to my dismay. Anything I could put on a plate I can put in a bowl but I can't put soup on a plate so I don't bring a plate at all. I also bring a cheap plastic mug which covers all my drinking needs. To summarize: one bowl, one mug, one spoon – that's my mess kit. Lightweight and easy to clean!

Toothbrush/toothpaste: Only bring as much toothpaste as you need since it is heavy. I also got a traveler's mini toothbrush to save space and weight in my pack.

Camp sandals: Once in camp after a long day of hiking, sandals are much more comfortable and don't trample the ground as much as boots. I prefer TEVA's because of the straps and because water doesn't hurt them. I can swim in them, climb rocks with them and they are fairly small.

Extra boot laces: Imagine breaking a boot lace on day three of a 50 mile backpack trip. 'nuf said.

REQUIRED GROUP GEAR FOR MULTI-DAY BACKPACK TRIPS

Tents: Backpack tents should be as light as possible so most are two man tents. When shopping, go for at least a 3 season tent that is under 4 pounds (some are as light as 2), sleeps two and

packs up small. Tents also vary greatly in price so think about how often it will be used and how much abuse it needs to handle. Patrols should make sure every scout is buddied up and each pair have a tent.

Stoves: There are many kinds of stoves out there so go for one that is lightweight, small and easy to use. I prefer a Coleman Multi-fuel stove that uses white gas but the MSR Whisperlite is also a very popular stove. Some stoves are designed to attach fuel canisters directly to them while others need to be filled. For the latter, store extra fuel in metal gas bottles.

Cooking gear: The best ones are sets that come with two pots, a lid that is also a pan and a little metal gripper for picking up hot pots. It all fits together nice and compact and usually comes with a small stuff sack to fit it in.

Water Bladder: Stores one gallon of purified water. Makes camp life much easier. Packs up really small and light (when empty!) and has handles for carrying. Every patrol should have one.

Clothes: (Mother's look away!). No matter how many days you go backpacking, you only need a certain amount of clothes. I have made the mistake of bringing fresh clothes for every day and it is just way too much bulk and weight for my pack. Here is my latest philosophy.

Underwear: 2 pair. You can wash one while wearing the other.

Socks: 2 pair.

Liner socks: 2 pair

Pants: NO jeans. Too heavy, bulky and they don't dry out quickly. I bring one pair of lightweight hiking pants and a pair of shorts that are really swim trunks but work as shorts too.

Shirts: I carry a polypropylene turtleneck for an undershirt. Very warm for mornings and cold nights. I bring a very lightweight short-sleeved hiking shirt that is also some kind of moisture wicking material. Hiking in a t-shirt isn't good. They get soaked with sweat. I bring a long sleeved button up shirt with a collar for evenings when the bugs are out. My polar fleece (see above) is my main jacket. For greater warmth I wear it over my turtleneck. For greatest warmth I use the turtleneck, then the fleece and finally the rain jacket which cuts the wind and seals in warmth.

If I hike in spring or late fall I also bring a pair of ragwool gloves and a wool hat.

Well that's about all I can think of. I hope you find this useful. I know that the troop is planning more hikes and backpacks so I strongly encourage you all to outfit your scouts as soon as possible. Please let me know if you have any questions or need more information. I would be happy to help in any way I can.

Thanks,

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