

# Packing Your Equipment

Small, frequently used items should go in your pants pockets, "throw" pockets on the pack, hung from your shoulder straps, or placed in other readily accessible place. These include knife, compass, map, whistle and watch. Other items that need to be readily accessible to you or others should be in conspicuous outside pockets. These may include rain gear, first aid kit, sun and insect protection, trail snacks & lunch, bandana, some matches, toilet paper, digging trowel, and perhaps camera, binoculars and paper & pencil. Packing several small similar items together in heavy plastic (ziplock) bags organizes items that could get "lost" inside the pack and keeps the contents dry even if the pack gets soaked. Items that must be kept dry but are too large for ziplock bags, like a sleeping bag, should be placed inside a heavy plastic bag. Your water bottle should be easy to retrieve. The harder it is to drink, the more likely you are to get dehydrated. Equipment you won't need until you make camp can be buried deep in the pack, but reserve an outside pocket for isolating your fuel and any other "smellables" that might contaminate food, clothing, tent or sleeping bag. Assign each item a specific "home" in your pack so that it can be located quickly and always return it to that home. Normally, arrange the pack's contents so that its center of gravity (heavy gear) is high and close to your back. Compression straps can help. Where stability is vital, some comfort can be traded for the stability of a lower center of gravity by placing heavy gear in the bottom of the pack.

## **Upper Main Compartment.**

It usually holds the bulky and heavy things (to keep weight over your skeleton). The internal frame pack is "top-loading". The top pocket is swung off and all gear is loaded from the top like putting groceries into a shopping bag. On most newer design packs, that compartment has a draw string at the top to close it before it is covered by the top flap/pocket. Some external frames are also top-loading. Top-loading main compartments are often quite a bit larger than front-loading main compartments. Basically, everything that doesn't go somewhere else gets "dumped" into here.

## **Lower Main Compartment.**

It is often called the sleeping bag compartment, after its usual contents in internal frames. Generally, this compartment is front-loading with a heavy zipper. Many external frames (especially ones with top-loading main compartments and older designs) don't have this second main compartment, so more is stored in the upper compartment. Sometimes the two compartments have a removable (drawstring or zipper) separator and it is incomplete so that long things (like tent poles) can "passed-through" both compartments. Instead, sometimes one of the external side pockets is not fastened to the main pack at the top and bottom to allow tent poles to be "passed-behind" or "tunnel" it to rest in a lower pocket. Front Pocket. It is sometimes called a "shovel pocket". Because of accessibility and its prominent visible position, this is a good place for important things like the first aid kit, tour permit and medical forms. It may also be a place for a camera and binoculars. Frames without this pocket often have a "top pocket" that can be used for the same purpose. Other External Pockets. They may include the top pocket on a top-loading main compartment, lower external pockets and elasticized throw pockets. I wouldn't put the fuel bottle or other contaminants in a top pocket for fear of contaminating the contents of main compartments.

## **Water Bottle Holder Pockets.**

Sometimes they are specifically designed for this function. Other times extra external zippered or elasticized pockets can be used. Some packs have the bottle pockets near the top. This provides "over-the-shoulder" access instead of "under-the-shoulder" access. Both work. If none of these are

available, bottle bags [\$4 in Campmor] or canteen holders with belt loops or clips can be used on the hip belt.

### **Top Lash Points**

. These points are often used for sleeping bags (in stuff sack), sleeping pads, tents (in bag) and ground cloths, especially on external frames. The same purpose can be achieved by placing things between the top pocket) and the top-loading upper main compartment and tightening the fastening straps. Not recommend this if you don't have a drawstring on that compartment. Bottom Lash Points. They serve the same purpose as those on top.

### **Total Pack Weight.**

How much a pack weighs depends on the length of the trek, the food and equipment you must carry, and your personal preferences for optional (luxury) items. Traveling with a crew allows tents, food, cooking gear, and other crew gear to be divided. The amount of weight that you can carry depends on a lot of physical factors (size, physical condition, age, experience) and terrain. Remember, excessive weight and the resultant fatigue from overexertion can lead to loss of fun, irritability, and injuries.

### **Straps for Comfort and Control of Your Pack.**

One of the biggest advances in pack technology has been the addition of helpful functional straps.

