

# Fieldcraft Skill Series

## Backpack Tips



Here are a few tips to make backpack use on outdoor activities as comfortable as possible. Incorrect packing a backpack can quickly lead to overexertion on even the simplest of hikes. You may have to tweak these tips a little bit depending on what gear you decide to bring on a hike. Keep in mind that this is just a general guideline. With experience you'll develop a packing method that works best for you and your equipment.

**Find the right pack.** Be sure that your backpack fits you well and also will be adequate for your hike. If you are going on a simple day hike, you don't need a humongous expedition pack. Likewise, daypacks are generally too small for multi-day use.

**Wear your pack correctly.** When putting on your pack, loosen all the straps. First tighten the hip belt (which should be on your hips, not above them), and then the shoulder straps and then the load lifters (near your shoulders). Finally adjust the load stabilizer straps on the hip belt (at the back of the belt). Your sternum strap should not be tight but should keep the shoulder straps in position. It should not feel restrictive or limit your breathing.

**Plan for easy access.** Put essential items like a map, first aid kit, flashlight, and trail snacks on outer pockets or in upper compartments for easy access during breaks. Many packs have side-pockets for your water bottles. Other items like clothing or a ground cloth that you won't use until you get to a campsite should be deeper in your pack.

**Don't waste space.** Pack food and your stove and cooking gear in your pots. They will all be used together so don't pack them separately. If you put extra clothing in zipper lock plastic bags to keep them dry, squeeze the air out of the bag before completely zipping it closed.

**Back breakers.** Heavier items should be kept close to your back and higher up in your pack to help you maintain a center of gravity. This helps keep your gear from pulling you backwards or side to side. Avoid skewing the weight distribution to one side. Even complex suspension systems on internal frame packs can't compensate for a dramatic difference in weight from one side to another.

**Sleeping bag at the bottom.** Even though most hikers will build upon these general rules to create their unique packing system, almost everyone agrees that your sleeping bag belongs at the bottom of the pack. On an external frame pack, this means it is lashed to the frame below the pack itself.

**Waterproof your pack.** A good pack cover will not just keep the contents of your pack dry but will also keep the pack itself dry. Water increases weight, so a dry pack is also lighter. You should line the inside of your backpack with a plastic trash bag. A stuff sack with a sleeping bag should be lined with a plastic bag, especially if it is on the outside of a pack to help keep it dry.

**Secure gear to the external frame.** You may need to secure items to the outside of the pack. Tie each item securely so that it doesn't sway as you walk. The extra movement on the pack will make you work harder to keep your balance on the trail. Try to minimize the number of items you keep on the outside of your pack.

**Prevent ruining food and gear.** Fuel for your stove should be nowhere near your food or your tent. Double check the cap to ensure it is screwed on tightly. It should also be placed in a heavy gauge plastic bag. A fuel leak can spoil your food and ruin the waterproof layers of your tent or raingear.