

Gear Head

Christmas 2008

General Shopping Guidelines: For those new to our Troop, we do a combination of Backpacking and Car Camping outings throughout the year. As you shop for gear, it's usually best to buy with Backpacking in mind. You can take your Backpacking gear Car Camping, but it's difficult to carry heavy Car Camping gear on a Backpacking trip. In most cases, smaller and lighter is better.

I've originally had this gear list sorted by price, but I've moved the sleeping gear up front even though these items can be a bit expensive. My logic here is that a warm night's sleep is more important than most of the other gear.

\$10-\$100-\$200 Sleeping Bags are a hotly debated item among gear heads. In our location, it's difficult to get by with a single sleeping bag for year round camping. In most cases you'll have to buy two bags.

Summer use: I sleep in a \$10 dollar Wal-Mart fleece bag. This bag is good only if it stays dry and the temperature doesn't drop lower than the 60's. Usually this is good enough, but I'll admit that I have been a bit cool while camping in the mountains of northern Georgia in July.

Fall, winter and spring use: Our troop camps year round, so if you don't already have a warm bag, this should become a priority on your wish list. First let me recommend a Mummy Bag. Mummy bags keep you warmer, are lighter to carry and take up less space in your pack than a traditional rectangular type of bag.



A Mummy Bag is warmer because there is less space inside the bag that your body has to heat up.

Fill Material: Down is lighter and warmer than synthetic, but it's more expensive and won't keep you warm if it gets wet (note: Scouts are experts at getting their bags wet). Synthetic will keep you warm even if you get them wet (however it's always best to crawl into a dry bag). I sleep in a synthetic filled bag.

Temperature Rating: This is mostly personal preference. My bag is rated at 20 degrees. A 20 degree bag doesn't mean you'll be toasty when the temperatures hit 20 degrees, but you won't freeze to death either. I spent one 12 degree night dressed only in a T-shirt and shorts in my 20 degree bag and I'll admit I was cold. I would've been warmer if I would've donned my knit cap, long-undies and my fleece. Unfortunately I left those items in my pack, which was 10 ft. away leaning against a tree. An informal survey amongst the troop shows that most winter campers use bags rated between Zero and 25 degrees. If you're cold blooded, I'd recommend getting a bag rated to a lower temperature.

Weight: Typically there are two weights associated with a sleeping bag, the **fill weight** and the **actual weight**.

Fill weight is the weight of the fill insulation material. I typically disregard this metric because different fill materials have different insulation properties. The Temp Rating is a better metric to how warm the bag will keep you.

Actual weight is the actual weight of the bag. As you guessed, lower is better than heavier when it comes to backpacking. A good goal to shoot for is a bag that weighs about 3 lbs. For a given temperature rating, a lighter bag will typically cost you more than a heavier bag.

For comparison purposes when shopping, here are the specs on my fall/winter bag:

Fill Material: Polarguard 3D, (synthetic material, named by the marketing department).

Temp Rating: 20 degrees. I'm typically a warm sleeper (I come from Wisconsin), but as I get ~~older~~ wiser, I've noticed that the ground gets a little colder and harder each year.

Weight: 2 lbs 14 oz. Just under my 3 lb goal

Cost: ~\$79 dollars for a name brand bag.

To show how cost affects weight, I did a quick internet search for similar bags that weighed roughly a pound more or less than my bag.

