

Go- Light Backpacking

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The newest trend in Backpacking is to carry as little as possible. It cuts back on the load, and it cuts back on the damage to the wilderness. It also leads to a radically different head trip.

It's early summer and you're in the mountains. You walked up a long canyon that started as a deep gorge and ends here at its upper reach as an alpine meadow between parallel ridges. Ahead is a series of high basins with lakes nestled among snowy peaks. The meadow is covered with thick grass, and down the middle of it runs a stream with a slight meander. Though it's summer at home, at this elevation it's just spring with flowers all around. Scattered over the meadow are pearly-gray granite boulders and exposed mounds and low swells of the same rock. Conifers border the meadow and grow up the ridges to thin out at treeline. The ridges have a rounded, smooth look in their lower parts but are fractured and jagged along their crests.

Late afternoon. The light is oblique and soft under a pale blue dome of perfectly cloudless sky. The air is still, the day's upwind has stopped, the night's downwind not yet begun. You're sitting on a polished granite swell in a bend of the stream. The stream is running over its banks from snowmelt above.

It slows around the bend with a strong flat current. Winged insects make busy toward the end of day. Violet-green swallows catch them on the wing. Trout rise to them. It occurs to you that insects have a lineage more ancient than the granite you're sitting on, insects being Devonian, the granite of these mountains Cretaceous. As a living form, they're more ancient than conifers and the grass of the meadow. Being among these skillful ancients in this alpine setting makes you feel primeval. Natural wonder lays you back.

Then, like a visitation, you see, for a moment, the Indians that used to summer here. You hear voices in a soft language. It is a family encamped by the stream right where you are, doing their life. You realize you must be on a camping spot that's centuries old. You think of the vision of life the Indians had that enabled them to spend all their summers here. You see that it was the clear purpose and precision of their very light techniques that allowed them their lives in the open. This and their idea of what constituted living a human life. A kind of

sophistication we no longer understand, it was elegant in the way scientists speak of an elegant solution: when it gets too hot for comfort in the valley below, go up into the cool mountains; when it gets too cold in the mountains, go down to the warm valley. In either place the Indians had all they needed, and they knew how to do all the things that needed to be done. They were onto the same superintelligent level as the insect. They were in concert with plants, minerals and animals and they survived by using what was before them, requiring nothing more.

But now, as if out of nowhere, a white gull goes floating by, seated high on the water. It brings you back to where you are. Seagulls in the mountains? Then you remember: they summer here too.

The light is beginning to fade. You must find your place for the night. You're not making elaborate camp. All you need is a level spot big enough to lie down on. You don't need fire. You aren't cooking. You'll drink water and eat raw out of your store. Toward the upper end of the meadow you see the rise of a glacial step with the stream cascading down it. To one side is a multijointed, smooth granite eminence with conifers growing in its fractures and on its terraces. On one of these terraces you will find a small bed of white sand. It will have a view to the peaks ahead and the meadow below.

You have everything you need, you can go where you want. You've come in spare for ease of travel. You have leaned toward not enough rather than more than enough, because you know that you can make do with not enough. You are going light.

It comes about this way. You find you always return home from a wilderness trip with leftover food and stuff you took in and didn't use. You look at the excess and you remember you carried it all the way for nothing, and how hard it was to carry. After you've done this a number of times, it occurs to you, as an ideal, to go as light as possible next time.

But why do we take more than we need? In a strange way, we generally calculate the amount of stuff we're going to take not on how much we need but on how much we can bear. The packs that are offered to us by designers of outdoor equipment seem to encourage this tendency to overload. When we see the more than generous space they give us, we feel obliged to



fill it. Chock-full of stuff, our packs end up weighing just over what we can bear comfortably. We assuage our doubt about the weight with the thought that the pack will lighten each succeeding day, but it never seems to. Are we in wilderness to prove how much we can carry? Is backpacking a form of punishment? Are we beasts of burden? There is a vicious cycle involved here. The more stuff we take, the more exertion necessary to bear it; the more exertion, the more food we feel we need to keep up our strength, and so on. The only way to break this cycle is to begin thinking in terms of an ultralight wilderness style. And relief from our present burdensome style is not the only consideration—ultralight comes to mean not only cutting back on the load, but also treading very light on wilderness, thus helping to preserve it.

