

# Backcountry

## The Gear Closet »

### Hydration Bladders

**Does your bladder pass the leak test?**

One of the biggest problems facing hikers is staying properly hydrated. When motoring up a hill, the last thing many of us want to do is stop and take a drink of water. I started using a hydration system a few years ago, and now, water is always available through a bite valve dangling out of the top of my pack. At water stops it's dead simple to water up; see our sidebar on "Backfilling" for details. Using a hydration bladder takes a little bit of care, but if it helps to keep us feeling strong and healthy all day, the fuss is worth it. One thing I find problematic: you can't tell you are out of water until your hose runs dry. To counter this, I typically carry a half-liter of water in a hard-sided bottle. That bottle will come in handy in camp for cooking, teeth-brushing, and other tasks where a soft-sided container is not going to cut it.

When we last visited hydration bladders in May, 2005, as part of a piece reviewing trail running packs, there were a wide range of issues separating the good from the bad, but now it comes down largely to personal preferences. All bladders tested are 3 liters—the difference in weight between a smaller or larger bladder is negligible, and bladders pack a little better if they are not completely full. All tested are BPA-free, and have bite valves that close securely. I did a "leak test" on all four bladders as follows: I filled each halfway, bled out the air, closed it up, and sat on it with the bite valve open. Any well-made piece of hiking gear should be able to endure this type of abuse.

#### Hydrapak 3L - \$29

I have not seen great results with the Hydrapak bladders in the past, so expectations were not terribly high. Previous versions tended to be leaky, and gave water an odd taste. Today's version is vastly improved. The bladder is easy to fill, with a large roll-top that clips securely closed. The 45-degree bite valve is a bit on the small side, but delivers lots of flow. There is a little magnet on the bite valve and a magnetic piece that attaches to a pack strap—great feature. When the hose catches on brush, the magnet releases and you don't get snared. The Hydrapak is designed so that it can be easily turned inside-out for cleaning. Directions for use and cleaning are printed right on the bladder. I could not make this bladder leak. My one complaint? The bladder tended to make the water taste like plastic, more specifically, like how a waterbed might taste if you ate one. I gave it an overnight soak with a diluted bleach solution, rinsed, and—voila!—problem solved.

#### MSR Hydromedary 3L - \$40

At \$40, the Hydromedary comes in as the most expensive of the bunch, so I expected it to be the most fully featured. The bladder itself is impressive-looking enough, with watertight Cordura for the bladder body material. It oddly lacked the quick-disconnect feature found on



**The verdict on the Hydrapak 3L: I'd recommend this bladder.**



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**Outcome: Can't recommend this one.**

the other three. The mouth of the bladder is not big enough for you to put a hand inside for cleaning, but it's of a standard dimension used for many water bottles. Sturdy grommets make a good place to hang the bladder inside your pack. I gave it the leak test, and it immediately failed both at the large opening and the bite valve. The clip intended to attach the hose to your pack was strong enough, but I find the magnet system is better in brush. Rather than brush grabbing the tube and stopping you in your tracks, the magnet can release, allowing for unimpeded travel.



**Verdict: Strongly recommended for non-guzzlers.**

### Platypus Big Zip SL 3L - \$33

I have not been a fan of the Platypus bladders in the past. I had a Big Zip a few years ago. It had a top like a big ziplock bag, and it would occasionally burst open while being filled. The new Big Zip addresses the problem with a cleverly designed sliding piece that goes over the zipper and doubles as a burly handle. The old bite valve design tended to leak if you so much as looked at it sideways. Since the MSR and Platypus have virtually identical hoses and bite valves, I expected the Platy to fail the leak test, but it performed perfectly. The smaller bite valve on this bladder will suit lighter drinkers, and some will appreciate the removable clip for attaching hose to pack strap.



**The Nalgene CXC Rapid Fill: Recommended with minor reservations.**

### Nalgene CXC Rapid Fill 3L - \$29

The Nalgene bladders have been my favorites for years, so expectations were high. I like the giant opening at the top that allows you to get your whole hand in for cleaning, and the plastic spine makes it easy to handle. The quick-disconnect is the best in the business, and the burly bite valve delivers big sips. The magnetic hose holder is a proven winner. The piece of plastic that runs the length of the bladder provides extra stability and makes handling the CXC a snap.

Now, for the moment of truth: the leak test. The CXC did not leak, but it broke at a certain place around the collar of the large opening in the same place I've seen the Nalgenes break before. Quite simply, the black plastic that forms the collar and handle need to somehow be made more durable. That said, I've had this piece break before on Nalgene bladders and it does not affect performance. ♦

## Tech Tip: How to keep your hydration bladder greeblie-free

One of the problems I have struggled with is how to get the bladder and hose clean and dry once I'm home. The vendors have all kinds of fizzy pills and long skinny brushes to make cleaning the things easier, but the efficacy is questionable at best. The best solution is simple: rinse bladder, hose, and bite valve with clean water, and put the whole mess in the freezer. Nothing grows in the bladder, problem solved. If you still feel the need to give it a good cleaning from time to time, use denture cleaning tablets. They are inexpensive and widely available.

## Backfilling

The fine art of watering up your bladder without removing it from your pack

If you've ever tried to fill a hydration bladder by any other means, you have my sympathies.

In a perfect world, you simply pop off the bite valve and attach the bladder hose straight to the outflow of your water filter and start pumping. The MSR and Platypus bladders, with their identical hose diameters and valves, fit perfectly once the battle is done to remove the bite valve. In order for this to be easy in the field, heat the hose and valve up with the steam from a tea kettle a few times. The Hydrapak and Nalgene hoses are of a larger diameter, but backfilling is a cinch. Remove the bite valve, slip the smaller filter tube deep into the larger one on the bladder, and pump away. You'll surely like this method better than trying to stuff a loaded bladder into a full pack. This method should work with all water filters with standard-sized outflow hoses, and works for certain with MSR and Katadyn filters.

