

YOU & YOUR GEAR

CLEANING YOUR BAG

By William Kutik

Is anything more amazing than a modern down sleeping bag? Stuffed, it's no larger than a pillow. Opened, it's the size of a bed. Just a hat trick? Perhaps. But the four pounds of nylon, webbing and leathers that come out of the sack literally keep you alive on a bitter cold night. And that's real magic.

Your sleeping bag is a portable womb, an indispensable component of your wilderness life-support system. When all of nature demands you return home from the backcountry, it alone allows you to remain—and in comfort. How long it will keep performing this magic is really up to you. A bag can survive years of regular use or be destroyed on a single weekend outing. One improper cleaning can become a "\$100 Misunderstanding," but several done correctly may never hurt a bit.

Proper care for your sleeping bag should begin right after purchase. Store it at home unstuffed—folded or loosely rolled in a box or large bag in a clean dry place. This allows air circulation—the major factor in the life and performance of down. Whenever the bag is stuffed, the down bends and then must unbend to loft up again. The natural state of the down (once off the goose) is unbent. The less time spent compacted, the longer it will remain resilient.

Similarly, when stopping on the trail, give the bag enough time to loft. The loft, of course, is what keeps you warm. Don't pull your bag out of the stuff sack and crawl right in. Shake it gently and set it out a good hour before going to sleep.

The bag's nylon shell is tough, but the ground is a lot tougher. Use a water-

proof ground sheet (vinyl or coated nylon) to protect the bag from snags, water and dirt.

Another formidable enemy is fire. Campfire sparks will melt through the shell in seconds and can even ignite the down inside. Never dry a wet bag by a campfire or use a stuffed bag as a seat cushion around one. Resist those temptations by not building a fire to start with.

After a trip, air the bag thoroughly, outside if possible. The sun's rays will sterilize it somewhat, and air circulation will help revive the down.

With steady usage, despite all the care in the world, your bag will eventually get dirty inside and out. Whenever you sleep in it, moisture passes through the shell into the down, carrying with it an unpleasant assortment of your body's dirt and oils. This dirt collects on the down particles, reducing their ability to loft. People supposedly allergic to down are sometimes reacting only to the dust and dirt that collect on it. A modern nylon shell doesn't absorb dirt and oils as quickly as the old standard Egyptian cotton, but it, too, gets dirty. After considerable use, your bag may begin to smell and feel like a giant, dirty sweatsock. And who wants to sleep in that?

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Apparently some people are willing to because they say a bag should never be cleaned, that any method you choose will destroy it. Don't listen to them. And certainly don't sleep next to them. Cleaning your bag may be a little traumatic, but it doesn't have to be a disaster. Short of buying a new one, you'll have to clean it occasionally to restore the down, if not your sense of smell. (Dirt, remember, inhibits lofting.)

Like leather, down is an animal-protein substance, and has natural oils which give it the resiliency to loft after being crushed. The basic problem is finding a way to clean off the unnatural oils and dirt without stripping away the natural ones. Dry cleaning is risky. The fluids used, including the mild ones, attack the natural oils. Admit-



Warning

If you do have your bag dry-cleaned, be sure to air it thoroughly. The stuffing of the bag absorbs dry-cleaning fluid. If it isn't aired properly, you can pick up a skin rash from sleeping in the bag. Air your bag outside for at least a week. Then get inside the bag, close it up, and breathe. If you can still smell the cleaning fluid, air your bag some more.

tedly, a lot of the oils have already been removed by the down merchant in the original processing. But how much more can be spared before the down loses its properties is really anyone's guess.

Despite this undeniable chemical danger, most manufacturers recommend dry cleaning over washing. When pressed, they would admit to being forced into that position simply because too many people ruin their bags by washing and drying them improperly.

Finding a dry cleaner competent to handle down is harder than finding one to do a leather jacket or skirt. Although the problems in doing the two are similar, don't assume that an expert leather cleaner can handle your bag. The first step is to inquire at your local camping store. Someone there should know an experienced bag cleaner.

Even armed with that information, be suspicious. When the cleaner cheerfully replies that "of course" he can handle down, ask what fluid he'll use. Most cleaning is done with harsh synthetic agents made up of chlorinated hydrocarbons. The most common is perchloroethylene, known in the trade as "perk." This will turn the down into shoelaces. If that's what he suggests, leave immediately. Only mild petroleum-based agents such as Stoddard solvent are acceptable.

After cleaning, air your bag for at least a week to remove any lingering traces of the chemical solvent, which can damage the down and, possibly, your brain. If you don't have time to air it, U.S. Army general issue gas masks (\$14.95; 37 ounces) are available at many surplus stores.

A better idea is to wash and dry the



bag yourself. Even though improper washing and drying have ruined more sleeping bags than campfires and avalanches, it can be done right.

The most important thing to remember is that your sleeping bag is not a big nylon envelope filled with down—unless it cost \$23.50. In all better quality bags, the down is kept in place by interior baffles made of a lightweight cotton which looks like cheesecloth. These baffles are sewn in varying con-

figurations between the two nylon layers. With the down inside, heavy and water-soaked, rough handling will tear the baffles out, turning your bag into a useless envelope.

For this reason, do not wash in a machine. Top-loading agitator models are obvious bag-mashers. Even front-loading tumble machines toss a heavy, wet bag around too much.

Hand washing is the answer. Fill your bathtub with a few inches of lukewarm water, enough to cover the bag. Use only Ivory Flakes, or the occasionally available down soaps—most detergents are oil strippers. Work the suds in by pushing down on the bag with open hands, gently kneading. Do not twist or wring. Dirt will appear as the suds are worked through. Sponge off especially dirty spots on the nylon. Drain the tub, rinse the bag, and repeat

DO

- Clean your bag when it gets dirty.
- Wash your bag yourself—in the bathtub.
- Use Ivory Flakes.
- Get *all* the soap out of your bag.
- Store at home unstuffed.

DON'T

- Send the bag to just any dry cleaner.
- Pick up a water-soaked bag.
- Wash in a top-loading machine (even a front-loading one is risky).
- Use detergents.

the process until the suds stay white—two or three times at the most. Rinse thoroughly the last time as any soap left in will clump the down like dirt. When rinsed, press the bag to remove as much water as possible. This doesn't mean running it through the human equivalent of a wringer. Press firmly, but gently.

Do Not Pick Up a Water-Soaked Bag.

Ever see a down waterfall? Just yank your soaking bag out of the tub like a suitcase and you will. The baffles will be ripped out for sure. Instead, after gently pressing out the water, just gather the bag up in your arms like a baby, supporting all its weight with your hands from underneath.

While it may be aesthetically pleasing to dry the bag outside in a mesh hammock, it takes at least three days and will result in permanent clumps of down unless these are continually broken up by hand. Another method is to use a large commercial tumble drier that can be set for low or no heat. (Heat is death to nylon.) First inspect the drum for protrusions, sharp edges and forgotten bathmats. Put the bag in with a pair of clean sneakers (laces off). Their weight will break up the down, and the rubber will build up some static electricity to renew the loft. At the lowest heat possible, run the machine as many times as necessary. Complete the drying with a good, long airing in the sun, if available.

If, after all these words of caution, you somehow manage to muck it up, don't bother sending the bag back to the manufacturer. They'll only say "I told you so." Send the next bag to the cleaners. That way, if disaster strikes twice you'll at least have someone else to blame. ■

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