As more people go into wilderness, it becomes necessary to rethink the wilderness experience in terms of right now. How not to despoil wilderness has become the primary issue. Without some clear thinking on this matter, a whole bunch of backpackers are going to repeat the depredations of sheep, cattle and lumberjacks. We've got to learn to go light.

LIGHT ON THE MUSTARD!

My meals were easily made, for they were all alike and simple, only a cupful of tea and bread. JOHN MUIR

In America we have a strange attitude toward food and eating. It's a part of our

abundant supply of food, and the way it's dealt to us commercially and highly advertised. We're led to believe we must eat more food than is necessary or good for us. We end up believing that unless we have three square meals a day, every day, we'll starve or immediately become sick. Something called "dietary deficiency" is presented to us as a constant threat to our health and well-being. You wonder how our species managed to survive to this point without knowing the minimum daily requirements.

And because the food that's purveyed to us is highly processed and generally thin on nutrition, great amounts of it must be eaten to feel nourished. So we eat and eat, and we do it on schedule. We end up eating not so much because we're hungry as because it's time.

It's compulsive behavior. We eat to fill a maw of insecurity. Every sign seems to say: Eat. So we eat, and grow fat and partially secure. If we take this food style into wilderness, we're bound to take more than we need.

The psychology of abundance and the impact of advertising are reflected in the variety of specially prepared camping foods offered the backpacker. Check the catalog of any store that carries a complete line of dehydrated and freeze-dried dishes. It reads like the fantasy of a starving man: Tuna à la Neptune, Chili Con Carne Ranchero, Beef Almondine, Turkey Tetrizzini, Chicken Chop Suey . . . Packaged

menus for breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks read the same way. The whole American food trip has been freeze-dried.

It seems something better could be thought up, something more in keeping with the spirit of wilderness. How long can we go on using a gift of such beauty as fire to cook up freeze-dried Turkey Supreme? Even white flour biscuits, bacon grease and coffee have more the feeling of proper outdoor grub.

Freeze-drieds do have the great advantage of light weight, but at what price? They have a deadness that no amount of culinary skill can liven. It's hard to see how a food could be submitted to the extreme temperatures required by freeze-drying without destroying its vitality. Your freeze-dried dish is twice cooked, first before packaging and again when you prepare to eat it. It's a pretty limp food that finally enters your mouth. There's also a large consensus that these foods don't digest well. And the cooking they require means carrying kitchen paraphernalia, which means finding a campsite with wood if you aren't carrying a stove and fuel. You will also need a good supply of water for cooking and washing up after. All of these are limiting factors if you have a mind to go light and free.

What are the alternatives? Here, as in all things having to do with living in the wild, we can turn to the Indians for instruction. They mastered the way to live on foot on this continent. When they



traveled they carried such foods as pemmican, jerky, parched corn, pinole and buccan. They understood how to lighten and preserve food by drying out the water. As we mechanically dehydrate and freeze-dry, they dried out their stuff with sun and wind and over slow smoky fire, a gentler method that left more food value intact.

Pemmican was made with jerky and rendered fat. Jerky is lean meat cut in strips and dried in the sun and wind or over a small smoky fire of nonresinous wood; the fire must not cook the meat. The jerky was shredded by pounding, then mixed with hot rendered fat in a proportion of half to half, then packed in hide bags. It was a kind of sausage. Parched corn is corn roast-dried. Pinole is a meal made from parched corn flour mixed with the sweet flower of mesquite beans or with sugar and spices. Buccan is smoked meat, buccan being the wood

frame on which the meat was placed over the smoky fire. Then, of course, the Indians knew all the wild edible plants along the way.

If we could come up with a modern equivalent of these Indian foods, we might have something better than freeze-driers. The idea would be to find a few staple foods that are compact, digestible and nutritious, that would taste good to us at all times of day, day after day. They should not require cooking.

