

Backpacking – Level 6

Ultra-light Backpacking

Ultra-light Backpacking:

Ultra-light backpacking is a way of backcountry travel that has permeated virtually every outdoor sport: day hiking, trail running, horse packing, packrafting, backcountry hunting and fishing, mountaineering, mountain biking, and adventure racing. The Ultra-light Ethic no longer stands in the shadow of conventional backcountry theology that proclaims “more is better”. An increasing number of people, including elite Alaskan alpinists, Appalachian Trail thru-hikers, parents with children, and even aging baby boomers are entering the wilderness with an astounding level of self-awareness rooted in a simple ethic: Less is better. Lighter is better.

Ultra-light backpacking is not hard, nor does it discriminate against those with physical challenges. Anyone with a mind to change, and a desire to cultivate their own ultra-light ethic, can do it. Here’s how.

How-To: Seven Steps to Ultra-light Backpacking

1. Weigh your stuff.

Don’t have a digital scale yet? Get one. Once you weigh your old gear and add up the pounds and ounces you will be making your way to your local outdoor shop for some lighter gear. The saying is true: ounces add up to pounds, and pounds add up to discomfort on the trail.

2. Trim the fat: leave the kitchen sink at home.

Camp chairs, GPS units, espresso makers, the latest Clancy novel, cellular phones – do you really need all this stuff? Whatever happened to sitting on a stump, navigating with a compass, drinking cowboy coffee, reading the fine print on a map, and enjoying a ring-free wilderness experience? You’re going into the backcountry to get away from it all, so don’t bring it all with you! At the very least, exercise some discipline when choosing your luxuries, and only allow yourself one.

3. Plan your trip: limit your contingencies.

We have been fed a steady diet of conservative backcountry theology that has created generations of hikers that prepare for winter but only hike between July Fourth and Labor Day. Do your homework: assess your destination’s terrain, climate, weather patterns, and natural hazards. Then, plan (and pack) accordingly. How light you should go will depend in part on your experience and skill – and you’re better safe than sorry, so don’t cut it too close. But at least grab a last minute weather report and adjust your equipment list appropriately. And practice!

Backyard camping in inclement weather is a great way to fine tune your ultralight gear systems and take risks you normally wouldn't take in the backcountry.

4. Consider function first: take the lightest possible item to do the job.

Ultra-light backpacking requires that you rethink your equipment list. Most backpackers think they need more than they really do.

Example #1: "I need a stove". Reality: you may only need a cup of hot water for a morning drink and evening bowl of soup. Result: a one-ounce titanium alcohol stove and an aluminum foil windscreen can save a half pound or more on a canister or white gas stove kit.

Example #2: "I need a tent". Reality: you may only need an overhead shelter for the remote possibility of a brief rain shower on a summer hike in the desert. Result: an eight ounce silnylon tarp serves this function as well as even the very lightest double-wall tents on the market, and saves you pounds to boot.

5. Simplify: take items that serve multiple functions.

Ultra-light backpackers are characterized by their ability to define multiple uses from individual items in their equipment kit. Some classic examples: using a poncho-tarp as both raingear and shelter, spare socks as emergency mittens, and a small pot for boiling, eating, and drinking. Taking multi-use gear reduces the number of items in your equipment kit and can dramatically simplify your life on the trail.

6. Don't just take a bunch of stuff: build a system.

Experienced ultra-lighters consider a systems approach to developing their equipment kit: exploiting the synergistic relationships between items to achieve maximum performance. This is especially true when planning your clothing, sleep, and shelter system. For example, ultra-light hikers that wear their sleeping bags around camp as insulating wear (or those that opt for a lighter sleeping bag and combine it with an insulating jacket at night), are able to reap significant weight savings over backpackers that bring a warm jacket for camp and simply use it as a pillow with their too-heavy sleeping bag at night. Combining a torso-length sleeping pad with the padded back pad from your backpack, instead of bringing a full-length mattress, is another great way to cut weight without sacrificing comfort.

7. Get back to the basics: learn to be an outdoorsman.

Decades of technological advances in outdoor gear design (including the abilities to withstand worse storms, shoulder heavier loads, and resist more abrasion) has now created generations of outdoorsmen that are more dependent on their gear than their own wilderness savvy. Most of these folks are carrying far too much weight on their back because they have placed their backcountry security in gear that is over-designed, overbuilt, and overweight. Develop a solid foundation in backcountry skills and you will lighten your load. Dealing with inclement weather,

injuries, route finding challenges, and natural hazards depends as much on your backcountry skills and ability to improvise, than it does on any assembly of gear you bring with you.

