

# Camping on a Budget

## Low Tech Camping

### Improvising and Making Gear

There was a simpler time. There was a time when boys could grab a few things from home, toss *them* in a bag, fling it over their shoulder and head for “the hills” with a few friends and a few days of adventure. In our culture, that could get the parents arrested, these days.

But have we over-complicated things? Have we taken away a sense of adventure by introducing (by our own actions and comments) a lust for the latest in techno-marvelous camping and backpacking gear? When was the last time a boy in your Troop arrived for a weekend campout with over half of his gear home-made...by the Scout? Has it ever happened? Would you even let him go with such unconventional stuff?

We as leaders/parents may feel good if we can outfit our Troop/Scouts with the very best, be that a \$300 pack, a \$200 sleeping bag, a \$400 tent or a \$100 stove but not all families or Troops can afford such things. Plus, we may be sending a subtle message that without these things, camping cannot take place.

So, with the three topics in the title as a guide, we would like to present some thoughts, ideas, concepts, suggestions and sources to open your mind to other possibilities and, perhaps, help you step back, if only for a little while to that simpler time when an 11 year old could face the “wilderness” with only.....

OK... you have little money to spend...little enthusiasm for carrying much gear...and an inclination to improvise and create...what can you do?

#### Shelter:

**Clothing.** We have a mindset that the Scout Uniform is the ideal outfit for hiking and camping. In reality, except for warm weather, it leaves a lot to be desired because of its high cotton content. Still, there is something about a Troop on the trail in uniform... OK, let's assume your starting point is a pair of Scout shorts and a short-sleeve Scout uniform shirt or “Class B” T-shirt. What's next? Well, those legs might need some protection at night. The trail pants with the zip off legs are all the rage among hikers these days, but there are no zippers on those Scout shorts. **Improvise.** Put on your shopping list for the thrift store a pair of pants (maybe 2), one of a tightly woven but light fabric and one of “dress slack” wool. Size does not matter because you are going to cut the legs off them, attach some tie strips and make leggings or chaps. Make them long enough to cover from ankle to crotch. If they are long enough (or the legs short enough) you may want to make them higher (longer) on the outseam than the inseam. Tie them to the belt and you have easily removable covers for warmth (the wool alone or with the windproof outer layer) and protection from sun and briars (windproof layer alone). They weigh a lot less and take up less room than all those pants would, too. Need an extra pair of shorts, just to be safe? How about swim trunks? You do have a pair already, don't you?

For cool evenings (or days) add a wool sweater from the thrift store and a light windbreaker from the same place. Nothing elaborate! Packing along one set of polyester or polypropylene long underwear (top and bottom) is a good (insurance) policy regardless of the season. If it is early spring, late fall or winter, add additional insulating layers (sweaters, fleece, wool shirts...all from thrift stores or military surplus) and consider including a pair of wool military surplus pants. A wool or fleece "watch cap" will insulate when you are cold and when dipped in water, will cool you when you are hot. A handy piece of gear! The fleece "skull-cap" is ridiculously easy to make, with or without ear flaps.

Socks should be wool, with poly or silk liners if a lot of hiking is on the menu. Don't cut corners here, but watch for closeout bargains at local outlets or the mail order locations mentioned.

A cotton bandanna can add insulation around your neck, if you can keep it dry; be a pot holder; dust mask; sun shade for head and neck; and, perhaps, the snot rag it was intended to be. (The latter use may limit some of the previous uses.)

As for rain gear...if it is really warm, the best rain gear is the swim suit mentioned earlier. Skin dries faster than any fabric and if it is warm and you put on a waterproof layer, you will stew in your own juice (sweat!). Take the free shower. Cool or cold weather is another subject. First, unless you are hiking off trail in woods and brush, don't scoff at the lowly umbrella. Ray Jardine and his wife have through-hiked the Pacific Crest trail more than once with this as their principal rain gear. In monsoon weather, a full rain suit is about all that works. Campmor has some that aren't too expensive. A poncho works unless it is really breezy. Tying a piece of cord around your waist (and over the poncho) helps some with the wind issue but does restrict arm movement some and is difficult if the poncho is on over a pack (about the only way to deal with the pack and poncho combination). If all that is too expensive, try the construction grade trash bag or some of the puncture and tear resistant leaf bags.

Time for bed. For a sleeping bag in warmer weather, why not make a fleece "liner" for use in winter and use it alone or (better) with a nylon cover you also made for summer. On the warmest of nights, the nylon cover alone will be adequate and if woven tightly enough, the mosquitoes will not be able to drain your blood as you sleep. The fleece liner, nylon cover and the above mentioned long underwear and fleece hat will get you through a pretty cool evening. Of course, the virtue and versatility of a good (military surplus) wool blanket. Wrapped in such a blanket, sleeping under the stars, not even a heavy dew condensing on the outer fibers of the blanket will disturb your rest. And the distant roll of thunder will give you a few minutes to wrap up in your tarp to await the coming storm!

