

Smokin': 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. 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. 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 has high peaks, hiking trails, and expanses of wild terrain. Great Smoky Mountains National Park, a half-million-acre cache of waterfalls, wildflowers, and old growth forest 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. I had found my first Southern challenge. Forming a sinuous loop incorporating sections of the Appalachian Trail and Benton MacKaye Trail, eighteen 5,000-foot peaks, and a half-dozen scenic waterfalls, my proposed 72-mile, 18,000-vertical-foot Smoky Mountains route was beautiful. The only way to cover it in less than four days was to use fine lightweight style.

Though the term "lightweight backpacking" may have one imaging hikers scurrying around, freezing at night, and having an overall spartan experience, while having no money left because they spent it on expensive gear, nothing could be more untrue. Traveling light is not about how much money you spend nor how much you're willing to suffer. It's about what you bring and don't bring. The three lightweight backpacking questions that should be asked before a trip are:

1. Will I use each item during each day?
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 this preliminary question and answer 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 a few days. And so, I began my hike.

The first peak I encountered was Cammerer Ridge, whose high point gently rises a quarter-mile from the Appalachian Trail. Covered in gentle grasses, 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 thru-hikers looked more like high altitude mountaineers lost in the Himalayas than backpackers who would reach their next resupply point within three days. Greeting them with friendly hellos, I continued south on the AT at a fresh pace, taking side trips up Sunup Knob and Cosby Knob, whose trailless summits easily accessible.

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 have gotten 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, I headed south to the highest trailless peak in the East, Mount Guyot. Named during the mid-1800s for Swiss explorer and scientist Arnold Guyot, this 6,621-foot behemoth of a peak 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 and bruises and swearing, I reached the top marked with a United States Geological Survey benchmark from 1929. That afternoon, I added ascents of Mount Yonaguska and Marks Knob to have my total climbing 6,000 vertical feet. Later that evening, I reached a campsite 22 miles from my start point.

You can't help but draw attention to yourself when you cook dinner on the skeleton of a tuna can. Weighing 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 into 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, 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. Underneath this went my three-pound pack to cushion my legs.

Up top, I stacked extra clothing to form a makeshift pillow while I watched my lean-to mates hobble around on blistered feet or organize all their gear into enormous piles. After finishing dinner, I dozed off in my one-pound sleeping bag, free from nightmares of donning 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 a.m. with a climb of Mount Chapman, a lonely briar-covered hill that has 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 a.m., 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 who were actually hiking stopped and asked how early I had to have started to be twenty miles from the nearest trailhead. They assumed I was wearing a day pack. I let them know that I was on a three-day trip and that all my gear fit into the tiny pack that hovered on my back. But the majority of backpackers I met were not hiking. They were resting. With packs mirroring the dimensions of 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 and be able to walk the next day.

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 Pecks Corner shelter, a stone-walled structure set in a hardwood forest. 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 thru-hikers stumbling into the shelter at dusk after covering a sunup-to-sundown thirteen miles. I imagined their bulging packs ready to burst at the seams.

With side trips up two more 5,000-footers completed by 2:00 p.m., all was going well until the hike up Highland Ridge, what I dubbed "the hike from hell." In my journal I recorded the heath and greenbrier-choked bushwhack ascent as "one of the most miserable hikes of my life." After an equally horrendous descent off this terrible hill, I reached my second campsite at dusk with more than 38 of the 72 miles completed. Though the climbing for day two was 2,000 vertical 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 stars framed the black night sky.

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 I rolled into 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 gear 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. It was a classic Boreal forest. 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 wasn't sure if I could meet my goal of at least 24 miles each day. I gave it my best and 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 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, averaging 24 miles and 6,000 vertical feet of climbing per day. At the parking area where I had 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. They were probably still resting at vistas, hoping their sweat-stained loads would roll off a cliff. To 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 style.