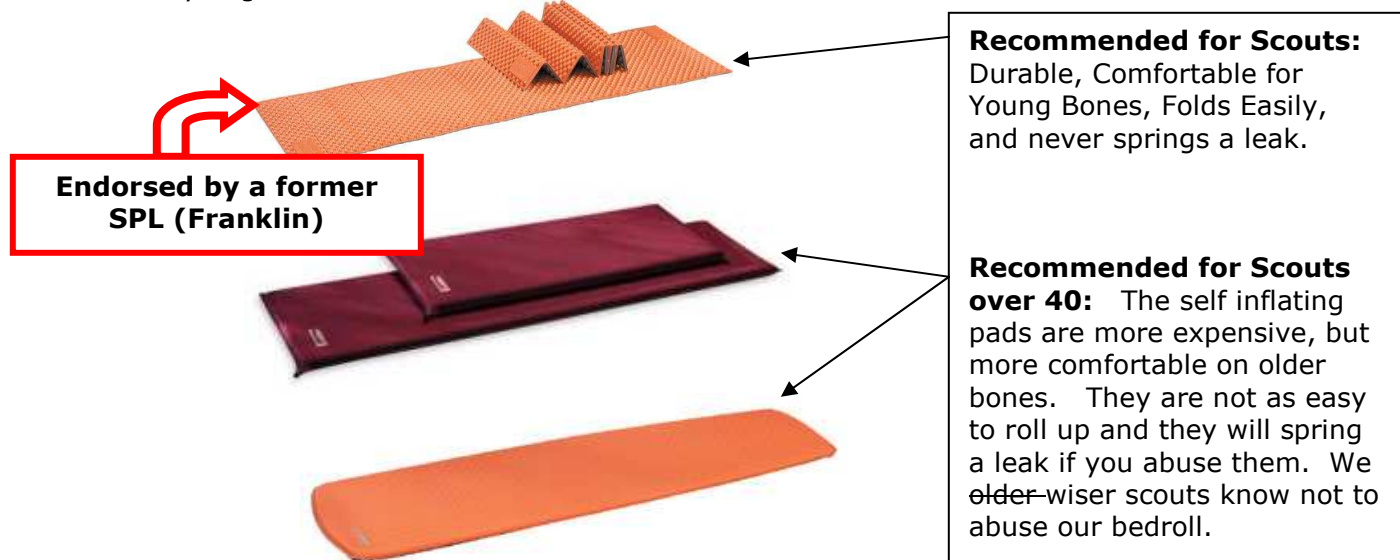
\$ 50 dollars for a 4 lb / 20 degree synthetic bag (name brand on sale)

\$110 dollars for a 2 lb 4 oz / 20 degree down bag (generic brand on sale.)

\$10-\$30-\$70 Sleeping Pads provide insulation and comfort between you and the ground.

- On the low cost end, you have the Foam Exercise Roll (not shown). The foam roll works, but it is very difficult to roll up into a tight bundle while on the trail.
- **Accordion Folding Foam Pad** costs a few dollars more (~\$35 bucks) and **is easily packed** by any scout. I've recently talked to several scouts that sleep on these and they give them the "thumbs up".
- On the high end are the **Self Inflating Pads**. These lightweight pads are thin and have an inner foam pad. When you open the valve the foam expands and sucks in air (thus the self inflating feature). Before I bed down, I normally blow one or two breaths into the valve just to firm things up.

Scouts will likely find any pad acceptable. However since I turned 40, my hip and shoulder bones have vetoed foam and have demanded the self-inflating pad. Luckily for my wallet, I found a $\frac{3}{4}$ length, name brand, factory second pad online for \$25.00. A $\frac{3}{4}$ length pad is just that, it's only $\frac{3}{4}$ the length of a full pad. It's nice for backpacking because it's lighter than a full length pad, but obviously you don't get full body coverage. For me, this means the pad ends at about my knees. When I bed down, I typically put my jacket under the lower part of my bag for additional padding & insulation.



Price Range:

\$1-\$2 Carabiners; These lightweight carabiners come in a variety of colors. The low cost ones aren't suitable for climbing, but they do come in handy when you want to hang something from your pack or belt loop. But most of all, they're cool.



\$2-\$3 S-Biners: As cool as carabiners are, they may get replaced by these cooler S-Biners. I found mine at Home Depot, but Lowes probably has them as well.



\$3 The new SPORK by Light My Fire: Historically the SPORK combined the fork and spoon parts on the same end with limited success. This new re-incarnation of the SPORK puts a Spoon on one end and a Fork on the other (wish I would've thought of that). If you look close, you'll see a serrated edge on one of the fork's tines, so it's also useful as a knife. I've seen our SPL with a SPORK, so I knew I had to get one. I found mine at a Wal-Mart in Texas. I'm hoping they'll come to Alabama Wal-Marts soon. **Great Stocking Stuffer !**



**Endorsed by a former
SPL (Franklin)**

\$6 dollars - \$25 dollars Wicking Underwear: Wicking takes water or sweat away from your skin and moves it to outer garments so that it can evaporate. Wicking in any garment is a good thing, so a good wicking base layer is great. Outfitter's stores will sell these briefs for over \$25 dollars a pair (which is a bit pricey). Recently Target has been offering a very competitive product under the Champion brand for about \$6 dollars a pair (a scout is Thrifty). Most of us won't be able to tell the difference between the \$6 dollar and \$25 dollar pair, so I recommend saving your money and getting 2 pair of the \$6 dollar variety. Two pair will cover you for most campouts. With two pair, you can air a pair out while you're wearing a fresh pair. My latest \$6 dollar pair also came with an **Antimicrobial** treatment. In short, Antimicrobial

will keep you and your underwear smelling a little sweeter by inhibiting the growth of smelly microbes. What could be cooler than that?



