

## The Skills: Ultralight or Bust

A 10-step plan for getting your base pack weight under 15 pounds

By Michael Lanza, January 18, 2008

Going light is a bit like marriage: It's a multifaceted contract that requires your constant commitment. Cheat just a little bit, and your hike—and especially your shoulders—will suffer. But stick to these rules, and you'll quickly find a new comfort level with 15-mile days.

### Step 1: Question everything

The only way to make ultralight work is to ditch your standard gear list and your gotta-have-my-coffee-press 'tude. A checklist tricks you into bringing gear you don't need—like a tent in the Sierra—and the attitude distorts the hard choices you'll have to make to trim the last five pounds. For your next trip, start from scratch and select only the gear that's absolutely critical for the conditions you'll face. If in doubt, leave it out.

### Step 2: Weigh it all

It'll open your eyes to the surprisingly heavy items—like a filter or first aid kit—and to the little things that individually weigh next to nothing but together add up to something real. Allow yourself a luxury item (recommendation: a comfortable sleeping pad), but otherwise eliminate or substitute with a ruthless eye for fat and duplication. Example: Swap your knife for a razor blade, which is just as effective in most medical situations.

### Step 3: Rethink shelter

This is the place to make a major dent: Most serious ULers carry tarps that weigh less than a pound without stakes and guylines. (See page 86 for our testers' favorite.) If you need a three-season tent for bugs or heavy rain, try the superlight Big Agnes Seedhouse SL2 (2 lbs. 14 oz.; \$319). Or split the difference with a tent that pitches with just rainfly, poles, and footprint. On the AT and Long Trail, plan to sleep in the shelters that appear almost every 8 miles, unless it's a busy weekend.

### Step 4: Change your bedding

Old thinking: Choose a sleeping bag for the lowest temps you might encounter. New thinking: Aim for the middle, and wear more

clothes if a cold snap hits. Hard-core fastpackers hit the trail pre-dawn—typically the coldest hour of the night—when they start feeling chilled in their lightweight bags. You can also lose pad weight (and bulk) without sacrificing comfort: Carry a short model and place your empty pack under your feet.

#### Step 5: Layer down

Another tired maxim: Carry extra clothing. Sure, you want to be cozy and safe, but thick down in July is overkill. Choose layers based on the forecast, and don't double up (no wind jacket and rain shell). For 3-season trips, your shell should weigh under a pound; the lightest are a mere 8 ounces. Pack a midweight long-sleeve top, one synthetic T, lightweight shorts and pants, a light down jacket (10–12 oz.), two pairs of socks and underwear, two hats (for sun and warmth), and (maybe) light gloves and rain pants.

#### Step 6: Improve your diet

This is a hard sell for caffeine junkies, but do you really need a hot drink (or meal) in summer? Even the lightest stoves add ounces, especially when you tally fuel and cooking-gear ballast. Leave it home in favor of peanut butter, tortillas, cheese, jerky, pepperoni, dried fruits, nuts, sesame sticks, and peanut M&Ms—all of which are satisfying, nutritious, and packed with calories. And that extra food you always carry? Skip it. Even remote trails are usually within a day's hike of a road, and hunger would take weeks to kill you. Besides, when's the last time you ran out of chow on a trip?

#### Step 7: Ditch the map

Hiking without a topo (and guidebook) isn't sane everywhere, but many trails are so well-marked that no seasoned hiker could get lost. If you must carry a map, trim the superfluous parts. If you're thru-hiking, carry only the section you need between resupplies—and find the lightest version available. The set of 13 waterproof maps from Tom Harrison covers the entire JMT and weighs just three ounces, about the same weight as the Trails Illustrated map of Yosemite, which covers just a fraction.

#### Step 8: Downsize your pack

Your streamlined load should fit in a pack with about 3,000 cubic inches of capacity. And you no longer need an elaborate (read: heavy) suspension. Ultralight packs typically consist of a simple,

lightly padded harness and a minimalist frame. They weigh six ounces to two pounds, and comfortably carry up to 25 pounds.

#### Step 9: Take less medicine

Your kit should weigh no more than eight ounces: All you really need is antibiotic ointment, duct tape, a few gauze pads and bandages, a bit of blister treatment, and your WFA training (you got that, right?). In the field, sub what's available: sticks for SAM splints, a cold stream for an ice pack, a T-shirt for a dressing.

#### Step 10: Empty your bottles

Tradition holds that you need to carry two to three liters of water at all times. But at 2 lbs. 2 oz. per liter, water is among the heaviest things you're schlepping. Instead, drink opportunistically. Along many mountain trails, you rarely need to carry more than a liter—if any. Elsewhere, check distances between sources and tank up just enough that you're nearly empty as you reach each one. Then guzzle away as you refill. Finally, forego a filter in favor of lightweight water treatment like Aqua Mira.