

Less is More: The Lighter Side of Appalachian Backpacking

For most, a trek through Appalachia is bittersweet, with blooming rhododendrons and bursting blisters, heavenly views and slipped disks. But there's an enlightening way to make it all backcountry bliss.

- I had been testing the waters of lightweight backpacking, sometimes dubbed fastpacking, on the rugged trails of the Northeast for five years, learning the advantages of carrying less on my back; the core benefit being covering more miles while feeling fresh as a daisy at the conclusion of most days.

I knew the advantages of lightweight backpacking could be applied anywhere in the world, so upon a summertime move to the Appalachian high peaks I salivated when I first saw the terrain. I knew my first south-of-the-

Mason-Dixon Line fastpacking trip would happen sooner than later.

To make a well-rounded Southern itinerary I needed a place that had tons of high peaks, lots of hiking trails and an expanse of wild terrain. Great Smoky Mountains National Park, a half-million-acre cache of waterfalls, wildflowers and old growth straddling the North



Carolina-Tennessee border, immediately came to mind.

After consulting an overview map of the park, then examining detailed topographic maps, I grinned from ear-to-ear. I found a fine Southern challenge. Forming a sinuous loop incorporating sections of the Appalachian National Scenic Trail and Benton MacKaye Trail, eighteen 5,000-foot peaks and a half dozen scenic waterfalls, my



proposed 72-mile/17,500-vertical-feet-of-climbing Smoky Mountains route overflowed with difficulty and

beauty. The only way to cover it in my self-allotted three days' time was to use fine fastpacking style.

Though the term fastpacking may conjure up images of spandex-clad extreme athletes

scurrying around, freezing at night and having a miserable, Spartan experience – while having no money left over because they bought expensive lightweight gear – no such image enters the refined world of fastpacking.

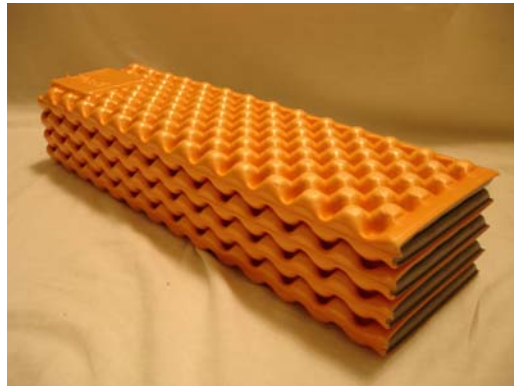
Traveling light is not about how much cash you can lay out or how much you're willing to suffer. It's simply about what you bring (and don't bring). The three fastpacking questions that should always be asked are:

- Will you use each item at least once a day? (A first aid kit and one extra insulating layer are void from this question)
- With modest financial means, can you purchase an item that's lighter than the one you now have?
- Do you *need* to bring this item or do you *want* to bring this item?

For prospective fastpackers, the answers should be, "yes," "yes" and "need." After the preliminary Q and A session, my pack tipped the scales at a feathery 10.5 pounds; the sum of what I needed to hike, bushwhack, camp, photograph and write in the backcountry for three days. And so I began.

The first peak I encountered was Cammerer Ridge, whose high point gently rose from its gracefully-rolling northern spur that the Appalachian Trail traversed. Covered in soft grasses, American beech and buckeye, Cammerer Ridge offered a Smoky Mountain introduction with aplomb.

Ascending six miles to its high point in less than three hours, my pace doubled what the many Appalachian Trail thru-hikers I met that day



were covering. Shadowed by 5,000-cubic-inch internal frame packs, most AT thru-hikers looked more like mountaineers loaded down with a hundred pounds of high-altitude gear on their way up an 8,000-meter peak, more than long-distance hikers who would reach their next resupply point in just three days.

Greeting hikers with friendly hellos, I continued south on the AT at a fresh pace, employing side trips up trailless Sunup Knob and Cosby Knob, whose untrammeled summits were very cooperative by Southern standards.

Unlike these two summits, far too many trailless Southern peaks guard their apexes with choking rhododendron thickets, deep, dark stands of spruce and fir, and briars that can



shred work pants like a wildcat on acid can shred a piñata.

But for the time being, I was in heavenly Appalachia. Permeated by the white noise of streams churning 3,000 vertical feet below my feet and the sweet smell of blooming mountain laurel just above my head, the hiking couldn't get any better.

The next stop was the first 6,000-footer of the trip, Old Black, named for its expansive



stands of black spruce. After touching the summit cairn of Old Black I headed south under my light

load bound for the highest trailless peak in the East, Mount Guyot.

Named in the mid-1800's for the indefatigable Swiss explorer and scientist Arnold

Guyot, this 6,621-foot behemoth offered a stout challenge with acres of briars growing above stacks of sun-bleached blowdown. The summit ridge resembled a garden straight out of Satan's backyard but after a fair amount of scrapes, cuts, bruises and swearing, I reached the top marked with a 1929 USGS benchmark.

That afternoon I added fastpacking ascents of Mount Yonaguska and Marks Knob to have my total climbing figure exceed 6,000 vertical feet. In the evening, with my level of exhaustion barely reaching that of your typical mall-walker, I reached a campsite 22 miles from the start of the day.

You simply can't help but draw attention to yourself when you cook dinner on the skeleton



of a tuna can. Weighing an even one ounce, the

tuna can stove is the epitome of simplicity and my favorite piece of lightweight gear. Drop one half-ounce solid fuel tablet in the can, light it, set your pot on top and watch the silent blue flame work water to a boil. Ten minutes later – voila! – dinner is served.