Black



Charcoal



Grey

\$10-\$20 Stocking Cap: Unless your hair is as thick as Eric's, you can use a knit cap to keep your head warm. Having a follicle challenged scalp, I like to wear mine to bed to keep my noggin warm while I sleep. You can find plain stocking caps, or if you shop around you can probably find one with your favorite team's logo on it. Roll Tide or is it War Eagle ?



\$10 Swallet: Get rid of that "fat, old man wallet" and get a Swallet. Originally known as the surfer's wallet, the swallet is not really camping gear but it has a lot going for it. The neoprene sleeve will protect your valuables and will float (just in case). The Swallet will definitely lighten your load while backpacking or camping and comes highly recommended by my chiropractor (it keeps my behind level when I sit down). Dr. Bryant has the basic black Swallet for sale in his office on Sparkman Drive or you can go to swallet.com to get yours in some cool colors.



\$10-\$25 Sports Watch: Wal-Mart typically has a good selection of inexpensive watches. I personally like the ones that are water resistant/proof, have an Indigo back light and come with Velcro wristbands. Quite time on campouts is from 10:00pm-6:00am. If your scout has a watch he'll know what time it is and he won't be waking up the scoutmasters before 6:00am. Watches also come in extremely handy for campout cooking. It's always easier to check your own watch when you're trying to decide how long something has been on the fire.



\$5 Lexan Knife, Forks and Spoons: Lexan is an almost unbreakable plastic that is lighter than metal flatware. Die-hard backpackers will tell you that all you really need is a spoon, but the flatware is normally sold in sets. (Not a bad choice if you can't find the SPORK)



Bowls & Plates

\$5 Lexan Bowl: A plate is typically not required on a campout; all you really need is a bowl. While a Lexan bowl is high tech, I also like the Ziploc plastic bowls that you can buy. While not as durable as Lexan, you can usually buy several Ziploc bowls for the price of one Lexan Bowl.



\$3 Frisbee: Mr. Perry uses a Frisbee for a plate and for fun between meals. Any backpacker knows that it's always a big bonus whenever your gear can serve 2 or more functions on an outing.



\$5 Organi Plate/Bowls/Cups: Mr. Hanson got a closeout deal on some organi bowls and cups this past year and he's been selling them to the Troop at his cost. The dinnerware starts out as flat piece of plastic, but through several clever tucks and folds they transform into bowls and cups. The organi is extremely light, folds flat and takes up very little room in your pack.



\$7 Tupperware “FLATOUT” Bowl: Mr. Monel showed off his FLATOUT bowl on the 2007, 50 mile Grimes Canoe Trip. This bowl is neat because it collapses down and folds flat for stuffing into your pack. Curse you Mr. M for having the latest/greatest/coolest gear. *Note: Rubbermaid has recently released their own version of the compressible bowl. I got mine at Publix.*



\$5 Large Sierra Cup or Stainless Steel or Enamel Mug (12-18 oz): This is your hot chocolate mug, your soup bowl and sometimes your dinner plate. This is one case where bigger is better (even for backpacking).



\$2 Cat-Hole Trowel: When you gotta go, the only more important piece of equipment is a small roll of TP. Everyone needs their own trowel because we don't want to risk spreading germs on an outing. Traditionally the plastic orange trowel has always gotten the job done as long as the ground is relatively soft. But if the ground is hard or frozen, you may want to upgrade to Mr. Lovell's style of trowel. He uses a high tech tent stake designed for snow or beach camping. The holes make it light and also makes the stake more secure in loose snow or sand. But because it's made of aluminum and wider than a typical backpacking stake you can dig through hard ground that will break a plastic trowel.



\$7-\$10 32 Oz Wide Mouth Lexan Nalgene Water Bottle: The Troop recommends carrying 2-3 quarts of water on our backpacking trips. I confess that I normally only carry 2 liters. One liter is in my Nalgene Bottle and the other is in my Playtapus (see below). Nalgene is a brand name and it is guaranteed not to leak. And the wide mouth Nalgene bottles screws directly onto the troop's water filters. All scouts should have at least one Nalgene bottle. Here Lexan is definitely worth the money. The last thing you want is for your water bottle to break or spill onto the contents of your pack.



