

Backcountry

The Gear Closet »

Go Farther, Go Faster ...

GO LIGHTER!

Cut down the weight of your three biggest systems and you will be a much happier camper

After a long day's tromp in the woods, your body is left sore and achy. You tell yourself, "Don't worry. It's okay. Everybody feels this way after shouldering their home for ten hours ... don't they?" We're here to tell you that it doesn't need to be that way. You shouldn't feel like you've survived a car crash after a solid day of backpacking. Gear technology is constantly evolving, and the newest lighter gear will allow your shoulders, spine, hips, knees and feet to feel well supported and cushioned from the brunt of the backpack.

Today, there is a lighter alternative for nearly every item in your backpack, but the bulk of your weight (minus food and water) comes from three main systems: shelter, pack and sleep. We focused on these systems, specifically, because you can cut a huge amount of weight, without repurchasing your entire gear closet. Sure, there are 3-ounce stoves, feather-light titanium pot sets and ultralight shells, but you won't drop more than a pound or two off your pack weight by upgrading any or all of these items. But change your shelter, pack and sleep systems, and you'll see it's fairly easy to drop close to 10 pounds from your overall weight. Imagine going from a 35-pound load to a 25-pound load. Every inch of your body would rejoice! Your mind won't be bothered with annoying aches and pains, allowing you to be fully present to enjoy the beauty and tranquility of the backcountry.

Sound good? Then let's get started!

Shelter System *by Eli Boschetto*

Until recently, backpacking tents and shelters were among the heaviest items weighing down packs. With today's ultralight and hyper-light options, it's possible to drop those extra pounds and still have a tent or shelter that can withstand outdoor abuse—and the Northwest's notorious weather.

Big Agnes's Copper Spur 1 is light, but still plenty roomy.



TIP: If you downsize your pack first, you will most likely need to downsize your shelter and sleeping system, too. However, if you lighten your shelter or sleeping system (or both), there's no immediate need to purchase a lighter pack. These systems can be costly to upgrade, so think about what you can afford and the order in which you lighten your load.

I am a frequent solo backpacker and one of my favorite single-person tents is **Big Agnes' Copper Spur UL1**. I called one home for several weeks while trekking across California's Sierra Nevada last year, and I was thrilled with its size, weight and performance. This ultralight model takes up minimal room in the pack and weighs in at just 3 pounds—including fly, footprint and DAC Featherlite poles. The seam-sealed and silicone-treated rain fly kept the extra-roomy interior—both me and my gear—bone dry through the worst of summer thunderstorms.

A new solo model this year is the **MSR Carbon Reflex 1**—a first in the “hyperlight” line of double-wall tent options. I put this one to the test during our wet spring season on several outings in the Columbia River Gorge and was quite pleased. Weighing in at a scant 2.5 pounds, it sports a big, patiolike vestibule for keeping boots, gear and pack out of the rain. Plus, it offers enough headroom to keep you comfy when the weather chases you indoors, while the DuraShield-coated fly keeps the rain outdoors.

When my wife joins me and it's time for a couple's tent, I pack up a **Sierra Designs' Vapor Light 2**. This two-person model is snug, but that's an easy trade-off for a tough, ultralight 3.5-pound shelter. I especially like the innovative Jakes Foot pole and fly clip system, with color-coded attachments that make camp setup a no-brainer. There's room lengthwise to stash gear at the feet, and it features a big, easy-access front door and conveniently placed gear pockets. Flyless, it was light and airy around Central Oregon's Paulina Lake, then sturdy and waterproof on a few less-favorable days along the rain- and wind-whipped Olympic Coast.

Want to drop even more weight? Try a bivy sack instead. I pack the 2-pound **Outdoor Research Alpine Bivy**. Constructed of a

three-layer GoreTex shell and Hydroseal floor, it offers a bombproof lightweight shelter with comfortable headroom, allowing me to spend more time on the trail and less time setting up camp.

Pack System *by Cheri Higman*

I have fairly rigorous standards for an ideal lightweight pack. It needs to be less than 3 pounds, it needs to help carry a tent with a partner, and it needs to fit my sleeping gear and food. Oh yes, it also needs to carry a helmet, harness, crampons, ice axe, glacier gear and a rope. All of the packs I tested were held to these rigorous standards, and most held the weight and gear well, but two new models from Black Diamond blew me away.

I took the **Black Diamond Speed 40**, a 40-liter wonder pack, up Eldorado for a weekend climb. It had just enough bells and whistles to allow me to comfortably haul my gear up for the weekend without having excessive accessories to weigh me down. It has two ice axe loops with IceLink tool attachments, a gear loop on each side of the hip belt, a rope stay, a welded crampon patch, roll-top closure and a three-point haul system. The pack weighs just 2 pounds 14 ounces, and you can reduce the weight to a mere 2 pounds by removing the lid, downsizing the cushy hip belt and removing the frame sheet. That process takes a little work, but it is well worth it for a summit attempt. While going up steep trails, boulder-hopping, slipping across snowfields, or pushing up knife-edge summit slopes, the pack carried well with or without the frame sheet. Weight is comfortably distributed across the hip belt, and it's easy to adjust the straps on the fly to relieve shoulder pressure. With its low profile, it stays close to my body, making it ideal for a technical weekend climb.

