

# YOU & YOUR GEAR

## CARE & REPAIR OF TENTS

By Judy Bentley

With some justification, you might expect your new nylon tent to take care of itself. To a remarkable extent it will, but if you want it to last as long as your hiking yen, there are a few tent-keeping skills to learn.

**Waterproofing.** If the tent really has all the qualities the manufacturer claims for it, it will come fully waterproofed, with the proper pegs, a carrying case for the tent itself and perhaps one for the poles and stakes, and maybe some seam sealant to apply to the stitching of the floor, outer wall and rain fly, which are usually the coated fabrics. If tents are packed by the manufacturer too soon after the seams are sealed, wet sealant may work through the folds and ruin the tents. Consequently, some manufacturers cut costs and ask the customer to seal his own seams. Read the instructions accompanying the tent to see if yours is one of these. If that's the case, set the tent up and apply the sealant to the seams. Let the sealant dry thoroughly. Play it safe. Give the tent more drying time than the product directions call for. This will also help get rid of the smell of the sealant. A dry sunny afternoon should be sufficient.

**Floor Care.** Before packing the tent, be sure its floor is clean of elements of the outdoors not compatible with a nylon floor—pine needles, sand, pebbles, small sticks, and so on. The floor of the tent will wear out first and is most susceptible to puncture.

You should also plan for emergency repairs. Two-inch-wide ripstop nylon tape with adhesive backing is good for uncoated fabrics; the same tape, waterproofed, will do for the coated parts.

**Pitching.** Clear the camping spot of sharp objects. Pitch the tent well out of range of any sparks. (Even better, don't build a campfire.)

Guy lines should be taut, but not too tight; excessive tension adds unnecessary strain and may deform the tent. When the tent is new, loosen the lines if there's any possibility of rain. The ropes and fabric will shrink slightly when wet and tighten up, then expand when dry.

**Cooking.** Most tents are not intended to be cooked in; they won't burn, but nylon melts at a relatively low temperature. Any sudden flare-up will create a huge hole. A winter or true alpine tent should have an exhaust vent for fumes and a zippered cookhole, so that the pot or stove can be placed on the bare ground.

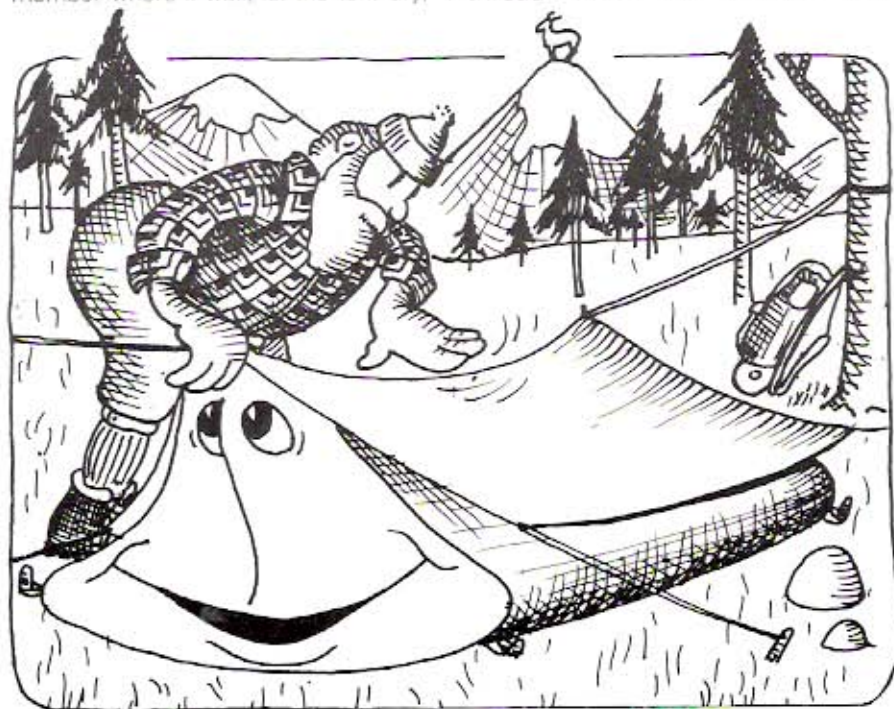
According to Du Pont, gasoline has no significant effect on nylon, even after 1,000 hours of immersion. But it does ruin all kinds of rubber, including urethane, so it would be a good idea to avoid spilling gas on your coated tent floor. What substances do harm nylon? All polyamides (of which nylon is one) are adversely affected by acids, including citric acid. So Du Pont recommends keeping lemonade and orange juice away from tent fabrics.