Padded Shoulder Straps go from the pack just behind/below the top of the shoulder, over the shoulder, and back down to the pack somewhere near the hip belt (bottom). When you experience sore shoulders it is often because too much weight is being carried by the shoulders -- the shoulder straps are lifting the weight off the hip belt. Two remedies are (1) loosening the shoulder straps, and (2) changing the position where the straps attach to the pack. If loosening the straps causes the pack to "fall away off the back" and the straps attach to the pack well below your shoulders, the pack (or adjustment) may be too short for your torso length and the shoulder straps could be moved up on the pack (or some allow the hip belt to be moved down). If it "falls away" and the straps attach above your shoulders, you may need to move them down (move the hip belt up) on the pack. The shoulder straps should attach to the pack just below shoulder level. Another potential remedy for the "falling away" problem is to tighten the load control straps, if the pack has them. If problems persist and you are out of adjustments, a different pack may be necessary. Sternum Strap goes from one shoulder strap to the other across the chest with a quick release buckle This strap, when pulled tight, relieves the pressure of the shoulder straps on the arms and distributes the pressure across the chest. When you experience numbness in your arms, it can often be relieved by tightening the sternum strap.

Padded Hip Belt attaches to the bottom of the pack and goes around the waist. The weight of the pack should rest on your hips, not your shoulders. This requires that the hip belt be pulled fairly tight and that the shoulder straps not lift the pack. The shoulder straps should mostly just keep the pack from falling backwards off of the back. Stabilizer Straps go from the sides of the hip belt to the pack on internal frames (and some external frames). They are needed because the "block" of padding at the bottom of the pack rests on the hips just above the tail bone. It also provides a nice fulcrum for the pack to rock on as you walk, which causes instability. By tightening these straps, the pack is restricted from side-to-side motion.

Load Control Straps extend from shoulder straps just in front of the shoulder to the top of the pack. Not all packs have these. When pulled tight, they pull the pack weight in close to

the shoulders. When loosened, they allow the pack to "fall off the back". These are useful features on steep and/or rocky climbs. Tightening them while going up hill brings the weight in closer so you don't need to bend over quite as much to maintain your balance. Going down hill, you may want the weight to be off the back (straps loosened), so that if you stumble, you fall backward against the hill rather than forward down the hill.

Compression Straps generally go horizontally around the main compartment of external frame packs from the edges of the pack near the frame, or the frame itself. They serve two purposes. First, if you have a "front-loading" pack with a zipper flap opening [like the traditional "bookbag" pack], they relieve stress off the zipper, so it is very important that you snug them. Some internal frame "rucksacks" and "daypacks" also are front-loading. Especially with heavy firm loads, zippers can rupture and spill the guts of your pack. The one I use every day to hike to the office is such an internal frame and will rupture the zipper with heavy books if the compression straps aren't snug. Second, the straps keep the contents from shifting and help organize the weight. Without compression straps, the contents of a large compartment will be loose and always settle to the bottom (yet we usually want weight high and close to the shoulders). The compression straps constrict the compartment's diameter, forcing the contents to stay higher. Think of it like squeezing the middle of a tube of toothpaste to get contents out the top. Large compartment top-loading internal frames are very analogous to the tooth paste tube example. Internal frames may have zig-zag compression straps (or elasticized "bungies") on the two sides or across the front. You will usually only find the zig-zag straps on climbing or "small contour" packs because they are just where the external pockets usually are. Their purpose is also to squeeze up and secure the contents. Some internal packs already have tall narrow profiles, so squeezing up the contents is not as crucial, but holding the contents steady is still important. They may have vertical compression straps running up and down almost the length of the pack. These straps relieve the pressure off the lower (sleeping bag) compartment zipper, secure the top cover, and compress the contents down to make the pack more stable. They sometimes are left long at the bottom so that they can double as lashing straps for securing things external to the pack. Load Lifting Straps are appearing on higher end internal (and a few external) frame packs to keep them from sagging and close to the torso. They attached to the bottom of the shoulder strap and to the bottom/side of the pack and are designed to lift and snug the lower part of the pack into the lumbar area of the back. This is not just a shoulder strap length adjustment as on many packs but specifically designed for this function. Loosening Straps in Unsure Footing allows you to jettisen the pack if you falter. Your pack can be shed quickly, if the hipbelt and sternum strap buckles are disconnected, by simply lowering/relieving your shoulders.

### **Hoisting the Pack Onto Your Back**

The best way to learn how to get the pack onto your back without straining is to watch experienced backpackers do it, then practice imitating them. The first time, do it with an empty pack, then work yourself up to the full weight you will carry. At the beginning or when the pack is heavy, it helps to loosen the shoulder straps a little. Bring the pack up to rest on my knee/thigh/hip with the back (strap side) facing you, then lean it to one side. Slip the closest arm through the shoulder strap and, with a smooth motion, swing it around behind me, reach down and catch it by sliding the other (free) arm through the other (free) shoulder strap. A couple of small jumps or jiggles allows you to position it squarely high on your shoulders (for stability and so that the hip belt is above your hips). Then clip the hip belt, followed by adjusting the shoulder straps and fastening the sternum strap.