As dinner simmered I removed the back pad from my pack and set it on the lean-to floor where my back would rest. Below it went my 36-ounce pack to cushion my legs. Up top I stacked extra clothing to form a makeshift pillow while my campmates hobbled around with bruised hip bones and blistered feet, organizing their gear into enormous



piles. After finishing a nice warm meal, I dozed off in my one-pound sleeping bag free from the nightmare of wearing a heavy pack at dawn.

Since I don't cook breakfast – to lessen my fuel burden and get an early start – day two was launched at 7:00 am with a climb of Mount Chapman, a lonely briar-covered hill that gave a good view back to Mount Guyot. Continuing at a steady two- to three-miles-an-hour, I climbed two more high peaks before 10:00 am: Mount Sequoyah and Eagle Rocks.

As the day progressed I met more AT hikers bound for the trail's northern terminus still 1,500 agonizing miles away. Those that were hiking stopped and asked how early I had to start to be twenty miles from the nearest trailhead. With a respectful response, I let them know I wasn't day hiking but on a three-day trip, all my gear fitting snugly into the pack that hovered airily on my back.

However, the majority of backpackers I met

were not hiking. They were resting. With packs mirroring the dimensions of yurts, collapsed swimming pools and inflatable life rafts more than something you would want on your shoulders all day, the weary adventurers I met eyed my pack and 72-mile itinerary with distrust for they knew – or so they thought – that only a day hiker could cover 24 miles and be able to walk the day after.



By noon I finished weaving through a slalom course of sidelined thru-hikers and left the Appalachian Trail. Now southbound on the Hughes Ridge Trail, I stopped to gather water below the Pecks Corner shelter, a well-built stone-walled structure set in a hardwood forest. Here the light was perfect, with sunlight straining through the canopy, creating a tapestry of shadow and light

on the brown forest floor.

Filling my lighter-than-Lexan soda bottles with clear, cold water from a rust-brown pipe, I dropped a tiny iodine tablet into each bottle, then paused at the shelter to read the log book.

Page after page told war stories of "exhausted" and "spent" thru-hikers stumbling into the shelter at dusk after covering a sunup-to-sundown 13 miles. I imagined their crushing loads: packs filled with item after item, ready to burst at the seams, merciless, near-literal monkeys on their backs.

With side trips up two more 5,000-footers completed by 2:00 pm all was going well until the hike from hell: Highland Ridge. In my journal I recorded the heath and greenbrier-choked bushwhack ascent as "one of the most miserable hikes of my life," among other unprintable narratives. After the equally horrendous descent off this slag hill I reached my second campsite at dusk with more than 38 of the 72 miles

completed.

Though the vertical ascent for day two was 2,000 feet less than day one, and the mileage six miles less, the heinous state of Highland Ridge made me welcome a horizontal position. I laid on the ground, at least thankful for my light pack, while white and blue stars framed the bottomless black night.

With two days' worth of food gone by day three, my pack was truly a day hiker's load. Before noon I climbed



Breakneck Ridge and Balsam High Top, then rolled into the Laurel Top shelter for more water and a short respite.

With a warm, deep Southern drawl, a man resting in the shelter greeted me. "Hey there. Man, that's a small pack. Or, more accurately,

that's a pack that ain't got much in it."

He asked what was inside and after a I gave a short punch list for him he stared at his pack, then back at mine and fell into thought. With a friendly tone he concluded with a wink, "Guess I like the creature comforts, huh?"

I sped along to reach the last two peaks of the trip: Big Catalooche Mountain and Luftee Knob, both 6,000-footers. They reminded me of



home – the Northeast – with acres of spruce, fir and birch; classic Northern Forest residents.

Standing next to a decapitated trunk of a long-dead black spruce on top of Luftee Knob, the eighteenth peak above 5,000 feet in just three days, I examined my map and calculated I couldn't meet the goal of averaging 24 miles a

day. But giving it the old college try, I covered 28 miles and climbed an ear-popping 7,000 vertical feet to roll into a campsite six miles short of the end of my loop. I cooked two extra-night-out packs of Ramen noodles and went to bed under my green 12-ounce tarp, strung up in a low A-frame style.

The next morning, through misting rain and silent fog, I covered the last bit of Big Creek Trail to end my first Appalachian adventure. At the parking area, where I started three days earlier, I stared into the forest and thought back to Mount Guyot, Highland Ridge and a host of other peaks. Those exhausted AT backpackers also came to mind, resting at vistas, hoping their sweat-stained loads would roll off the edge into oblivion.

But quite the contrary, I couldn't wait to put my pack back on, for I knew I'd be back in the high peaks of the South again, using fine fastpacking style. «« **ES** »»

Appalachian fastpacking gear list

Product	Weight (oz)
1. 2,800-cubic-inch pack	36.3
2. 35° 850-fill down bag	16.3
3. Polycryo ground sheet	1.6
4. Silicone-nylon tarp w/ cord	11.9
5. Primaloft vest	12.1
6. Lightweight thermal bottoms	7.4
7. Midweight thermal top	7.7
8. Waterproof/breathable jacket	12.5
9. Winter hat	1.8
10. One pair hiking socks	2.6
11. Eight solid fuel tablets	3.7
12. Tuna can stove, pot, lid	4.9
13. Extra kitchen supplies	4.5
14. Two soda bottles, iodine	4.2
15. Ditty bag	12.9
16. LED headlamp w/ battery	1.0
17. Maps, compass	6.6
18. Journal, golf pencil	6.5
19. Digital camera, hard case	11.8
20. Five baby wipes, baggie	1.1

Total: 167.4 ounces (10.5 pounds)