

Tips from the Old Scout

Tip # 4: Backpacks

Tips from the Old Scout is a series of informational articles that will appear on the Troop 201 website each month. They are intended to be an information source for both parents and scouts on a variety of important topics relating to camping, backpacking and hiking.

The subject is backpacks. Each scout should have a small daypack to be used on every camping trip and outing. This should be large enough for a water bottle, rain gear, first aid kit and handbook, with some room to spare. On weekend camping trips, the day pack will be used for side hikes: at summer camp, it will hold the scout's rain gear and merit badge materials as he goes through his daily routine at camp. Day packs often have padded shoulder straps for comfort, but do not need hip belts. A typical school backpack can serve as a daypack.

Scouts will also need a larger backpack for backpacking trips and high adventure camping activities. There are two main categories of backpacks to consider: internal frame packs, and external frame packs. While the majority of packs available these days are the internal frame style, there are still external frame packs available (for example, the Kelty Yukon backpack) which is a "traditional" scout backpack and will serve the scout well.

Internal frame packs are said to have greater storage capacity and better maneuverability on the trail, as they typically fit closer to one's back. Some criticisms are that they don't have as good an airflow between one's back and the backpack (hotter in summer months), and often do not have as many outside-access compartments for gear. Internal frame backpacks often have a top cover/compartments that separates and can be used as a daypack. Compact sleeping bags and sleeping pads will be stowed inside of an internal frame backpack.

External frame backpacks are known for having more outside pockets for access to gear, and more places to tie on gear such as tent poles, etc. They often have better airflow between the backpack and one's back, and can be cooler to carry in summer months. If you have a larger sleeping bag or sleeping pad, you will probably secure these on the outside of an external frame pack. Some criticisms are that the design is wider than an internal frame backpack, and the pack may be bulkier if carrying many items on the outside of the backpack.

External frame backpacks may have inside compartments to separate gear. Both styles usually come equipped with pouches for hydration bladders and hoses (a method of accessing drinking water while hiking, if not using water bottles).

It's important to have padded shoulder straps and padded hip belts. The majority of the pack's weight should ride on the hips, so the hip belt adjustment is critical. There is good information on www.backpackermagazine.com about fitting a backpack properly. Store personnel and the Troop's

Assistant Scoutmasters can help a scout properly adjust his backpack prior to an outing. Most backpacks have several adjustments for torso length, so the backpack can expand as the scout grows taller.

The troop regularly conducts “shakedown” prior to backpacking trips to help newer scouts adjust their backpacks to fit properly. A well-fitted backpack can mean the difference between a great hiking experience and an uncomfortable one. The backpack must be fitted after it is packed with the amount of weight that will be carried on the outing. Experts recommend the backpack weigh no more than 25-30% of the total body weight. Take the time to be sure the backpack is fitted properly.

Purchase a backpack cover to help keep out rain (or pack a large plastic garbage bag to do the same). Experienced hikers will place all their clothing and gear inside zip-lock plastic bags inside their pack to keep them dry and organized. Anything tied to the outside of the pack should be tied with rope or adjustable straps – do not use bungee cords to tie anything on the outside of the backpack!

Carabineer clips can be used to secure small items to the backpack. Generally, softer items should be packed along the side of the pack that faces one’s back. Put items that need quicker access (rain gear, first aid kit, water, etc.) near the top or in outside pockets. Sleeping gear or extra clothing can be placed deeper inside the backpack.

On backpacking trips, scouts need to keep enough room available to carry their food and their share of troop gear. Scouts will also split up and carry parts of the tent they will sleep in. Everything one carries on a backpacking trip should fit inside of, or be secured to the outside of the backpack (including the daypack!). Hands must be free for maneuvering on the trail.

Backpack volume is measured in cubic inches. For weekend camping and backpacking trips, look for an external frame backpack of approximately 2800 cu.in. (3300 cu. in. for internal frame). For extended backpacking trips like a Philmont Trek, look for an external backpack of approximately 4000 cu. in. (4600 cu. in. for internal frame).

Be careful not to strain your back in putting on or taking off a heavy backpack. Let a buddy assist you in mounting the pack. To mount the pack yourself, bend down and place the pack on one knee with the straps facing you. Insert one arm in the strap then swing the pack around to place the other arm. Stand up and secure and tighten the hip belt first, making sure the belt sits just above the hips. Then adjust the shoulder straps, and finally the “load adjuster” straps, if your backpack has them. Many backpacks will also have a sternum strap to pull in the shoulder straps to prevent them from chafing the arms. Readjust all straps for comfort as you hike.

Remember:

- Day packs are required on every camping trip and backpacking trip
- Carry a rain cover for your backpack
- Make sure your backpack is properly fitted to you
- Keep all emergency gear, rain gear and water accessible in the pack
- Do not use bungee cords to tie anything to the outside of the backpack!