The notion that we must cook outdoors is really an encumbering one. Must we carry a kitchen everywhere we go? Why should we want to eat in the wild as we do at home? Aside from the taste of cooked food, we eat cooked food for its warmth. Putting something hot into the stomach is a fast way to bring heat to the vitals and make us feel warm. Outdoors it's in the chill of morning and evening that we want a fire and hot food.

But it's good to remember here that a simple cup of hot water will do as well as a hot meal to warm your innards and is much easier to prepare. And eating hot food and hugging a fire are not the only ways to get warm. In fact, outdoors, fire isn't that great a method for getting warm since it heats just one side of you at a time.

A more efficient and expeditious way to be warm is to take advantage of the down sleeping bag. If you wake into a chill morning, instead of running around cold, building a fire and cooking, why not stay in your bag and watch morning happen? Then eat raw out of your store while still in your bag. Then emerge from bag nice and warm and start the day just as direct sunlight hits you. In the evening, when the chill begins to make you shake, get into your bag and eat foods of high caloric content such as fats and carbohydrates.

The comfort of being warmed by your own body heat under down cover is a form of pure luxury. And this method requires no hunting of wood, no fire place building, no cooking, no kitchen cleanup. No muss, fuss or bother.

Still, cooking is ancient to us. And fire is possibly the oldest distinctly human acquisition. Cooking by fire must be the vestige of an old sacrificial ritual. There is a beauty in sitting by a fire in wilderness, at twilight, with a pot of slumgullion at a bubbling simmer before you. But there's also great beauty in the simplicity of hiking to the end of your day, then finding that level spot just big enough to lie down on and eating raw out of your store while you watch night fall. As John Muir put it: "One may take a little simple clean bread and have nothing to do on these fine excursions but enjoy oneself."

Now that we've worked our way somewhat out of the cooking imperative, we can go back to thinking of kinds of flavorful staple foods that can be eaten every day and don't require cooking in the field. We return to the idea of a pemmican.

The Indian pemmican was mainly protein and fat. The early American outdoorsman made a pemmican of jerky, fat, raisins, and sugar (which added some carbohydrates, minerals and plain sugar). If we could make a pemmican of high caloric content that contained protein, fat, carbohydrates, minerals and vitamins, we might have something more like a fully nutritious food. Here,



let's broaden the definition of pemmican to mean any compact, nutritious, tasty, uncooked or precooked foodstuff that carries well and keeps for a long time—for at least a month, say, without spoiling or getting rancid. It may or may not contain meat and animal fat. Most important, it must serve as a staple food; it must take the place of the traditional collection of separate and various foods that require cooking.

A light, relatively nonfatty, nonmeat, uncooked pemmican might include the following:

Seeds: Sunflower, pumpkin, chia. High-caloric content, both saturated and unsaturated fats, rich in both protein and minerals, some vitamins. Best raw.

Nuts: Pinole, almond. Much like seeds nutritionally. Best raw.

Dried fruits: Pitted dates, apricots, raisins or currants. Good for calories, minerals, some protein. Dates are an excellent carbohydrate source, better in fact, than most grains. Dates are a fine all-around food. In addition to carbohydrates, they have high caloric content, some protein, and are rich in minerals—a natural sweet bread. There are many varieties: the Empress is excellent. Dried apricots are extremely high in vitamin A. Dried fruits are best sun-dried.

To these basic ingredients might be

added raw wheat germ, wheat germ oil, a little salt, some vitamin C powder—just enough to give the pemmican a slightly tart, clean aftertaste. (If you can find powdered fruit vitamin C, all the better.) Also, some kind of high-protein powder, bittersweet chocolate chips, etc. You can either mix all these ingredients as they are or put the whole thing through a hand grinder set at "coarse." When you compress the stuff to pack it, the stickiness of the dried fruit will bind it nicely. About three-quarters of a pound a day should do you well.

This pemmican can also be made into a biscuit. Simply add flour, milk and egg to the pemmican mixture in quantity sufficient to make a biscuit batter, mix well, roll it out and cut it into flat, rectangular biscuits for efficient packing. Then bake them on a cookie tin at 300° for 20 to 30 minutes on each side until you have a dry biscuit. Check often to test. Here again, you may use the ingredients as they are, or coarse-grind some or all of them. Carob powder, powdered chocolate, or something like Ovaltine will make a sweeter biscuit.

