



When you have to pack in the backcountry, there is a right way and a painful way. (Mark Rackay/Special to the MDP)

Carry the load without pain

I was on one of those hunting trips that made me wish I was a golfer instead. We were hunting mountain goats in an area of British Columbia where every inch of terrain was earned. Everything was uphill or downhill, with nothing even slightly resembling level ground. We crossed several talus slope, where one misstep and I would be the star in one of those this happened to my late friend stories.

Making matters worse, we carried everything with us, on our packs. Every item, from food, clothes, sleeping bags, rifles, and the list goes on. We made camp in a new place every evening, then packed it all up in the morning, and off we went. Evening camp was made where the first of the three of us collapsed from the load of the pack.

I would spend the night taking ibuprofen and soaking in Absorbine Junior, all



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

in an attempt to hit it again the next morning, with a smile. Little did I know then, but a few minor adjustments to my gear, and our methods, would have saved me much pain.

First mistake was the amount of food I carried. Most people overdue the amount of food they think they will consume on a trip, and I was very much a case in point. I could have fed a fire squad with what I crammed in my pack.

Lay out all your meals for each day separately, and actually visualize what you will eat that particular day, then wrap up each day individually. Plan for about 1 ½ pounds of food, per person, each day, roughly 3,000 calories. Perhaps add an extra day to what you think you need. Freeze dried and dehydrated foods fill this need nicely.

Divvy up the community gear equally between all the members of your group. One person should not get stuck with the cookware, food, tent, stove and fuel, unless of course, he is extremely strong. Don't be a hero, carry an equal share and let everyone take part.

If you are going to be hiking at altitude, make sure you are well acclimated before you go. When you live at 6m000 feet, it still takes a day or two to get used to 8,500 feet. While on the track, snack

often and drink plenty of water. Altitude sickness is something to take seriously. On our hunt, we did not stop to rehydrate often enough, and we paid the price in overexertion.

When you begin puffing at altitude, take a tip from long-range shooters, and breathe properly. Take a deep, deep breath, well into your midsection, then exhale very forcefully, like you are blowing out the candles on a birthday cake. This exercise purges carbon dioxide from your lungs, and fills your muscles with oxygen, helping you feel better as you exert.

Each day was a new experience in pain. My shoulders would kill me one day, and the next day my lower back would revolt. It all boils down to making the pack fit you properly.

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Trekking into the vanishing point

I had hiked across that footbridge scores of times, without realizing what a visual image it presents.

Wearing a backpack and carrying trekking poles two weeks ago, I exited the Wilderness Area where the Big Dominguez meets the Gunnison River.

This time, I happened to look through a camera lens after crossing the bridge, and was struck by the existence of the vanishing point at its far end.

It was a fitting image of transitioning after a journey on foot in the 66,000 acre Dominguez Canyon Wilderness. The trekking poles came in handy for clambering up and descending down some rocky slopes. In addition, they were needed to serve as the support poles in my ultralight tent.

A lighter load of gear can allow a trained person to run with a loaded overnight backpack, and thereby get even further from the parking lot of trucks and cars for a few days. In this Wilderness Area, the first four miles of trail is limited to Day Use Only.

This designation keeps the day hiking area accessible to individuals and families who are prepared for just that. An overnight camping trip then means going more miles on foot with one's gear on their back to get that far in. And of course that also entails hiking one's gear the same distance back out.

On the other end of the extreme of pricey new ultralight back-



Outdoors

By John T. Unger

packing gear, I choose to carry a pair of old aluminum adjustable ski poles, with the baskets removed. They work perfectly well for a two or three day backpacking trip. It is true that modern trekking poles are much lighter and that they fold down smaller than ski poles which are twenty years old. But it feels rewarding to re-purpose aluminum poles that are actually less fragile than modern carbon-fiber poles.

A pair of trekking poles can be just enough to assist a backpacker in leaping across a small stream or creek, and preventing a backpack full of cold water from spoiling the day, or worse.

Share the load

Such poles have understandably appealed to the outdoors aficionados who may have knees and hips with significant degenerative changes. Years of good times spent on trails in the desert and above timberline make a person want to continue such outdoor adventures as the decades pass.

For such hikers, a pair of poles may expand their current range and minimize or eliminate joint soreness that evening in camp.

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October light accents the vanishing point at the far end of the footbridge to Dominguez Canyon Wilderness Area. (John T. Unger/Special to the MDP)



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HIKING

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Another group that benefits by using poles includes those who are new to hiking the trails and who want to experience the joys of the wilderness on foot. In our increasingly digitally driver, screen-mediated culture, it is common for a person to be carrying more body weight than their physical frame is built for. Hiking as a means of burning off those pounds can be done more safely by the added stability of a pair of poles.

