

Backcountry

The Gear Closet »

Light Thy Path

Portable lighting options to illuminate trail and camp

As one of hiking's 10 essentials, some form of illumination device should be found in every backcountry traveler's pack, whether on an overnight trip or a simple day hike. One can never be over-prepared for any contingency the wilderness may have up its sleeve.

Today, head lamps, or hands-free lighting, are arguably the modern hiker's illumination gear of choice. Worn over the head, or attached to a hat or cap, they allow both hands the freedom to work, cook or blaze ahead, while providing light in whichever direction you turn your head. And as technologies improve, today's newer head lamps feature a variety of illumination options, from variable intensity bulbs, dimmer controls, emergency flashers, and programmable settings. As in head lamps, compact camp lighting has also evolved in recent years, sporting ultra-bright LEDs and

ever-smaller platforms, offering illumination equipment to meet any hiker's style and need.

For this issue, the *Washington Trails* gear team took up the task of testing out some of these latest lighting options from today's leading outdoor manufacturers to see which has the best features, which can take a beating, and which best stand up to the northwest's notoriously wet environment. Here's what they came back with.

Ultra-Light

For you ounce-counters, nothing beats **Petzl's e+LITE**. This micro head lamp weighs in at a ridiculously light 28 grams (46 grams if you include the watertight case). It won't signal passing planes, but features five lighting modes, attaches via the minimal head strap

Petzl e+LITE and Black Diamond Orbit Lantern



or a convenient clip, and is capable of operating in extreme temperatures. For a reliable ultralight camp lantern, the team's ultralight thru-hiker Matt Thyer took particular interest in **Black Diamond's Orbit Lantern**, noting, "This handy little lantern sheds plenty of light for making dinner or cleaning up in the dark, or hanging in the tent to read, or pore over the next day's maps. Its simple operation, compact size and water-resistance make the Orbit—as well as the larger Apollo and Titan models—a sweet line of capable and bombproof camp lanterns."

Illumi-Tech

For trail runners, the **Black Diamond Sprinter** takes our team's highest kudos. The multi-setting, ultra-bright LED throws out a large oval beam, illuminating the ground around your feet, while the specifically-balanced design keeps the light from bouncing around. And instead of batteries, it's rechargeable, for operation up to 60 hours—ideal for eliminating extra battery waste—and making both trail and downtown running a safer experience. For Washington Trails gear tester Cherie Bevers, the programmable **Petzl MYO RXP** is her head lamp of choice. "With the high-output LED—200 percent brighter than the previous model—this powerhouse lets me personalize my own light settings, while the flip-up beam diffuser lets me optimize the illumination for a wide or narrow beam in any situation I might face while hiking or camping. I use this light in all weather conditions and it works perfectly."

High-Beams

When it comes to high-powered night lighting, there's a reason the **Mammut Lucido TX-1** took Backpacker magazine's 2008 Editor's Choice award. And our gear tester Patrick Leahy seconds that motion: "This is one of the brightest lights I tested, and hands-down one of the most efficient as well. The HiFlux 1-watt LED shoots a brilliant beam 105 meters into the darkness, with unprecedented battery life at a whopping 145 hours. The TX-1 makes everything clear as daytime, in the highest quality of light I've seen." In camp, for turning night to day, the team chose the **Snow Peak Gigapower Lantern**. This is not your father's old camp lantern. This tiny, lightweight, and exceptionally bright lantern gets the job done, using an isobutane canister instead of batteries. It features an automatic ignition system that operated flawlessly with our tester, and has found its way onto his gear checklist for future climbs in the Cascades.



From the top: Black Diamond Sprinter, Mammut Lucido TX-1, Snow Peak Gigapower Lantern, and the Petzl Tikka XP2.

Tried-and-True

Gear tester Eli Boschetto has been using his original Petzl Tikka for years, but when presented with the **Petzl Tikka XP2**, he was ready to upgrade. "All the reliability of my previous model, but now with five light settings, including a red night-vision LED, and a low-battery indicator. My favorite feature: the retractable diffuser lens which converts the beam from a spotlight to a wide-angle floodlight, effectively adding three more light settings." For toughing it out in the northwest's wet weather, both the **Black Diamond Icon** and **Princeton Tec Remix** were also declared winners. In spotlight mode, the dependable Icon emits a brilliant, far-reaching beam, while the smaller LEDs illuminate a shorter, wider path. It's also compatible with Black Diamond's NRG rechargeable battery kit. The Remix sports a hybrid system with 3 Ultrabright LEDs and 1 Maxbright LED, allowing for a variety of illumination options and ranges, and can be purchased with red or green Ultrabright LEDs for additional night-vision options.