A meat pemmican can be made by adding shredded jerky, crumbled-up bacon bar, or ground-up dry salami to the seeds, nuts, dried fruits, etc. Salami ground up becomes more perishable, so use it accordingly. Lecithin might be added to this mixture to help the body assimilate the animal fat.

In this discussion of pemmican no specific recipe has been given. You must instruct yourself in this matter. Everyone must figure out his own pemmican. It will take some experimenting. The important thing is to find the combination of ingredients that suits your taste.

Now the question is, will it work? Can you eat pemmican day after day as your staple food outdoors? It would seem to be mostly a question of attitude. If you have no expectation but pemmican, and you're relaxed and not overtired when you eat, and you chew well and attend to flavors, and you're in a beautiful setting, and you remember Muir with his bread and tea, and you have an interesting pemmican, there's no reason why it shouldn't work.

You may want to take both kinds of pemmican to appreciate the contrast between the saltier meat pemmican and the sweeter pemmican biscuit. In addition to your pemmican, you might carry a few items like powdered fruit drink, powdered milk, some fresh, good-keeping fruits and vegetables like orange, apple, cucumber, carrot and sweet onion tucked away in your pack.

If the idea of pemmican puts you off entirely, instead of mixing up the different ingredients, carry them separately. All the ingredients for pemmican are good by themselves. Other foods that don't require cooking include cheese, granola-type cereals, roasted soybeans, fig paste, nut butters, dry breads and crackers, or dense pumpnickel that comes in a well-sealed package.

You might also consider the foods just lately brought to public attention, such as bee pollen and the royal jelly of bees. Bee pollen, which is pollen as it's brought to the hive by the worker bee, is an extremely nutritious food containing protein, minerals, vitamins (especially B complex), free amino acids and enzymes. It has a flavor unlike any other food, like very concentrated natural, bittersweet, tart bread candy. You must taste it to believe it. It is said to be good for cardiac action and intestinal function. Its purported ability to increase the hemoglobin count would make it an excellent high-altitude food. Buy it in its natural pellet form. Royal jelly is a glandular substance produced by the worker bee and fed to bee larvae together with honey and pollen. It is rich in nucleic acids. The Chinese make a kind of tonic based on royal jelly. It is called Peking

Royal Jelly and comes in a 10 cc. glass vial. Taste it on an empty stomach to see what it does for you. A vial of this is a fine way to start an extra hard wilderness day. If your health food connection can't get it for you, try a Chinese pharmacy.

Someday a dedicated backpacker will go through the whole Chinese pharmacopoeia in search of herbs and medicaments helpful to the outdoor life. Modern research, for instance, has shown the legendary ginseng to be an excellent central nervous system tonic and regulator of blood pressure. If you are in the mountains, which is a yin condition, the yang of ginseng will provide a nice balance.

So if permican doesn't appeal to you, there are many alternatives. You could go far and high on a store of raw almonds, a jar of raw honey (or a brick of maple sugar), a bag of bee pollen, a small chunk of ginseng, some vials of Peking Royal Jelly, a bag of dates, a bag of dried apricots and some fresh stuff perhaps, together with whatever supplements you might need or want.

The ideal is to take the minimum to get you by without a feeling of terrible deprivation or hardship. There's no need for fanaticism. On the other hand, say that you've taken the bare minimum, stayed longer than planned, and run out of food a day or two away from your car. Well, what's wrong with an honest fast, if it comes to that? Our body has great reserves available to it at all times. The capacity to fast is an interesting and valuable thing to know. How far can you go without food? To know this could be considered an outdoor skill.

Muir's bread and tea diet is probably impossible for us to keep over any length of time. It's simply too austere, and we're too conscious of nutritional factors to accept it. Then again, even Muir varied his diet on occasion. Somewhere in his writings he speaks of a breakfast of crystal clear water and nectar sucked out of flowers. His example continues to be inspiring and provides a rock-bottom model of what's possible.

