

WHAT'S YOUR BAG?

How to pick a goose down sleeping bag

by Nelson Packer

The first rule in buying a sleeping bag is: Don't trust a sales clerk. More often than not he'll merely repeat to you the spiel he heard from the last manufacturer's salesman who spoke to him.

Sales clerks won't even ask you the right questions. They are almost always certain to ask you, for instance, what the coldest temperatures will be in which you'll be using the sleeping bag. You should *not* buy a sleeping bag for the most extreme weather conditions in which you are possibly going to use it. Instead, you should buy a bag *that suits most of your needs most of the time*. Otherwise, you would suffocate in the normal temperatures in which you'd be giving the bag its greatest use.

The best advice is to follow the *Whole Earth Catalog* adage: buy what you now need, not what you wish you needed. Never mind that winter hike in the Wind Rivers you'd like to do some day; expeditions always need special equipment anyway.

Weight.

Most sleeping bag manufacturers advise backpackers to select a nylon sleeping bag containing about two pounds of goose down. Backpackers themselves overwhelmingly agree with this advice; some 75 percent of the sleeping bags bought by backpackers are of this variety. The two-pound down bag is good for sleeping out in three seasons: summer, spring and fall. It is even good for much winter use—if you sleep warm, or know how to make the right kind of clothing adaptations. Several of our *BACKPACKER* staff members report that even on numerous nights of sleeping out in below-zero temperatures, they have never felt the need to use heavier bags.

However, if you are predominantly a summer backpacker, a two-pound down bag will be too hot, except at higher altitudes and on colder nights.

Shape.

Backpacking bags are usually made in a "mummy" shape, for two reasons: 1) they are lighter weight and 2) they are warmer.

Synthetic & Other Fillings.

Of course, sleeping bags are made of materials other than goose down—such as polyester (from which comes Dacron, Fortrel and Kodel). Although these are less expensive than down, they are also heavier.

But some fillings are almost as light weight as goose down. Duck down for one. Then, Dupont has developed a second-generation polyester called Dacron II. This filler is resilient like down and has the advantage of being warm when wet. Polyurethane foam, another filler, is also warm when wet. Both Dacron II and foam are less expensive, bulkier, and weigh more than down.

We will evaluate bags made of these materials in a future issue of *BACKPACKER*.

Obviously, except for the question of down, all the rest of the pointers in this article will be of consideration in selecting any type of sleeping bag with any type fill.

Shop & Compare.

Although your first impression might be that sleeping bags all look alike, the differences are substantial. The best advice I can give you is to compare them. This takes time, but it is well worth it.

Also, don't be afraid to be a little freaky. Talk to people about their bags. Talk to sales clerks. Ask questions.

Sleeping Bag Terms

Baffles: Panels sewn to the inner and outer shells of the sleeping bag. They contain the insulation.

Barrel Bag: A type of sleeping bag shape which is square at the top and closes with a drawstring. Bulges in the middle and tapers at the foot.

Box: A type of sleeping bag construction using baffles which form right-angled compartments.

Channel Block: See Side Wall Baffle.

Cilia: Hairlike extensions extending from a single plumule of down.

Differential Cut: Inner shell is smaller than the outer shell.

Double Sewn Through: See Laminated.

Draft Tube: Small tube filled with down that runs the length of the zipper.

Fiber: Barbs which have become detached from the down. In a sleeping bag, fiber tends to sift out through the seams.

Fill: The insulating material in a sleeping bag.

Filling Power: See Loft.

Hood Closure: Tie cord and fastening device which adjusts the hood around the sleeper's face.

Laminated: A type of sleeping bag construction which provides two layers of quilting.

Loft: Thickness of the bag lying flat and fluffed.

Mummy Bag: A type of sleeping bag shape in which the bag is contoured to the body. A mummy bag has a hood, which closes with a drawstring, and is tapered at the foot.

Overlapping V: See V-Tube.

Listen to what they have to say. Read the manufacturers' catalog descriptions on their bags. Read *BACKPACKER's* evaluations. Shop. Go to several stores, if you can, and compare. This is as much fun for most of us as is the actual purchase. And that is what you are in it for—the fun of it.

No equipment shop has all brands of sleeping bags in stock. In order for you to compare different brands in different stores, select one brand bag that is carried by both stores and use this as your standard.

There is another problem with comparative shopping: at least two of the best brands (Holubar and Eddie Bauer) are sold primarily by mail. Both companies have excellent reputations, however, and a good return policy.

Since the overwhelming choice of current backpackers is goose down, here are a few pointers on what to look for when you compare one goose down (two-pound) sleeping bag with another.

Down.