\$5-\$25-\$100 (and up) Fleece: A fleece jacket keeps you warm whether you're camping or backpacking. Outfitters will carry the top of the line performance fleece and you can expect to pay top dollar for it. Old Navy, Wal-mart, and other stores will carry fleece in the \$25 dollar range, but my favorite fleece costs \$5 bucks and comes from the Unclaimed Luggage Store in Scottsboro. It might not perform as well as the top of the line fleece, but it still keeps me warm. And it won't bother your pocket book if your son rips it, burns it or loses it.



Olive

\$10-\$15 Flashlight: There are many flashlights on the market. Again think small, think backpacking. You don't really need a large light that runs off heavy D-cells or a giant 6 volt battery. A small, lightweight light will work just fine. Newer flashlights have LEDs for light sources. These are brighter, more durable and require less power than bulbs. Also relatively new are headlamps which are becoming more popular. I've just bought one and I must admit, it's very convenient to be able to use both hands to root through your pack in the dark.



\$10-\$20 Playtapus (shown) or CamelBak water Bladders: Hands Free Hydration on the trail. These allow hikers to drink their while in route. The scout stores the bag in his pack and simply sucks on the tube water as he walks. These work very well for keeping the scouts hydrated on backpacking outings. *Caution:* Mold and other nasty things can start to grow inside these plastic bags between campouts. I usually rinse mine out when I return and then throw it into the Freezer for cryogenic storage between campouts.



\$10-\$20 Orienteering Compass: An Orienteering Compass has a clear base, with a rotating bezel. I paid a couple of dollars more for mine to get one with a built in magnifying glass to help my ~~older~~ wiser eyes read the fine print on the map. A lanyard is another nice feature to have on your compass. In addition to the official Boy Scouts compass you can look for these brand names as well: Brunton, Silva and Suunto.



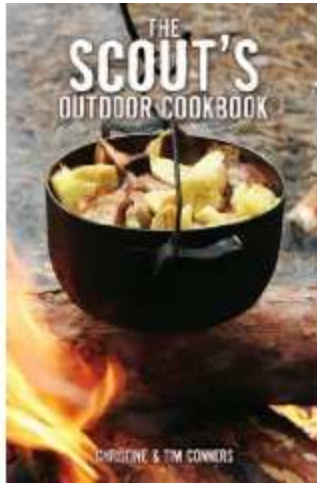
\$10 Small light-weight Camp Pillows. Full size bed pillows are too heavy and take up too much room in your pack. Ultra-light backpackers will simple fold up a shirt and use it as a pillow, but it's nice to have a small pillow. These pillows are about 1/4 of the size or less of your typical bed pillow. You can get these at Wiley's, Dick's Sporting Goods, Outdoor Omnibus and maybe even Wal-Mart.



\$30-\$40 10 inch or 12 inch Dutch Ovens. Ok, they're not small and they're not lightweight and they'll probably appeal more to the Assistant Scoutmaster in your household than your son. But they are fun to cook with. I'm partial to Lodge Dutch Ovens. If you're passing by South Pittsburg you can usually find a good deal on a factory second oven at the Lodge Outlet Store. Or if you want to save gas Wal-Mart has a 12 inch Lodge Dutch Oven for about \$35 bucks, just make sure you get the one with 3 little legs. If you don't want to take the plunge yet, consider getting your want to be Dutch Oven chef a Dutch Oven Cookbook. That'll prompt him to go out and buy his own Dutch Oven.



\$20 The Scouts Outdoor Cookbook. Now that you have a Dutch Oven, the Scout's Outdoor Cookbook is a great source of recipes. These recipes are tasty and easy to make. Many of these recipes were submitted by Scoutmasters from across the country. I'm especially fond of the recipe on page 125. The Scout Shop has this book or you can order it through Amazon.com.



\$50-100 Trekking Poles: Trekking poles take a surprising amount of stress off your knees and joints when backpacking. They can be a little tricky to use, so you may want to wait a year or so before you get a pair for your son.



Backpacks - - External Frame versus Internal Frame: If you look go to REI's web site at:
<http://www.rei.com/expertadvice/articles/backpack.html>
<http://www.rei.com/expertadvice/articles/backpacks+torso+hip+size.html>
you'll find a nice section on how to select a backpack, measure your torso and a comparison of the Pros and Cons between Internal and External Frame packs. My son has an Internal Frame and I have an External, so you can see I still haven't made up my mind yet.