The **Black Diamond Astral 40**, a woman-specific bag was my other top pick. [The men's counterpart is the Axiom.] This pack set the standard on a two-day excursion to Mount Baker's summit. The Astral features a



The Black Diamond Speed 40, a lightweight wonder pack



TIPS: Looking to lose even more weight from your tent? Check the weather forecast and pack just the fly and footprint as a lighter-weight alternative. Many new tents give you this option. If it's hot and good weather is practically guaranteed, leave the rain fly in the car and enjoy views of star-filled skies from your tent, while still keeping bugs at bay. Pack only as many stakes as you need. Leave the footprint at home. Do you really need multiple stuff sacks, or any for that matter?

removable lid and frame, three stretch pockets (perfect for stashing a helmet in the front), two hip-belt pockets, roll-top closure and two ice axe loops. All that, and it weighs in at just 2 pounds 6 ounces. It rides well on the hips and doesn't provide any discomfort or undue shoulder stress. The OpenAir back panel provides nice circulation to ensure a cool trip for your back. In short, this pack is light, can carry the gear you need on a weekend climb and, well, it's darn cute, too.

Sleeping System—Bag and Pad

When heading into the mountains, one of the most important things you can do for yourself is make sure you get a good night's rest. No one is looking for an evening filled with tossing and turning; you want deep, uninterrupted sleep. By pairing the right bag and pad, you should be able to get the restorative sleep you desire, while still cutting more ounces than you ever dreamed.



The Marmot Plasma 30's vertical baffles transfer heat well.

TIP: We all pack a decent amount of clothing with us when we go backpacking, so we should make sure to use it. Don't be afraid to wear your thermal layers and your puffy coat to bed (maybe even your hiking pants and socks). You will be able to bring a lighter, more compressible bag.

Sleeping Bags *by Patrick Leahy*

As I waited fifteen long, dragging hours for a storm to pass, I was thrilled to be wrapped in the **Marmot Plasma 30** (72 inches, 1 pound 6.44 ounces). At 7,400 feet, lying on cold, wet snow, I was impressed with just how toasty this bag kept me. When I packed a 30-degree bag for this trip up Eldorado and Klawatti, I knew that I might be pushing its comfort limits to the edge. However, I wanted to pack light, and I needed to save space for additional climbing gear. I chose this bag in particular because it was specifically designed to have a higher warmth-to-weight ratio. I must admit, I was a little skeptical—and nervous—at first. The Plasma has vertical baffles as opposed to the traditional horizontal baffles, but Marmot's In-sotect Flow System lived up to its promise. The vertical baffles actually did allow more heat from my core to be transferred to my extremities, namely my feet. It was heavenly! Marmot has stuffed this beauty with premium 900+ fill power goose down, which allows them to add an insulated shoulder/neck collar (rarely seen on a 30-degree bag) and a full-length draft tube. These features keep in more warmth, thereby increasing the range of temperatures in which this bag can perform efficiently. It's not going to replace my 15-degree bag for winter adventures, but it will be my go-to bag for just about everything else.

Western Mountaineering's MegaLite (30-degree, 72 inches, 1-pound 8 ounces) has to be one of the most comfortable bags I have ever had the pleasure of using. The cut is extra-wide in the hips (55 inches) and shoulders (64 inches), so you never feel bunched or scrunched. The fabric is so soft and silky smooth, and the 12 ounces of down so plush and fluffy, you may prefer sleeping in this bag

even when you're at home in your own bed! No joke, this bag screams pure luxury. Don't be fooled though, it's also as technical as they come. Continuous baffles, a top collar, and the best snag-proof zipper design I've seen make this bag one to be reckoned with. After a full twelve-hour day of hiking and scrambling on the ridges near Navajo and Earl Peaks, I couldn't have imagined a cozier cocoon in which to rest my bones. Bonus: If you don't need the extra-wide cut, save an additional 5-ounces and choose WM's SummerLite (32-degree, 72 inches, 1 pound 3 ounce) bag instead.

Western Mountaineering's MegaLite is meganice.



Sleeping Pads *by Cherie Bevers*

While testing three sleeping pads this spring, I focused on their weight, packability and R-value (measure of thermal resistance). Here's how they ranked in my book.

Good: The **Therm-a-rest RidgeRest** has distinct advantages. It is affordable (\$30). It does not rely on air pockets (making it more reliable). There is no setup or deflation needed. It weighs just 14 little ounces. The R-value is 2.8, comparable to the better air mattress pads on the market. Balanced with all these advantages come a couple of considerations. The RidgeRest is not as comfortable as your average air mattress, as there is not a layer of air to distribute weight away from pressure points. While it is quite light, its size (8 inches in diameter and 20 inches wide) makes it unwieldy. You'll most likely need to carry it on the outside of your pack, and you'll need a couple of straps to keep it from bobbing as you hike.