⊖ The most expensive ingredient in the manufacture of your sleeping bag is the down. If there is a great difference in price between one sleeping bag and another, it is almost always due to the quality of the down that is used in them. You can pretty well depend upon the accuracy of the "Do Not Remove" tag which tells you what kind of down is in the bag and the amount. However, it does not tell you anything about the quality of the down.

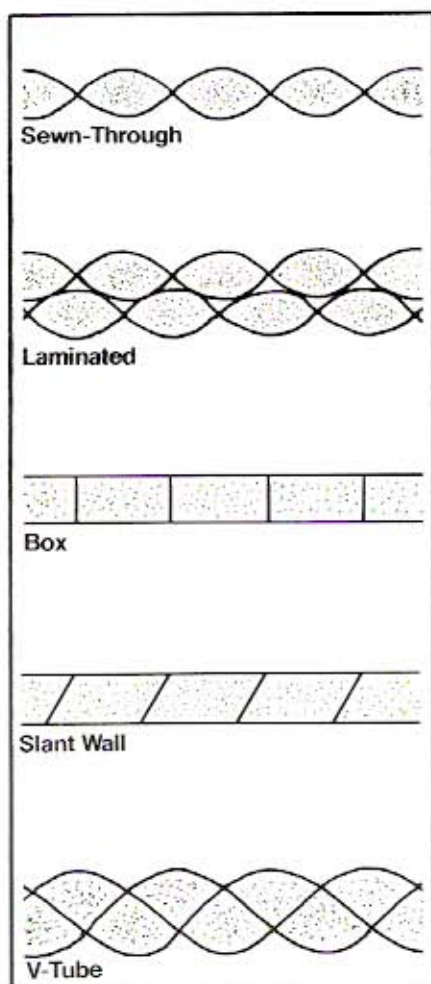
Bag makers buy down at prices that range from \$8 to \$11 a pound. The difference in the price is in direct proportion to the quality of the down. (Elsewhere in this issue, there is more information about this subject than you will probably want to know.)

Since you cannot see the down unless you cut open the sleeping bag, you are going to have to rely upon circumstantial evidence to judge its quality. There are some clues, though.

Loft.

First and foremost, compare the loft of several bags. Make sure they all are filled with the same amount of down. Lay the bags out on the floor, side by side, after you have fluffed them up as much as possible. (Fluff them by grasping the top of the bag at the spot where your chin would rest and shake the bag with a whip-like motion to fill it full of air. Then, let it settle naturally.) Now judge which bag is thickest. The thickest one has the most loft.

Be careful of misleading adjectives used to describe the down in a bag. Such words as "prime down," "pure down," "AA down," and "AAA down" say nothing about the quality of the down in the bag. They are merely buzz words and do not refer to grades of down. Also the term "100 percent" or "All" cannot legally be used to describe down, because it is virtually impossible to obtain a 100 percent down fill, since all the feathers cannot be separated



Parallelogram: See Slant Wall.

Plumule: An individual piece of down.

Quill: The hollow, stemlike main shaft of a feather. Down grows from a single quill point.

Quilt: See Sewn-Through.

Rectangular Bag: A type of sleeping bag shape. The bag is squared off across the top and bottom.

Ripstop: A type of nylon fabric. The extraheavy threads in the fabric prevent tears from running.

Semi-Mummy Bag: A type of sleeping bag shape. Like the mummy, but the foot area is larger.

Sewn-Through: A type of sleeping bag construction. Inner and outer shells are sewn together.

Shell: The fabric of the sleeping bag, comprised of an inner layer and an outer layer. The insulation is contained between these shells.

Side Wall Baffle: A baffle opposite the zipper that prevents the down from shifting from the top to the bottom of the bag.

Slant Wall: A type of sleeping bag baffle construction in which the baffles are sewn on a slant.

Space-Filler Cut: Inner and outer shells are cut the same size.

Storm Flap: See Draft Tube.

Stuff Sack: Sleeping bags are stuffed into a stuff sack.

Tie Tabs: Tabs sewed to the bottom of the bag allowing the user to roll and tie the bag together.

V-Tube: A type of sleeping bag baffle construction. Baffling is sewn up and down between two layers of fabric to make a series of upside-down and rightside-up V's.

from the down. Also, as far as warmth is concerned, white goose down is no better than gray.

Other than loft, the only clue to the kind of down inside the bag is the kind of workmanship on the outside of it. Obviously, sloppy workmanship on the outside is evidence that the inside will not be much better. The converse is not necessarily so.

Fabric.

Due to its light weight and durability, ripstop nylon is used on almost all goose down bags. Although the fabric itself comes in various weights and thread counts, you cannot ascertain these by look or by feel. You will have to rely upon the manufacturer's representation.