Rolling an ankle on uneven terrain is not going to allow safe or secure or pleasant travel. The extra support of poles can really pay off in opening up more opportunities for a wider range of people to venture out.

Beyond these types of groups, trekking poles are finding greater use among completely healthy and trained adventurers, as well. Many of us often elect not to carry poles, as we find them to be a bit of a hassle while running with a backpack. But two short narrow nylon straps with buckles can turn two poles into one for ease of carrying.

Hiking in the desert may require the carrying of much more weight for an overnight than would be needed in a similar length of hike in the mountains, due to the desert's lessened availability of streams for water to purify for drinking and cooking. At eight pounds

to the gallon, and a gallon per day needed per person, that weight quickly adds up as a burden on one's back.

Especially in a backpack with the normal weighted tent, pad, stove, and sleeping bag, a pair of poles can be very welcome in redistributing some of that weight onto the arms. Passing through a narrow set of rock walls in canyon country, for example, a 150 pound person with forty pounds of weight on their back may risk injury when planting and rotating a knee under that weight. Better to have the poles to use to briefly reduce the load on that knee.

The same is true for the spinal discs between the vertebrae of that backpacker. The disc is made of a fibrocartilage ring surrounding a pressurized, gel-filled center. Actively twisting one's trunk while carrying a load in the pack risks damage to the discs. Such an injury occurring in the backcountry can quickly exceed the ability for self-rescue.

Such challenges are counter-balanced by the opportunity to spend a couple of days away from the noise of cell phones, sirens, and Wi-Fi distractions.

John T. Unger is a Diplomate of the American Chiropractic Board of Sports Physicians, and in 2022 achieved the credential of Fellow of the Academy of Wilderness Medicine. Your feedback and ideas for future columns are welcomed at www.sportsdocunger.com.

LOAD

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Remember that your pack should never exceed 30% of your body weight, and the pack should be designed to carry that amount of weight. Don't expect a discount store daypack to comfortably carry 60 pounds of food and gear, it just is not going to work.

If your shoulders are hurting, loosen the shoulder straps until you feel the weight settle onto your hips. Shoulder straps should carry no more than 30% of the load. The straps should be taut, but not overly tight. If you are experiencing pinching or cramping, you have too much weight on your shoulders and it is time to readjust. Don't wait, adjust as soon as the pain starts.

If you have numb fingers, it is a sign that the shoulder straps are the cause. Too much pressure on your shoulders will hinder the blood flow to your hands, causing that tingling sensation. Loosen the straps, then tighten the sternum strap to reduce the backward pulling. If you are slinging a heavy rifle, that could also be the cause. Consider attaching the rifle to you pack in a pack sling made especially for rifles.

When your back starts to ache, it is most likely because you do not have the hip belt adjusted properly. The center of the hip belt should line up with the pointy part of your hip bones. Lower or raise the hip belt as needed and make it snug. Then adjust the shoulder straps accordingly.

I would mention that it is a good idea to do a gear shake-down at home, before the big trip. I bought one of those new, very lightweight, and rather expensive jet fire stoves and a handful of fuel canisters. I spent half the first night trying to get the fool thing to work, to no

avail. I lugged that thing around for a week and it never did work. Fortunately, one of the other guys brought a stove and we all shared, otherwise it is pretty tough to eat dehydrated food with no way to cook it.

Same goes for tents and sleeping bags. Check them all out before you go, especially if you have not used them in a while. You don't want to discover that your lightweight mountain tent has an extraordinary view of the stars during a torrential downpour.

The last thing I would mention is to know your limits and don't push the limits. We really overdid each day because we wanted to cover lots of ground and find a mountain goat. We did eventually find goats, but what we also found was that our bodies were revolting to the strenuous over-exercise, thereby sapping any enjoyment we would have enjoyed with the trip. Slow down and take it easy.

I'm glad I took that trip when I was younger because today, they would probably leave me up there under a pile of rocks with a grave marker on top. Looking back on that trip a decade later, and in a melancholy way, I wish I did go golfing instead of that miserable trek. Not really, even a bad hunting trip is still a good time.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press, Delta County Independent, and several other newspapers, as well as a feature writer for several saltwater fishing magazines. He is an avid hunter and world class saltwater angler, who travels around the world in search of adventure and serves as a Director and Public Information Officer for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. For information about the Posse call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org



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