If you get really confused on backpacks, the Kelty Yukon (shown on the left) is a popular External Frame pack among the youth in our troop. And we've recently had several scouts and dads buy the ALPS Mountaineering Red Tail or Denali Internal Frame backpack shown on the right. One of the nice features of all these packs is that they are adjustable so they can keep pace with your son from year to year as he grows (and it's amazing how fast they grow).

Clothes: Depending on what you buy, clothing costs can vary significantly, but are a few tips:

Tip # 1: Think Layers: Several thin layers are better than one heavy layer. This allows you to take layers off when you're hot and to put on additional layers when you're cold. Layers give you warmth by trapping air (air is an insulator) between the layers. The more layers, the more insulation, the warmer you'll be.

Tip # 2: Wicking is Good. High tech wicking materials pull the sweat off your body and move it to the outer layers, so you stay dryer & warmer. Some High Tech materials can be downright pricey. But if you shop around, you can occasionally find bargains. Wal-Mart has wicking *Starter Dry Star* T-shirts and Target has *Champion* T-shirts that are very affordable compared to the wicking *Under Armor* T-shirts. Wal-Mart also has polypropylene (which is wicking) long underwear by their hunting gear.

Tip # 3: Socks: Again look for wicking materials, merino wool is a natural wicking material that doesn't itch. SmartWool, Thorlo, Wigwarm, CoolMax and Diodora are brand names of several popular hiking socks. Some prefer the use of sock liners inside the sock to cut down on friction, which hopefully will minimize blisters. I like having 3 pairs of socks with me. One pair I'll have on my feet, one pair I sleep in and the third pair is what I'll wear tomorrow. Note that when tomorrow comes, I'll be drying out yesterday's socks by hanging them on the outside of my pack. Just in case I have to wear them again.

Tip # 4: Boots: High quality boots will run you \$100 - \$200 bucks. If you're an adult and you plan to do a lot of backpacking with the troop, then they are worth the investment. If you're spending this much on your boots, you should also shop around for a good knowledgeable boot fitter to give you a proper fit. I don't recommend getting high end boots for the younger scouts, because their feet typically grow a size or two between backpacking treks. Wal-Mart has decent hiking boots in the \$25 dollar range that can be used on at least one backpacking trek and several car campouts before your son outgrows them. Amazingly several years back, Consumer Reports gave very respectable ratings to these low cost boots.



When shopping for boots, be sure to wear your hiking socks to ensure a good fit. Here are some additional desirable features to look for in a boot:

- Ankle support
- Waterproof uppers
- Vibram soles
- Rubber that extends up over the toe (as shown)

Tip # 5: Zip Off Pants: These are very handy, especially for backpacking. As you heat up, it's easy to zip off the legs and hike in shorts. If you get cold, you just zip the legs back on. Look for zip off pants that are labeled either Fast Drying or Wicking. Some department stores carry cotton zip off pants which tend to be heavy and cold when wet. The Boy Scouts of America have finally issued their own official Zip Off Pants. These were a long time coming and at \$40 bucks, they have many of the same features of the high dollar, name brand pants. You can pick these up at the Scout Shop on Drake Avenue.



Where to Shop: Locally we have Wal-Mart, Target, Dicks Sporting Goods, the Scout Shop, Wiley's Sports, the Outdoor Omnibus, Alabama Outdoors, Mountain High and Gander Mountain. If you know what you want, and they carry it, the best prices are found at Wal-Mart and Target. If you want the higher end gear and someone knowledgeable to talk to, then you'll want to go to Wiley's, the Outdoor Omnibus, Alabama Outdoors or Gander Mountain. A new high end store in town is Mountain High Outfitters. If you make a purchase there, make sure you mention you're a Boy Scout and you'll get a 10% discount.

If you're an internet shopper, here are a couple of sites that I typically frequent (there are many other sites that I haven't listed):

www.campmor.com check out the Web Bargains and Hot Deals section.

www.rei.com check out the REI Outlet site.

www.alpsmountaineering.com/ The troop has just started using this site and so far we've been impressed with the gear we've gotten so far. If you're a scout leader, you can register on their sister site www.scoutdirect.com and you'll get their gear at 45% off the price that they sell to the public.

Hopefully this will give parents, grandparents and aunts and uncles of new scouts something to think about as Christmas approaches. Merry Christmas and Caveat Emptor!