

How To Think Like An Ultralight Backpacker

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It isn't just about the gear you buy. Here is how you can think like an ultralight backpacker.
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How does an ultralight backpacker think? A reporter for a backpacking magazine asked me this in a recent interview. I've gone backpacking in winter conditions with as little as eleven pounds total on my back, so I do think light. In fact, there are some basic questions that seem to automatically come to mind when I am either planning a backpacking trip or looking at gear. I suspect other lightweight backpackers ask themselves the same things.

{bot_wrgoogle}1. How do I make it lighter?

Habitually ask this of every item you bring. Foam sleeping pads can be trimmed, a stuff sack could be left behind if the sleeping bag can just be stuffed directly into the pack. Shortening a toothbrush and cutting the edges off maps won't lighten the load much, but modify enough different items, and the weight savings can add up to a pound or two.

2. Is there a lighter alternative?

This is where you really save weight, especially if you start with the "big three;" sleeping bag, shelter and backpack. Buying new gear may be necessary, but you can also find the lightest choice among the things you already own. Pick out your lightest t-shirts, for example, or take your light tarp for a short trip, instead of a tent. This can make a big difference in how light you go. Many years ago, I went from a 88-ounce (5 1/2 pound) backpack to a 14-ounce one, and from a three-pound sleeping bag to a one-pound one.

3. What can I leave behind?

"Do I really need to bring this?" Ask that of each item. One shirt may be enough, for example. Ask, "will I use it?" For several trips I carried a small chess set, but never used it. If with a group, see if someone else in the party has an item you are considering. A group of three only needs one stove. Not sure if you can leave something behind? The last three questions may help you find an answer.

4. Are there multiple-use items I can use to cut weight?

If I cook at all (unusual), my pan is my bowl, and my spoon is my fork. Some ponchos can be used as a shelter. A trekking pole can be the support for a tarp shelter or even some tents. The stuff-sack from your sleeping bag can be filled with clothing to use as a pillow. Find ways to use the things you have for more than one purpose, and buy things that have multiple purposes. This is classic ultralight backpacker thinking.

5. Are there strategies can I use to lighten the load?

An extreme example: eat a low-carbohydrate diet for a few days, then load up on pasta the day before a trip. In this way you can store up to a couple pounds of extra carbs in your body, so you won't need to carry as much food. Called "carbo-loading," it's been used by endurance athletes for decades. Another strategy: plan according to the weather report. If no rain is predicted, you can leave the rain gear behind, or bring just the top. In an area with many water sources, you can carry just a one-pint plastic soda bottle, if you fill it up every time you come to a stream or lake.

6. What skills and habits can I work on?

This is partly about learning survival skills. Why? Because being at home in the wilderness makes it safer to go lighter. If, for example, you know how to make a warm bed of dried leaves and grass, it's safe to try that light sleeping bag which otherwise might not be quite warm enough for you. Being able to identify and eat wild edible plants makes it safer to

carry less food. In fact, if with sufficient survival skills, an ultralight backpacker can be prepared for almost anything.

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