**Patching.** If all your tent keeping goes for naught, and you create a hole in the fabric, the damage can be repaired with the adhesive tape mentioned above. If a leak has developed and you can remember where it was, let the tent dry,

then apply the tape from the outside, which is usually the uncoated side. If the leak is small—the result of worn coating or a minor abrasion—rub the area inside and out with candle wax, paraffin or a commercial wax stick such as the No Drip Wax Stick. Even chapstick will do in a pinch. Apply more seam sealant to leaky seams.

**Packing.** Ripstop nylon does not tear readily, but it is prone to puncture, hence the need to sweep it out before packing. Sap from small twigs, leaves, or blossoms and bird droppings should be whisked off, too, before they invite more dirt. As you roll the tent up loosely (folding will create creases which weaken the fabric), sweep away any dirt sticking to the outside as well. Steel pegs may corrode and stain the material or cause creases if they're not packed separately. If the tent is still wet from a rain, it can be packed temporarily without harm—nylon tents are genuinely mildew resistant. But if your pack has D-rings on the outside, it won't hurt to lash the wet tent onto them, piled up loosely, to let it dry as you continue your hike. Remember, too, that it's lighter dry.

**Storage.** Back home and ready to stuff the gear in the back of the closet? If the tent's still wet, help the chemical mildewproofing along by letting the fabric dry out thoroughly, remembering that seams remain damp longest and cotton thread—which will mildew—will



remain damp even longer.

The poles and pegs may need some attention. Nesting poles should be cleaned off to prevent jamming, especially if they have been used near an ocean where salt air rapidly corrodes the aluminum. And, if you want to be meticulous, lightly swab any metal poles with oil before storing them and buff any joints with a light emery cloth.

**Repairs.** At home, you can make major repairs, if necessary. The simplest repair kit is one that involves no sewing at all: a combination fabric cement and patch of matching material. Camp Trails sells a repair kit called Bondall; another is the Jiffy Sew kit from Jiffy Products of Montreal. Air-mattress repair kits can also be used.

Any sewing you do, along the seams for example, will leave small holes that must be waterproofed again, either by reapplying seam sealant or by rubbing wax into the seam, working it in thoroughly with your fingers. Repeated light applications are more effective than one heavy application.

There are also grommet repair kits with everything needed to replace or add grommets. New zippers can be ordered from most manufacturers, but one, Sierra Designs, offers the following preventive advice instead: "If a zipper becomes jammed, don't lose your cool. Excessive tugging will tear netting or damage the zipper." When all else fails, write to the EMS repair service, the only outfit, to our knowledge, which will repair any equipment regardless of manufacture.

**Washing.** Tents can be washed or just left to season with vintage grime if you prefer. Sierra Designs says that after the guy lines have been removed, its tents can be put in a washing machine, washed with an ordinary detergent and machine dried. But they also add that most experts feel that air drying is better. Other manufacturers say their tents should never be machine washed. If you're too timid to try machine washing, just sponge the tent down or set it up and spray it with the garden hose. If you don't have a backyard, hang the tent indoors by its normal suspension points after sponging it down or washing in the shower. Dry cleaning fluid will help remove pitch and resin stains.

Now that you've done what you can, forget about it for a while. Part of what you paid for, after all, is durability.

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