Better: The 19-ounce **Thermarest NeoAir Trekker** is well-designed to fit in even a small backpack because it packs down to about the equivalent of a water bottle. It took only 2 minutes to inflate. This 20-inch pad felt a bit narrow to me, but it did keep me from making contact with the ground. With an R-value of 2.0



and a three-season rating, you definitely will want to reconsider this pad if you're sleeping on snow.

Best: At 16.2 ounces and about the size of a liter water bottle, the **Exped SynMat UL 7** air pad is of comparable size and weight to the NeoAir. Even though the width is 5 inches smaller than the NeoAir, it seems wider, perhaps because the flutes run lengthwise, which helps keep your sleeping bag from slipping off the pad. With an R-value of 3.1, the SynMat is the best insulator of this bunch. It was also the most comfortable, and very easy to inflate (a quick one minute and twenty seconds) and deflate. It distributed weight evenly across all pressure points, which was a real reward after hiking the charming Lake Dorothy Trail. With snow patches on the ground, it was a cold night, but I remained warm and comfortable with this pad beneath me.

Backpacking is supposed to be an enjoyable, exciting and exhilarating activity. But add up all the gear needed for a trip into the wild, and it's easy to find yourself weighted down and frustrated. Avoid needless pounds, and you will be happier and healthier on the trail. Start lightening your load by focusing on your three main systems. If you're going to drop substantial weight, you need to take apart your shelter, pack and sleep systems and put together a winning combination that offers you durability, packability, protection and comfort. It will take practice, but with every trip, it will become a little clearer what works best for you. Soon, your only worry will be which trail to choose and how far to go—and the weight of your pack will only be a faint memory.♦

TIP: If you're not on snow and you want to go lighter, think about getting the three-quarter length or short length of any pad. This will save both weight and bulk. If you use a shorter pad and end up on snow, place your pack or clothing under your feet for added warmth and comfort.

Exped's SynMat UL has an R value of 3.1 and weighs less than 17 ounces.



GO EVEN LIGHTER

Once you've found the right mix of shelter, pack and sleep systems, you can start fine-tuning the rest of your gear. Here are four more tips to lighten your load.

- Think about the purposes that each piece of gear serves. See anything redundant? If you find unnecessary items, remove them. Pack items that serve multiple purposes to shave off extra ounces and create additional room.
- Always check the weather forecast, and adjust your gear to match the seasons and circumstances.
- Think about how much water you really need to carry at any given time (1 liter water= 2.2 pounds), particularly if there are many water sources along your route.
- Bringing extra food is always a good idea, but bringing 2,000 extra calories is a bit foolish. Your emergency calories don't have to be tasty, so try to keep them light.

READ MORE REVIEWS

To read more reviews of the lightweight gear we've put to the test, visit www.wta.org/gear.

Lighten Your Photographic Load

After reading the feature on nature photography (page 21), you're probably wondering how to carry more photographic gear without breaking your back. Here's a little advice to ensure that the photo equipment you carry only gives you good memories and doesn't slow you down.

Get a Carbon Fiber Tripod. A tripod is essential for landscape photography, so taking a tripod with you on the trail is unavoidable. Carbon fiber tripods are light, stable and surprisingly durable. Though buying a good carbon fiber tripod isn't the cheapest way to go, it is an investment that can save money in the long run. You'll buy five cheap tripods in the lifespan of one good carbon fiber tripod, the last of the five being the quality tripod you should have gotten in the first place. Buy the carbon fiber tripod first, and you'll save yourself some back pain. Buff Black, a WTA contributing photographer, goes even further by using a tabletop tripod for those longer treks. "On my multiday backpack trips, I like to leave the heavier, bulkier tripods at home. What I pack is the Manfrotto tabletop tripod. It's amazing how stable this setup can be for my Canon 5D II."



Gitzo makes a great, light tripod.

Use Flexible Lenses. If you are using a digital single lens reflex camera, look into purchasing a lens with lots of zoom flexibility. While these lenses aren't always the highest quality, they can cut down on the number of lenses you want to carry with you. When I go backpacking, I carry two lenses, a 10 to 20 mm lens and 18 to 200 mm lens (15-30 mm and 28-300 mm full frame or 35 mm equivalent). With these two lenses, I can shoot just about anything, from wide angle landscapes to wildlife portraits.

Consider a Mirrorless Interchangeable-Lens Camera. In this new breed of digital cameras, you get the small size of a point-and-shoot camera with the high-quality image sensors of a DSLR camera. If you are really trying to cut down on weight for multiday backpack trips, you may want to invest in this system.

—Paul Raymaker