Now, the tent. A blue (or green or brown or camo) plastic tarp, about 7' x 9' is a good start. If that is too expensive, get a roll of 3 or 4 mil clear plastic and divide it among several Scouts (and divide the cost too) and cut tarps about the same size. They won't have the neat grommets, but by using pebbles and two half hitches or just tie a sheet bend with cord and the corners of the tarp, it can be pitched over a ridgeline between trees or with some picked-up sticks to anchor it. Two small fellows can get under one of those tarps but sometimes it works better if each Scout has his own. They can be pitched close together to keep the buddy system intact. Some of that plastic or even a split open trash bag will do for a ground cloth. Worried about mosquitoes? Remember that the nylon shell is good protection but having your head inside a bag is never a good idea. So, get a little

mosquito netting and sew a piece to one side of your nylon bag so that it drapes over the end. If the local mosquitoes are especially obnoxious, you may want to attach a little pull tab on the netting so that it may be pulled up towards the ridgeline to keep it off your face. Some types of netting, if it touches your face, allows the little blood suckers to get to you. Add a cheap closed cell foam pad from your favorite “-mart” store or military surplus to add some insulation (and a little comfort) below you and your home for the night is complete. There is one problem with this setup which is perhaps most significant on Camporees when the Troop and individual Scouts may not have much choice in where to pitch camp. If your assigned area is not “the high ground” and the rains come in great abundance, chances are there will be ponding of water and the deepest puddles will be where the boys are sleeping. It just works that way. Now, a really good tub-floor tent with good waterproofing on the floor and all seams sealed should stay dry...a lot dryer than the fly under such circumstances. For the truly creative, sewing your own hammock or tent is not out of the question. Those projects are more demanding of time and skill and the boys may need lots of help to make it work, but, hey! Aren't we supposed to be helping? “Cheap” tents are usually a waste of money. Just about every one I have ever seen will remain reasonably dry when it is not raining. When it rains, they usually serve as collection devices for potential drinking water. Oh, bring some duct tape to patch any holes that develop in the plastic and don't pitch it within spark range of your fire. But then, you wouldn't do that anyway, would you?

Water...Everyone should have a personal water bottle or two. A liter bottle containing water equipped with a pull-top spout is an interesting place to start. Here's a suggestion, though...don't open the bottle with your mouth or teeth. Just pull it open with your hands and squirt the water in your mouth instead of wrapping your germ-infested lips around it. It will stay cleaner and you'll have lots less problems with bacteria build-up, assuming that your hands were reasonably clean in the first place. Hmmm. Maybe opening it with your teeth wasn't such a bad idea.

If you need to resupply from a source that is not a known-good one, plan on treating the water. Polar Pure crystals are about the most cost effective treatment, short of boiling water over a wood fire. Quality filters involve a substantial initial investment so they may not be an option to the budget camper. Most Scouts make their initial trips to camps with a known-good source of water.

Fire...How to light it and what to burn...Having a few waterproof matches in a waterproof match safe can be a very good idea but both can be expensive. A wad of cotton (saved from pill bottles?), an old plastic pill bottle or film canister, some petroleum jelly, a Boy Scout Hot Spark, some string and duct tape all go together to make a sure fire method of getting about 30 fires going. How many fires will each Scout have to start in a year? Get enough cotton to fill the can or bottle (small bottle!) and coat it with a good swipe of petroleum jelly. Work the PJ through the cotton, then stuff it all back into the can. Tie the hot spark and striker onto the string and tape the string to the side of the can/bottle. The string should be long enough so that the scraper can be scraped along the hot spark. This is an awesome fire making kit. It will light fires and stoves equally well. For stoves, light just a pinch of the cotton which is resting on the stove burner, near the gas jets. While it is still burning, turn the gas on. Lanterns present a bit of a challenge. Take a twig and put a little cotton on the end, kind of like a Q-Tip. Light it and stick it up the little match hole in the lantern. It usually works on the first try.

As for what type of stove to use, if there is adequate wood available, no stove at all will be the cheapest way to go. Lacking wood, an old coffee can with some charcoal will do some cooking. Then there are the homemade alcohol stoves made out of aluminum cans with nearly zero cost. There are also some surplus cook sets that contain a cook pot, stand and an alcohol stove for maybe

6 bucks. Not bad! As for cooking pots, if you don't like the one just mentioned, if you plan on cooking over a fire, try to find a pot with a bail. Or, make one from a tin can and a piece of heavy wire. We used to use coat hangers, but those are so flimsy now, they really don't hold the weight. Oh, there will be a coating on the inside of the can that needs to be burned out before you cook in it. Obviously it is food-safe, but a peeling coating going into my corn pasta is a culinary turn-off. With the bail, you can construct a hasty tripod and hang the can from it. A small "S" hook will make this easier. Of course there are any number of ways to cook without utensils at all. For personal eating gear, a metal cup (12 oz minimum; 16 oz is better) and a spoon along with the water bottle will work. If you feel the need to pick up pieces of food, try making chop sticks from wood harvested near your camp.