The density of the thread makes the fabric downproof; that is, it prevents down from leaking out of the bag. Do not be alarmed if you lose a few feathers. However, a loss of too many would indicate that the fabric is not downproof. You can get some idea of whether or not the fabric is porous by blowing into it. If you can feel your breath coming out the other side of the fabric, it isn't downproof.

A few manufacturers use ripstop fabric which has been "calendered" to give it the "wet" look. Calendering is a flattening and pore-setting process which is done during manufacture. Some claim that this makes the fabric more water repellent; this is not true. "Calendered" fabric is *not* more water repellent. However, it is a little less likely to snag on sharp objects. It is also less likely to get dirty and looks good.

Baffles.

Bags that are sewn through like a quilt will have cold spots at every seam, and so are adequate only in summer. Greater versatility can be found in bags that have baffles; that is, internal walls of fabric between the outer shell and the inner shell of the bag. Baffles are meant to keep down from shifting. There is a variety of types of baffles (described in detail in another article in this issue). Suffice it to say that baffles should be ample. The down needs room to loft. To check them, take hold of the sewn seam on the outer shell and the sewn seam on the inner shell. Pull them gently out to see what kind of configuration of baffles the bag has, and how it compares to another bag.

Sidewall baffle.

Manufacturers disagree over whether or not to use a baffle along the side

opposite the zipper to prevent down from shifting from the top to the bottom of the bag. The important point is that if your bag does have a sidewall baffle, it should be at least an inch wide. If it's too small, you'll probably have an uncomfortable cold spot. Check it the same way you did the baffle by grabbing the inside and outside seams of the bag.

Stitching.

The best way to evaluate the workmanship of a sleeping bag is to check its stitching, since sewing accounts for most of the labor that goes into making a bag. The most easily discernible criterion of good stitching is its evenness. If it wanders all over the place and skips some of the fabric that is supposed to be stitched, then obviously you know the answer. To inspect the stitching, look at it closely at many points of the bag, even inside it. Also, check the stitching in such difficult-to-sew places as along the zipper and on the hood.

Another criterion of good stitching is back stitching or tacking, which means that the sewer ran the machine back and forth a few times to reinforce the stitching at the end of a row.

Check to see that there is a double row of stitching at such points of stress as at the hood closure seam and on the zipper. The ends of the zipper should be tacked in place as well.

Zipper.

The zipper should ideally run from the top of the bag to the bottom. It should have two slides so that the bag can be opened from either end. This allows for flexibility in ventilation. Also, since most zippers—even on quality bags—snag, you should get inside the bag, and test the ease in opening it both from the top and bottom. A consideration, if you are looking for super light weight, is that metal is heavier than nylon. Also, metal zippers conduct cold; nylon zippers do not.

Zipper Draft Tube.

The place of greatest potential heat loss in a sleeping bag is the zipper. Your bag should have a down-filled nylon fabric tube running the entire length of the zipper. It is important to make sure that it extends below the bottom of the zipper. Test this by zipping up the bag, putting your hand in the bottom, and trying to force your finger under the bottom of the zipper. If there is too much space, the bag will lose some heat at that point.

Length.

In general, for warmth, weight, and expense, you should buy the smallest bag that fits you. But when in doubt, take the larger bag over the one that "just fits." Keep in mind, however, that a six-foot bag is too small for a six-foot person. Get inside, close the hood, and make sure that your feet can move around, your neck can stretch, and that your head and feet don't press against the ends. When mail-ordering a bag, ask the manufacturer to make a recommendation; he will give good advice.

Head.

The bag should have a hood that can be drawn around the head and securely closed. Without it, body heat will escape through the top.

To test the hood, get inside the bag and see how well the hood closes. Does the closure work easily?

Foot.

Even in quality bags, the foot section varies. The fully lofted bag lying on the floor should have a high spot at the foot, as though there were two feet already in it. Without the extra room here your foot can compress the down and cause a cold spot at your toes.

Put your hand deep inside the bag and push it against the bottom where your feet would be. Feel with your other hand how much down there is in the bottom of the bag. Can you easily push your hand through the down to touch the outside shell?

Also, check to see if there is a baffle running across the foot section from side to side. This keeps the down from falling to the bottom when the bag is lying flat. Although it isn't essential to have a baffle in the foot section, many good bags do.

After you have checked the bags out and you're ready to buy, don't let money be your deciding factor. You will use your sleeping bag for many years. Better to do without something else and pay a few dollars more to get the right bag from the beginning. And something to consider: if you decide to sell your bag at the end of the season, the better bags can usually be resold for as much as 85 percent of their original purchase price. (We must point out, however, that selling a used down sleeping bag runs afoul of the bedding laws, even though many people do sell them after use.)

A listing of bag manufacturers and their addresses can be found on page 72.