Light-Hearted

The latest in chic couture head lamps, the **Sun Company Dinobryte** brought some fun to the team's testing. This will be a great bet for junior explorers. Open the T-Rex's mouth and the powerful LED sends out a massive beam of light, accompanied by a vicious roar—certain to terrify unwary campers, as well as any unsuspecting creatures nearby—though not recommended as an actual bear deterrent. For a dependable and economical camp lantern, team member Cherie Bevers likes **Eddie Bauer's Remote Lantern**: "This miniature lantern is easy to handle for adults and children alike, with a protective grid over the clear acrylic housing, and a handy remote control allowing everyone to get situated in the tent before turning off the light."

Whether you're in need of a head lamp for that pre-dawn summit on Mount Rainier, or a compact tent lantern for an upcoming summer weekend in Olympic's Hoh rain forest, one of these team-tested outdoor lighting solutions should certainly meet your needs. ♦

Find More Light Info Online

Visit www.wta.org/gear for a downloadable comparison chart on these, and many more head lamps and compact tent lanterns tested by the *Washington Trails* gear team. You'll find side-by-side ratings on brightness, durability, light modes and pricing.

Illuminating Picks

“The **Black Diamond Moxie** is extraordinarily light and comfortable, stormproof, and features multiple light settings. Plus with a power dimmer and an emergency strobe, I can use it for biking and running around town, as well as hiking in the North Cascades—all at a very reasonable price. The Moxie is my new go-to headlamp.”



– Cheri Higman

itself with multiple high-power light settings, or insert it into the compact lantern housing for a convenient camp light. It even features one of Joby’s signature bendable tripods so I can place the lamp on just about any surface.”

– Eli Boschetto



“I haven’t seen any other headlamp like the **Mammut Lucido X-Zoom**. With just one switch I have the ability to custom control the beam’s length and width by zooming

in and out. With its ease of use, unmatched beam strength and impeccable craftsmanship, this is my light of choice for mountaineering in Washington’s Cascades.”

– Patrick Leahy

“Joby’s Gorillatorch Switchback

is an ingenious little headlamp/lantern combo I’ll be packing on my next trip to Mount Rainier. I can use the headlamp by



Top to bottom: Black Diamond Icon, Princeton Tec Remix, Sun Company Dinobryte, Eddie Bauer Remote Lantern



Power Up! Choosing the right batteries

Most outdoor lighting gear relies on standard-type batteries, typically AA or AAA cells. Some of the more compact units rely on smaller, more unique types, and for those, your options are limited. For the vast majority of products, you can choose between standard **alkaline**, **rechargeable NiMH**, or **lithium**. There are advantages and disadvantages to each, depending on your own usage requirements. Here’s a breakdown:

Alkaline: These are by far the most affordable and readily available option. Since they are available in bulk packages, you can really stock up and always have an extra set to carry along. Depending on your brand choice, they’re typically reliable, and the basis for the usage hours is indicated on your item’s package specs. Alkalines do not hold up well in the cold; keep spare cells bundled up. On overnight trips, take them out of your gear when you bed down. Stash them in a sock and keep them in your sleeping bag.

Rechargeable NiMH: This is your most environmentally friendly option, but also the most expensive, and usually the heaviest. Towards the end of their charge, you may notice the power diminish rapidly, as the lower charge tends to fluctuate. The trade-off is just plugging them

back in when you get home. Look for “memory-free” cells in order to get the maximum amount of recharge every time, regardless of how much they’ve already been used and the higher the mAh number (capacity), the longer the charge will last. If traveling abroad, make sure you have a power-plug adaptor. Same as alkalines, keep them warm and bundled in the cold.

Lithium: This is the battery of choice for much of the newer high-power gear such as cameras and GPS units. They’re fairly expensive and presently only come in two- and four-packs. The advantage of lithium is that they are super-lightweight, and formulated to carry an extra-long life for heavy power usage. In modern LED lighting, with relatively low power consumption, they can last an extra-long time. They are also extremely resilient in cold weather, maintaining their charge even below freezing. However, not all items recommend the use of lithium cells, so check your item’s instructions before using.

Just as your head lamp or flashlight should always find its way into your pack, so should an extra set of batteries. Keep them in an accessible location, stored in a watertight container. You don’t want to find yourself stuck in the dark with dead batteries.