As for the miscellaneous gear, a compass is always handy, just stay away from the super cheap ones that one look tells you they will fall apart. A decent knife is good too. Here is a dilemma: the best value in a useful camp knife is the family of fixed blade knives known as "Mora" knives. For less than \$10 (ok, maybe \$10) you can get a knife that will hold an edge, sharpen easily to a razor edge, take lots of hard use, comes with a substantial sheath, has minimal bacterial hiding places when used for food prep and can't be taken on District Camporees.

An inexpensive whistle should be in every boy's kit (adults too). Several feet of extra parachute cord or other strong cord has a place too. A walking stick can double as a pole for the tarp tent and need be nothing more than a sturdy but light stick. Add a flattened metal tube tip and it can double as an effective digging stick for cat holes but this can create a dilemma if it is used as a tent pole too!

How about a pack to put it all in? There are serviceable surplus packs for as little as \$10. They are frameless rucksacks but they will store most of the gear for warmer weather trips. If you happen to get one of the folding surplus sleeping pads, they fit pretty well in the inside pocket of one of the low cost packs. What a coincidence that they both come from Germany.

Can you really go camping with a poncho, wool blanket, metal cup, tin can, knife, spoon, extra socks, a sweater and windbreaker, water bottle, first aid supplies, some food and a bag to put it in? That depends on the season and your skills. You may not need all that or you may need a few more items. Grandma Gatewood thru-hiked the Appalachian Trail with all her gear in a cloth bag she carried on her shoulder. She was in her 80's at the time, by the way. Ray Jardine thru-hikes the Pacific Crest Trail with a basic outfit (not including food and water) that weighs about 8 pounds. Most of his gear is homemade. It isn't rock-bottom cheap but it is light and it works!

A nylon tarp may be more practical than a plastic one but is it worth the 5 times higher price? We try to avoid "disposable" things so sometimes the price of durability is in dollars. Sometimes it is in pounds. A canvas tarp will outlast either nylon or plastic ones. But it is much heavier. And even heavier when it gets wet.

Also understand that you do not have to be comfortable all the time. You need to be able to get enough rest. Warm enough, dry enough, long enough to rest.

Mail order/Internet

Sportsmans Guide [www.sportsmansguide.com](http://www.sportsmansguide.com) surplus blankets, clothing, packs, bags,

Cheaper Than Dirt [www.cheaperthandirt.com](http://www.cheaperthandirt.com) same as above

Campmor [www.campmor.com](http://www.campmor.com) check special deals, youth rainwear and "thermal" underwear

<http://www.backpacking.net/makegear.html> really cool plans and ideas on how to make everything from stoves to packs to tents to sleeping bags. WARNING: the entire winter could be spent experimenting with just the stoves illustrated!!

Don Johnson's Alcohol stove:

<http://mywebpages.comcast.net/photonstove/stove/HighPerfAlcoholStove.html>

Henry Shires Tarptent:

<http://www.tarptent.com/projects/tarpdesign.html>

Lots o' links to homemade gear:

<http://www.verber.com/mark/outdoors/gear/homemake/>

Gossamer Gear (lightweight packs):

<http://www.gossamergear.com/>

Ray Jardine's Adventure page:

<http://www.rayjardine.com/index.shtml>

Fabrics:

Zero Porosity fabric (parachute materials):

[http://www.paragear.com/frame.asp?menu=group%3d193%26level%3d1&main=templates/base\\_template.asp%3fgroup%3d193](http://www.paragear.com/frame.asp?menu=group%3d193%26level%3d1&main=templates/base_template.asp%3fgroup%3d193)

Quest Outfitters:

<http://www.questoutfitters.com/index.html>

The Rainshed:

<http://www.therainshed.com/>

Outdoor Wilderness Fabrics:

<http://www.owfinc.com/>

Seattle Fabrics:

<http://www.seattlefabrics.com/>

Thrift stores\*

Charitable (Salvation Army, Volunteers of America etc)

Private (Ohio Thrift, Village Thrift etc)

The above places usually abound with wool sweaters, pants and sometimes shirts.

Ultimate cheap (garage sales)  
Flea markets

The above sources can provide nothing or unbelievable treasures

Make (or remake) it yourself  
Local military surplus stores\*

\*Check phone book for addresses

Also check out Ray Jardine's *Beyond Backpacking* and Thomas Elpel's *Participating in Nature* both of which have sections that relate to this and sections that don't but are worth the time to read them.