The Ultra-light Way of Life

Ultra-light backpacking is not just about lightening your load of physical baggage – it is a way of life on the trail embodied by simplicity of action, harmony with the natural world, and the self-realization borne of leaving the mental, emotional, and spiritual baggage of modern civilization at the trailhead. To that end, ultra-light backcountry travel is a means to an end (refreshment) that is as valuable to a professional Alaskan mountain guide as it is to the weekend warrior.

How light is Ultra-light

How light is right for each backpacker on, say, a 3-day solo trip? No official ultra-light standard exists. REI's has a Pack Weight Continuum so let's use that as a scale and go inside the numbers.

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Minimalist	Ultra-light	Lightweight	Plush/Deluxe
<12 lbs.	<20 lbs.	<30 lbs.	30-50+ lbs.

Under 12 pounds: Hard-core minimalists take justifiable pride in assembling featherweight loads that fall into the low teens—sometimes even cracking the sub-10-pound barrier. Miniscule loads typically involve customized gear or extreme, edge-of-logic techniques that wow the ultra-light faithful but seem like a stretch to the rest of us. Lightweight tarps, for example, make terrific rain shelters. But when bugs are active, more people prefer the full enclosure of a tent, no matter how many extra ounces are involved.

Around 20 pounds: This is "expert class" territory and can be achieved with relative ease if fair weather is forecast and newer gear is employed (such as a tent with a lightweight 40-denier floor, not traditional 70-denier). Hike with a companion and you can share community gear such as the tent, stove and water filter. Weight savings quickly add up.

Up to 30 pounds: This weight range is emerging as the new sweet spot for mainstream recreational backpackers—light enough to feel reasonably comfortable on the shoulders, yet stocked with a luxury item or 2 (camp sandals, for instance, or maybe some freeze-dried ice cream).

Over 30 pounds: If you have ample strength, plenty of energy and already own a nice collection of traditional backpacking gear, don't hesitate to use it. For decades it was accepted wisdom that backpackers could carry up to a third of their weight without complication.

As mentioned previously, you can make a transition to lighter gear an item at a time or go full-bore and create a whole separate ultra-light system, perhaps just for shorter trips. A few keys to keep in mind:

- In your drive to lower weight, do not sacrifice safety. For example, don't toss out your first-aid kit or insulation layer just to save a few ounces.
- Realize that ultra-light gear is not as brawny as traditional gear and requires some extra care to make it last.

In an effort to give you some comparisons on going ultra-light, take a look at the following table where we summarize a few selections and how they are viewed.

Gear	Minimalist	Ultralight	Lightweight
Footwear	Running shoes	Light hikers	Hiking boots
Trekking poles	Carbon fiber poles	Carbon fiber poles	Standard poles
Tent stakes	No stakes; rocks	Just 4-6 stakes	Most or all stakes
Stove	Fuel tabs, soda can	Tabs or canister stove	Lightweight stove
Cookpot	Titanium mug	Titanium mug or pot	Lightweight cookset
Utensil	Spork	Spork	Plastic utensils
Water filter	Halogen tablets	Tablets or filter	Filter
Water bottle	Soft bladders	Bladders or bottles	Bottles

Go Far

You can go farther when you do not carry as much weight in your backpack.

Go High

Leaving the trees behind and climbing high means you are truly in the face of nature's fury which requires that you be more attentive, more in focus, and more respectful of how powerful the wilderness can be.

Go Fast

Being lighter allows you to be able to go farther, and faster and offers more sensory stimulation in the course of a 24 hour day than you are able to digest, leaving your mind and spirit filled with, and fueled by, the wilderness experience long after you get off the trail.

Go Simple

When you hike, take as few items as possible, keep life on the trail simple. Give the body time to relax, recharge and reinvigorate. Sure, there is some culture shock on reentry, but it's a small price to pay for tuning yourself into the simplicity of trail life.

Ultra-light backpacking allows you to go farther and faster into God's great outdoors and explore all of what He has placed there for you to see.

Backpacking Level 6 Requirements

- 1 – What is Ultra-light backpacking?
- 2 – What are the benefits of Ultra-light backpacking?
- 3 – Develop a checklist for Ultra-light backpacking?