

Top 12 Backcountry Essentials

- from Get Out There magazine.

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To ensure a safe and enjoyable trip, here is a list of essential backcountry items you should never leave home without.

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1. A PLAN



Before leaving on any backcountry excursion, whether it's a day hike or multi-day expedition, leave a detailed trip plan with a family member or friend. Your plan should include: departure and return dates, your route and details of any alternative routes or day trips you might take, locations where you intend to camp, the colour of your pack(s) and tent(s), and your vehicle's colour, make and license plate number. If you do not return on schedule, local and/or park authorities should be notified immediately.

When travelling in one of Canada's provincial or national parks, your trip plan should also be left at the park ranger/warden's office. In some of Canada's National Parks an optional "safety registration" is available (in some parks this is required). If you do not report into park staff at your scheduled return time, a search will be initiated on your behalf. This is recommended for high risk activities such as mountaineering, climbing, glacier travel, canoeing, kayaking and backcountry skiing.

Parks Canada: www.pc.gc.ca

Alberta: www.ed.gov.ab.ca/enjoying_atberta/parks

British Columbia: www.env.gov.bc.ca/bcparks

Ontario: www.ontarioparks.com

Quebec: www.fapaq.gouv.qc.ca

2. KNOWLEDGE



At a minimum, basic knowledge of wilderness survival and first aid is essential for anyone hiking the backcountry. Many organizations offer “in the field” courses where you’ ll have the opportunity to test your skills in a true wilderness environment. Both a survival and first aid course are highly recommended.

St. John Ambulance Wilderness First Aid: www.sja.ca

Canada West Mountain School (British Columbia): www.themountainschool.com

Advanced Rescue Techniques School of Canada (Ontario): www.rescuetechniques.com

Yamnuska Mountain Adventures (Alberta): www.yamnuska.com

Rocky Mountain Adventure Medicine Inc. (Alberta): www.adventuremed.ca

3. MAP AND COMPASS



Pretty basic stuff here. A good topographic map and a magnetic compass (that you know how to use) are your first line of defence against a long unpleasant night of trying to find your way back to your campsite. A topographic map will enable you to identify key landmarks and a compass will help you establish your direction of travel – both essential if you get lost. A GPS can be helpful if you know how to use it – but always bring a compass and map along as well. Most orienteering clubs offer basic navigation skills clinics – call your local club for information.

4. EXTRA CLOTHING



Shifts in weather conditions and temperature can happen quickly in the backcountry – and exposure to the elements can lead to hypothermia (the most common killer of backcountry users). Carry enough extra clothing to layer-up should you start to get cold. Ideally, you should have a wicking base Layer (to pull moisture away from your skin), an insulating middle layer, and a waterproof outer layer to protect your other layers from the elements. This is called three layer systems. An extra pair of socks and a hat are also good ideas. Avoid cotton at all costs!

5. EXTRA FOOD AND WATER



Even on a day hike, always pack at least one extra day’ s worth of food and water. A few energy bars, nuts and dried fruit will not significantly impact the weight of your pack, but could provide essential fuel should you have to spend an extra night outside.

6. FIRST AID KIT



A pre-packed, waterproof wilderness first aid kit should be personalized according to your needs and the type of travel/activities you' ll be doing. As with any trip, be sure to carry any of your own required medications (such as inhalers, epi-pen, etc.).

7. POCKET KNIFE



A good pocket knife can serve a variety of purposes in the backcountry - including gear repair, food preparation and first aid, to name a few. A Victorinox Swiss Army Knife is a great option. Most have a variety of tools - including a knife, can opener and scissors. For the tech savvy, there are new models that even have built in USB memory sticks, altimeters and digital clocks.

www.swissarmy.com

8. FLASHLIGHT OR HEAD LAMP (WITH SPARE BATTERIES AND BULB) AND A MIRROR



A flashlight or head lamp will allow you to signal other campers and travel at night. Take an extra set of batteries and bulb along for added insurance. Modern LED headlamps are very light and batteries last much longer. They are not, however, always as bright as a halogen bulb - something to consider if you' ll be travelling over difficult terrain (off-trail/climbing). A mirror can be used as a signalling tool during the day.

9. MATCHES AND CANDLE



A fire can be useful for maintaining warmth and signalling rescuers. Keep waterproof matches (including the striker) and a candle in a waterproof container. Waterproof matches can ignite in windy and wet conditions and a candle will stay lit longer than a match, which can be helpful when trying to light damp firewood. Another alternative is fire paste, which will more easily allow you to start a fire with damp wood.

10. SPACE /EMERGENCY BLANKET



For a few bucks and a couple of ounces in your pack, a Mylar or Kelvalite space blanket can provide warmth and added protection from the elements. It can be used as a wind

break, insulation or shelter from rain and snow. Space blankets are also available as bivouac sacks (slightly tougher, usually lined with fabric). You might also consider carrying a piece of thin (2-3mm) closed cell foam; it's lightweight and will add immeasurable warmth during an unplanned overnight stay.

11. WHISTLE



The sound of a whistle will carry a lot further than your voice if you get lost, and requires much less energy than calling out. Attach it to the outside of your pack or on your clothing so you won't have to go searching for it in the case of an emergency. Be sure to choose a quality whistle such as a Fox 40.

www.fox40whistle.com

12. WATER FILTRATION AND PURIFICATION



No freshwater should be considered safe. A water filter and a purification system (iodine/chlorine) used together will offer great protection. A good system will allow you to stay hydrated with minimal fuss. There are many filters and purification systems available. Visit an experienced outfitter before you head out to establish a convenient and workable system.
