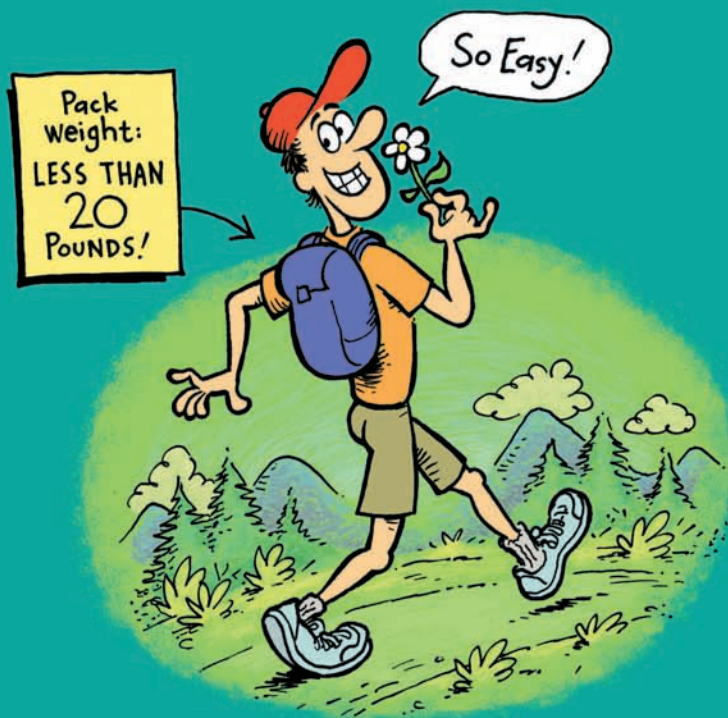


LIGHTEN UP!

A complete handbook for
LIGHT & ULTRALIGHT
backpacking



Don Ladigin

with illustrations by **Mike Clelland!**



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A COMPLETE HANDBOOK FOR LIGHT AND
ULTRALIGHT BACKPACKING

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—*Don Ladigin*

Foreword

Don Ladigin was “packing light” decades before most backpackers had ever heard the term “ultralight.” My first acquaintance with Don was on a backpacking trip in 1975, back when large and heavy packs were the norm, and bragging rights went to the person with the most gargantuan load. We had agreed to car pool, so early on the first morning of the trip, our group met at the agreed upon meeting point in town. When Don arrived I was surprised to see that he had with him only a tiny pack, barely big enough for a day hike, yet only partly full. Apparently he had either forgotten his real pack or thought we were intending only a very short day hike. Always the mother hen, I inquired and was astonished to hear that the small sack on his lap was indeed his full pack. I was skeptical, to say the least, but it was midsummer, the weather conditions were mild and stable, the intended hike was an easy trail hike in nontechnical terrain not far from the road, and my assistant leader agreed that we would be able to provide whatever else Don needed. So, we allowed him to go, though with considerable trepidation. We kept a wary eye on him all the while, wondering what other odd behaviors we might witness, and curious as to how he would manage to stay comfortable at the near freezing temperatures that we expected by morning.

As it turned out, I’ve been learning from Don ever since. Instead of having to assist him, we spent much of the trip envying his light kit as we slogged under our towering loads of “essentials” and did our best to keep up to his pace. We had assumed that the small size of Don’s pack meant that he might be ill-equipped, yet he had everything he needed and, adding to our chagrin, he was the only one in the group who had the tools needed to repair a participant’s broken pack frame. Over the years I’ve led many trips with Don in the full range of weather conditions, in all seasons, from the Cascades to the Alps. He’s completely at home in the wilds, where he’s always relaxed,

observant, and ready to assist others regardless of the conditions.

Don continues to amaze me and countless friends and students. He has led dozens of outings for the University of Oregon, assisting me in my work as director of the Outdoor Pursuits and Outdoor Leadership Training Programs. Participants on our outings must comply with extensive gear and clothing requirements, which often result in substantial pack weights. Don's become a living legend among local outdoors enthusiasts for his ability to comply fully with our stringent gear requirements while not exceeding the weight and volume of what most of us would consider a light "day pack."

A few years ago students on a snow-camping trip came to me to express their concern that Don's small pack might not contain enough to sustain him through the major snowstorm that was due to hit us during the second night of the outing. Needless to say they were even more concerned (and even I was a bit anxious) when the overnight storm dumped 26 inches of heavy Cascade "powder" on our campsite. Don was, of course, just fine, and as several of us were peering out of our half-buried tents at first light, his head erupted from the meadow where he'd been buried in his tiny shelter during the night. Before we could even get ourselves out of our tent, he'd brought us tea, and soon thereafter he was cheerfully scurrying about, helping others dig out from the storm.

Packing light requires careful planning (and a good measure of self-discipline) to assure that every item of gear and clothing is truly necessary, and that each item is as light as possible. On the other hand, packing light can make it possible to indulge in occasional whimsy. On a canyoneering trip in exceptionally rugged country, as our group prepared for unexpectedly cold, wet weather by dressing in fleece under rainwear pulled from our clumsy, heavy packs, Don astonished us by pulling a full wet suit from his impossibly tiny pack. By packing light he was able to afford the luxury of a wet suit while enjoying better mobility and safety on the slippery boulders and walls of the canyon. On a recent late-October backpacking outing, he arrived with his typical twelve-pound pack, which seemed impossibly small next to

the thirty-five- to fifty-pound packs carried by most of the other participants. Two days later, camped on an alpine ridge during one of the first snowstorms of the season, the group members could hardly believe their eyes when he pulled a large plastic pumpkin full of Halloween treats from his tiny pack!