GEAR & STUFF

The bundle I carried on my thin, bony shoulders was the cause of my first discomfort on this journey. I had intended to set off just as I was; however, a kamiko (kimono made of white paper, prepared with persimmon juice, and crumpled soft) to protect me from the cold at night, a yukata (thin cotton kimono), a

waterproof, and writing materials and so on—all these things I had received from my friends as parting gifts, and I could hardly leave them behind, but they were necessarily a cause of discomfort and vexation all the way. BASHO.

Gear is everything besides food. We all know where we can cut back and simplify on gear; it's the doing that's hard. We have a thing about things. Things make us feel secure. We have a need to be surrounded by our personal things. They provide comforts we're loath to give up. So when we leave home for wilderness, by some intricate mathematic we scale down our belongings to make up a mobile environment that matches the home environment almost point for point, only smaller and more compact. We have a light that can be turned on with a switch. A stove that can be lit with a match and the turn of a knob. A water supply right at hand in canteens. A kitchen with pots, pans, dishes and utensils. A waterproof shelter. A complete ensemble of clothes for every possible wilderness occasion. A medicine cabinet. A pantry full of food. And so forth. Someone will soon invent a collapsible portable chemical toilet that can be flushed into a sack—which may not be a bad idea, considering how thoughtless some people are with their toilet in wilderness. Then, of course, there must be hearth and fire. We want to be in wilderness but safely shielded from it at the same time.

The overload psychology of too much food and gear, and the heavy, home-outdoors style of camp ultimately rest on the early American urbanite pioneer's idea of wilderness as a foe to be fought and subdued—a domain of unfriendly forces to be penetrated at great risk to life and limb. Following this psychology, we often try to provision ourselves absolutely fail-safe.

Looking for an exemplar of a new wilderness style, we inevitably return to John Muir. He saw wilderness as a non-human realm of sacred nature with its own set of moves, and he learned these moves so that he could go with them. He never set foot in wilderness except with curiosity, wonder and reverence. There was no need to fight or trample it.

Gear was little burden: no one traveled lighter. In the Sierra, at his most elaborate, he would carry two blankets, bread and tea, a notebook, perhaps an aneroid and small stuff he could carry in his

trouser pockets. If he wanted to bear less he dispensed with the blankets.

For us, gear is a problem, and we must find the smallest amount of the very lightest gear to do wilderness right. The ideal, at this point, would seem to be a collection of gear that would make us self-contained units capable of passing through wilderness without in any way despoiling it. Uplift and water would be all that we'd take. In other words, we need gear to help keep our weight off wilderness as much as possible.

Basic gear for a temperate zone summer trip might include something like the following: a down sleeping bag, a lightweight sleeping pad to enable you to bed down anywhere, the long over-pack poncho, perhaps a space blanket, or a small (say five-by-seven) waterproofed nylon tarp (which could either be used as a ground cloth or, in combination with the poncho, be pitched as a tent when it rains) and the most versatile and spare ensemble of clothes possible. There's really not too much else you need.

But is the kind of gear we need for ultralight traveling available? For instance, is the present sack-type pack the best solution for our need as packs go? Couldn't there be a pack of some other design? Perhaps a pack that spreads out open, so that gear and food can be wrapped into a bundle in it and tightly lashed by some arrangement of belts? It would be like wrapping stuff in a blanket and lashing the bundle to a frame. The advantage of this design would be that you could make the shape and disposition of the load suit you exactly. And the pack would always be just the size that holds what you have. It could attach to the frame with clevis pins. Ingeniously designed, it could be as convenient as the sack-type pack.

How about a boot as light as high-top canvas shoes that would still give the support and protection of a medium-weight four-pound hiking boot? In the same way, we could go through every item of gear and redesign it ultralight yet capable of doing its function in the best way. The ultralight gear will follow as soon as we get our heads ultralight.

It's a provident and saving backcountry style we want. A lean style, appreciative of the wild as a refuge. And because we know wild earth to be a kind of flesh, we go in a way not to wound it. We go light. As though being stalked, we don't leave a trace. ■