

Less is More: The Lighter Side of Appalachian Backpacking

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I had been testing the waters of lightweight backpacking on the rugged trails of the Northeast for five years, learning the advantages of carrying less on my back. I knew the advantages of lightweight backpacking could be applied anywhere in the world, so upon a summer 2004 move to the Appalachian high peaks I salivated when I first saw the terrain. I knew my first south-of-the-Mason-Dixon Line backpacking trip would happen sooner than later.

To make a well-rounded Southern itinerary I needed a place that had tons of high peaks and hiking trails and an expanse of wild terrain. Great Smoky Mountains National Park, a half-million-acre cache of waterfalls, wildflowers, and old growth on the North Carolina-Tennessee border, first 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-foot Smoky Mountains route was beautiful. The only way to cover it in three days' time was to use fine lightweight backpacking style.

Though the term lightweight backpacking may conjure up images of hikers scurrying around, freezing at night, and having a spartan experience, while having no money left over because they bought expensive lightweight gear, nothing could be more untrue. Traveling light is not about how much money you spend or how much you're willing to suffer. It's about what you bring (and don't bring). The three lightweight backpacking questions that should always be asked before a trip are:

1. Will I use each item at least once each day? (A first aid kit and one insulating layer are void from this question.)
2. With modest means, can I purchase an item that's lighter than the one I now have?

3. Do I need to bring this item or do I 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 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 my hike.

The first peak I encountered was Cammerer Ridge, whose high point gently rose from the nearby Appalachian Trail. Covered in gentle grass, American beech, and buckeye, Cammerer Ridge offered a fine Smoky Mountain introduction. Ascending six miles to its high point in less than three hours, my pace doubled what 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 high altitude mountaineers in the Himalayas than backpackers who would reach their next resupply point in three days. Greeting them with friendly hellos, I continued south on the AT at a fresh pace, employing side trips up Sunup Knob and Cosby Knob, whose trailless summits were very cooperative by Southern standards.

Unlike these two summits, far too many trailless Southern peaks guard their apexes with choking thickets of rhododendrons and briars under dark stands of spruce and fir. But for the time being, I was in heavenly Appalachia. Permeated by the white noise of streams 3,000 vertical feet below me and the smell of blooming mountain laurel above me, the hiking couldn't get any better.

The next stop was the first 6,000-footer of the trip: Old Black, named for its stands of black spruce. After touching the summit cairn of Old Black I headed south to the highest trailless peak in the East: Mount Guyot. Named in the mid-1800s for Swiss explorer and scientist Arnold Guyot, this 6,621-foot behemoth offered a stout challenge with acres of briars growing above stacks of blowdown. The summit ridge resembled a garden from Satan's backyard but after a fair amount of scrapes, bruises, and swearing, I reached the top marked with a 1929 USGS benchmark. That afternoon I added ascents of Mount Yonaguska and Marks Knob to have my total climbing figure exceed 6,000 vertical feet. In the evening, far from exhausted, I reached a campsite 22 miles from the start of my 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 of the can, 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 my dinner I dozed off in my one-pound sleeping bag, free from a nightmare of wearing a heavy pack at dawn.

Since I don't cook breakfast – to lessen my fuel burden and to get an early start – day two began at 7:00 AM with a climb of Mount Chapman, a lonely briar-covered hill that had 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 1,500 miles away. Those that were hiking stopped and asked how early I had to start to be twenty miles from the nearest trailhead, assuming I was wearing a day pack. With a respectful response, I let them know I wasn't day hiking but was on a three-day trip where all my gear fitting snugly into the pack that hovered on my back. However, the majority of backpackers I met were not hiking. They were resting. With packs mirroring the dimensions of yurts and collapsed swimming pools 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. They knew – or so they thought – that only a day hiker could cover 24 miles a day and be able to walk the day after.

By noon I finished weaving through sidelined thru-hikers and left the Appalachian Trail. Now southbound on Hughes Ridge Trail, I stopped to gather water below the Pecks Corner shelter, a 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 forest floor. Filling my lighter-than-Lexan soda bottles with

clear, cold water from a rusty pipe, I 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 thirteen miles. I imagined their crushing loads: packs filled with item after item, ready to burst at the seams.

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 overhead stars framed the 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 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 I recited a short 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."

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 Boreal forest residents. Standing next to a decapitated trunk of a long-dead black spruce on top of Luftee Knob, my eighteenth peak in three days, I examined my map and could not be sure if I would meet the goal of averaging 24 miles a day. But giving it the old college try, I covered 28 miles and climbed 7,000 vertical feet to roll into a campsite six miles short of the end of my loop. I cooked two packs of Ramen noodles for dinner and went to bed under my green twelve-ounce tarp, strung up in a low Aframe 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, averaging 24 miles and nearly 6,000

vertical feet of climbing per day. At the parking area where I started exactly three days earlier, I stared into the forest and thought back to Mount Guyot, Highland Ridge, and all the other peaks. The exhausted AT backpackers also came to mind; resting at vistas, hoping their sweat-stained loads would roll off a cliff. But quite the contrary, I couldn't wait to put my pack back on. I knew I'd be back in the high peaks of the South soon again, using fine lightweight backpacking style. «« **E.S.** »»