The most obvious benefit of packing light is, of course, a light pack. A light pack makes almost every aspect of outdoor travel easier, safer, and a lot more fun. And packing light may offer even greater advantages in the long term. Most longtime hikers, climbers, and backcountry skiers eventually suffer serious knee, hip, and spine damage, much of it related to their having carried large loads too often. With Don's help we now offer an "ultra-light backpacking" course at the University of Oregon, and we're pleased to see that lightweight gear and techniques are finally becoming widely popular among outdoors enthusiasts of all ages. Perhaps the next generation of backpackers, backcountry skiers, snowshoers, and mountaineers will be able to enjoy healthy feet, knees, and backs throughout a lifetime of outdoor adventures!

—Jim Blanchard
Director of Outdoor Pursuits
University of Oregon

Introduction

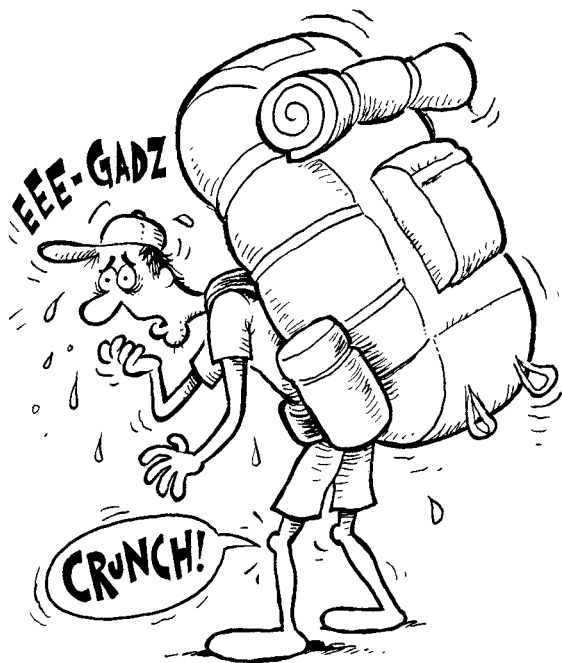
Lightweight backpacking is hiking and camping with everything needed to be safe, comfortable, and well fed while carrying a very small and lightweight backpack. In this book we will examine the most useful equipment and the techniques hikers can use to carry the lowest possible pack weight consistent with comfort and safety.

Hikers who gravitate toward lightweight backpacking tend to be highly self-reliant people who enjoy experimentation. Some use commercially available equipment, often modifying it to suit their needs, while others use custom-made or homemade gear. Almost every item of lightweight gear has evolved from conventional equipment and clothing. When a lightweight backpacker and a conventional backpacker lay out their respective gear side by side, both will have all the basics: a backpack, a shelter, sleeping gear, food, warm clothing, and miscellaneous useful smaller items. Item by item, the gear of the lightweight hiker will be noticeably more compact and lightweight than the traditional backpacker's gear. A traditional backpacker typically carries duplicate or redundant items. A lightweight hiker not only eliminates these redundancies but will maximize the usefulness of many items by using gear with multiple purposes.

So, there is really no mystery or secret to how lightweight backpackers achieve their light loads. Each item is deliberately smaller and lighter than the corresponding item carried by traditional backpackers, and any unnecessary items are deliberately omitted. The result is a much smaller and lighter load.

Some readers may be interested in achieving the lightest possible pack weight, while others might only want to reduce the weight they carry to a more manageable level. The information in this volume will be useful to both.

Most backpackers have realized at one time or another that they have overpacked for an outing. This realization may come in the middle of the trip when sore leg muscles rebel on a long



TRADITIONAL
BACKPACKER



ULTRALIGHT
BACKPACKER

climb uphill, or it may come at the end of a trip while unpacking large amounts of leftover food. Aside from what gets consumed during the hike, everything hikers put into a backpack will have to be carried for many miles, then carried back out again. Even small, light items will add up: Those many small weights become a single large weight once they're on a hiker's back.

Hikers who carry less weight spend less energy and can hike faster and farther when they want to. They will have greater agility fording streams and crossing slippery logs. If they stumble, they are less likely to fall, and when they do fall they are less likely to get hurt. A hiker who is less fatigued is more capable of helping others who are tired or injured. Hikers with interests such as photography or climbing are able to carry more of their specialized equipment when the rest of their gear is lightweight. A lighter load also allows the use of lighter boots, which save the hiker's energy and are gentler on the trail.

Hikers with lighter packs produce less impact in off-trail travel and are less likely to damage plants and soil, especially on slopes. Minimizing impacts on slopes requires avoiding delicate areas and may require taking somewhat more difficult route options, something heavily burdened hikers are less likely to do.

Some aspects of carrying a light burden are less obvious, but in the long run may be the most significant. When we are young, we can carry heavy burdens with little apparent effect on our knees and backs. However, carrying heavy loads can produce cumulative damage and result in serious impairment later in life. Besides, carrying a lighter load is just a lot more enjoyable!

There is no master list of lightweight gear that works well for everyone. You will have to experiment to find what light equipment works well for your particular needs. Be sure to use good judgment and stress safety while pursuing lighter weight. When trying out new or novel gear, try it in a safe environment, perhaps your back yard or a favorite campground, before venturing into the wilderness with it. If that's not practical, carry the old trustworthy gear in addition to the new gear until the new gear has proved it will work well. This is particularly important if the new gear is homemade or custom-made, since lighter-weight materials may be less durable, less weatherproof, or may provide less insulation than conventional materials.

