

WINTER BACKING CHECKLIST & Prep

by Don DeMello

Boots/hiking shoes (your most important piece of gear!)

When carrying a lot of weight over long distances, it is wise to have well-fitting, broken-in boots or hiking shoes. New or ill-fitting footwear can contribute to blisters, etc. Sneakers are OK to start but you'll be better off in shoes/boots designed for hiking as you grow and carry more weight. A lightweight liner sock inside a heavier outer wool sock helps dissipate friction and is more comfortable over a long trek. Some people prefer a single sock. Experiment with what works for you.

Backpack

I suggest that Scouts purchase a 65 litre (4000 in³) volume pack to start if a Scout is big & strong enough, but 50 litres is OK if you are small & skinny and as long as you don't have a 'depth charge' sized sleeping bag or other bulky gear. You need to either fit gear in the pack or strap it on the outside so make sure you have attachment points. The hardest thing to fit for a young Scout is the hipbelt which is usually too big, even if the rest of the pack fits. You can pad the space inside a too-big hip belt with foam cut from a backpacking sleeping pad to close the gap.

Sleeping Bag & Pad

Regarding sleeping bags, I suggest a 20F rated bag for 3 season TX camping (late fall, winter, early spring) and our high adventure treks (mountains). In the summer, all you need is a cotton sheet, silk or polyester liner sack as your sleeping bag. Honestly, you can get away with most of the fall & spring with a 30F-40F rated bag which is much lighter and more compact. As a rule, a good down filled bag compresses to 1/2 the size of a synthetic fiber filled bag and weighs ~1 lb less. I love the comfort and breathability of down but if you get it soaking wet (unlikely to happen), it loses its insulation. Synthetics are ~1/2 the cost of down bags and keep their loft when wet, so that's insurance where getting soaking wet on a cold trek is a concern. I've used down for over 30 yrs and never had a problem with it getting wet since I keep it in a waterproof sack. Not as much a concern in the Southwest anyway.

Figure \$60-\$120 for a good synthetic bag and \$120-\$250+ for down. Down bags increase in price based on the quality of the down which is measured in 'fill' volume/weight (in³/oz). If down, you want at least a 600 fill bag (2.5-3 lbs) which you can find on sale for \$120-150. Premium 700-800 fill bags are superlight (~2 lbs) but cost up to 2X. Higher the fill count, the more stratospheric the cost.

Basically, you buy for temperature rating first, cost second, weight third. If you have deep pockets buy quality and lightweight.....your back will thank you. Reliable brands are REI, GoLite, Sierra Designs, Kelty, Marmot, The North Face, Mountain Hardware, Big Agnes.

You'll also want a good pad for your bag for comfort and ground insulation. Can't go wrong with Thermarest brand.....different sizes and weights. I use a 1.5" thick inflatable/foam core Thermarest and have had it almost 20 yrs. Closed cell foam pads are bulky (outside of the pack) but don't leak if they hit a cactus! 1/2 - 1/3 the price too.

Tents

Scouts in the market for a new 2 man backpacking tent should target 5-6 lb range since tents have become MUCH lighter over the past decade thanks to advances in pole/tent fabrics & designs. One of the best price to weight values is the REI Half Dome. You can find 2 man tents in the 3-4 lb range, but at a price premium and they are more delicate, handle with care. I use a GoLite ShangriLa tent which uses my trekking poles instead of regular tent poles and that alone saves me almost a lb of weight. Sierra Trading Post.com has great tent deals if you use their Deal Flyer email coupons.

You can buy a quality tent for around \$100 there. But as a rule, budget \$150-175 for a good quality tent that will last. You do get what you pay for in a tent. You want aluminum poles.....fiberglass poles can be of cheap quality and splinter. Check out REI, GoLite, Kelty, Sierra Designs, Alps Mountaineering, Marmot, The North Face, Mountain Hardware, Big Agnes brands.

Always try out/test fit/set up your gear at home first BEFORE you use it outdoors, so you can return it clean if not what you're looking for. REI has the best gear return policy, 100% satisfaction, even if you have used something outdoors a lot.....if you don't like it, they'll refund you if you return it.

They are pricy and I don't shop there a lot because of that and because I find online bargains, but REI's service is the best. REI does have 'garage sales' though every few months and you can find some great deals on used gear or barely used stuff.

Look for deals at

Sierra Trading Post www.sierratradingpost.com

GoLite www.golite.com (Look in their Clearance Closet too)

REI Outlet www.rei.com/outlet (REI.com sells most stuff at expensive list pricing but does have some good sales throughout the year.

Moontrail www.moontrail.com

Scout Direct www.scoutdirect.com (This is the Scout discount program of Alps Mountaineering www.alpsmountaineering.com Good quality to start with at Scout Direct prices)

Campmor www.campmor.com (Campmor has been around since dirt, at least when I was a young Scout!)

Backcountry Gear www.backcountrygear.com

Backcountry Outlet, now Dept of Goods www.departmentofgoods.com

Geartrade www.geartrade.com

ProLite Gear www.prolitegear.com

Travel Country www.travelcountry.com

Local shopping at

REI Round Rock (very helpful in fitting packs and making gear suggestions.....they know Scouts are on a budget)

Academy

Walmart

Cabela's (in Buda)

Whole Earth Provision Co (downtown Austin)

Dick's Sporting Goods

Sports Authority