

The Self-Guided Hunter...

BACKPACK YOUR WAY TO TROPHY DEER

Fifth in a series...

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A very small percentage of hunters have the desire and mental endurance to become a backpack hunter. It is human nature to take the line of least resistance in whatever one endeavors to pursue. Many hunters choose to day hunt by camping at trailheads or riding the "Idaho mule" (a four-wheel ATV) into a hunting area. Some travel using pack animals and some hire an outfitter/guide to take them hunting. With so many other more convenient and easy options available, why would one ever choose to backpack into a hunting area?

I started backpack hunting 32 years ago for one very simple reason: it was the least expensive way I knew of to get into

quality hunting areas. Over the years, I have discovered other advantages to this style of hunting. One is access. Backpacking allows you to hunt wilderness areas that are closed to motorized vehicles. I have found that once you have traveled two or more miles from a trailhead in a wilderness area, you have eliminated 80 percent or more of the hunters. This equals less competition for the good trophy deer you may find in a given area.

By hunting with a backpack, I have been able to penetrate hunting areas that were too rough for horses and mules. Sometimes horses and mules could handle the terrain, but food and water for maintaining them was not sufficient. Several years ago, I found a little "honey hole" that held good mule deer bucks, but the only water source was from a small north-facing snow bank. Due to that small trickle of water, my son and I were able to live on the mountain to take advantage of prime hunting time. On several occasions,

we saw horseback hunters ride into the area from down below, but they always reached the area at midday after the good hunting hours had passed. At times, horses or mules can be a liability rather than an asset.

Mobility is another advantage. By carrying your complete life-support system with you in a backpack, you have the flexibility to move camp quickly as hunting conditions dictate. On my two Dall's sheep backpack hunts in Alaska, we moved camp daily. Several years ago, while backpacking into the high country of Wyoming for mule deer, a storm hit and dumped two feet of snow on us. As soon as the storm cleared it was obvious that the deer had pulled off the ridge tops and had dropped down to a lower elevation. In two hours time, we were able to pack up camp and follow the deer down to lower country.

Safety is another reason I prefer hunting with a backpack. Most horseback hunters do not want to admit it, but mules and horses can go loco on you in an instant for no apparent reason. Other times they have good reason, such as when they walk across a yellow jacket nest in the ground and you get a free rodeo ride. The bottom line is an 800-pound animal can just plain hurt you. The famous Alaskan guide and author, Russell Annabel, died from a leg injury received while riding a mule.

More hunting time is available to the backpack hunter because you do not have to care for horses and mules on a daily basis, which is very time-consuming and can cut into quality hunting time. After the hunting season is over, a backpack hunter washes and dries out his equipment and stores it away for the following year. You don't have the work or expenses associated with keeping livestock all year-round, such as buying hay, doctor-

Tent selection is a very personal choice that depends on your specific wants and needs.

Dr. Marshall Wilt of Danville, Kentucky hunting in the Sawtooth Mountains of Idaho. He is

using a backpack tent in conjunction with a Whelen Leanto tent.





Morris Owen showing the Yukon Day Pack. Note how the pack sits low and close to the back. The rifle is a 7mm S.T.W. with a 26" barrel. It weighs 7 pounds, 5 ounces - a mule deer backpack rifle.

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ing fence cuts, paying veterinarian bills, purchasing horse trailer licenses, and other necessities.

Finally, backpack hunting is the most economical way to hunt. Once you have a basic backpack outfit, your cost per hunt is very low compared to paying an outfitter or purchasing a horse, saddle, horse trailer, pack animals, and a pack outfit, plus the yearly maintenance cost.

There must be a downside to backpack hunting, you say! Yes, there is. You are limited to the amount of equipment and types of food that equal camp comfort. But this may work to your advantage. One of the great Alaska Dall's sheep backpack guides, Chuck Moe, once told me, "the more comfortable the camp, the less time a hunter wants to spend in the field hunting."

The other drawback of backpacking is the extra effort needed to remove your kill from the field to the trailhead. Most of the problem can be eliminated if you remember a few simple rules while trophy deer hunting. First, if the buck is not up to your preestablished standard, it is easier to pack out your deer tag than a buck you really didn't want. My rule is that if I won't mount it, I don't shoot it. Also, if I can't eat it (aside from the cape and antlers), I don't pack it. I bone out all the eatable meat to pack out. I have yet to see a deer that I

could not bone and pack to the trailhead in one load.

There are several secrets to being a good backpack hunter. First, you must have mental toughness and a true desire to hunt this way. It is not physical size, but mental size of a person that makes a successful backpack hunter. The other secret is to plan and organize your equipment as if your life depended on each item you select. It is not how much, but how little, equipment you take that makes a successful hunt. If you pay attention to the ounces when selecting equipment, the pounds will take care of themselves and you will be rewarded by an enjoyable hunting experience.

Too often the average hunter who does not backpack thinks in terms of hours upon hours of hiking into an area with 75 to 80 pound packs. This is not what backpack hunting should be. A pack should weigh between 40 to 55 pounds, depending on the time of year and the number of days of the hunt.

In order to assess your backpack equipment needs, I would recommend that you order a year's subscription to *Backpacker* magazine, and be sure to obtain the March 2000 issue. This issue has the most up-to-date and comprehensive list of equipment avail-

able from each manufacturer.

The first article of equipment to obtain is a good, reliable tent. I would select a tent that is rated for one person more than will be using the tent. I have found that a three-man tent is much more comfortable for two hunters. For hunts later in the season when foul weather is likely, I take along an oversized nylon Whelen Leanto tent at 4 pounds, 2 ounces, which is used in conjunction with my tent for extra protection and cooking out of the rain and snow. For early season hunts of only three to four days, I use the Whelen Leanto or take a tent fly to sleep under to save weight. Tent selection is a very personal choice that depends on your specific needs and wants. But always purchase quality—buying an \$89 tent at a discount store is the best way to ruin a good hunt.

As for backpacks, I can make several recommendations. For an external frame pack, the Camp Trails frame with their camo moose bag has stood the test of time. The main feature of this system is one large bag, without small individual compartments, so any item will fit (I have fit two boned-out yearling caribou in one moose bag and one hindquarter, two backstraps, and two front quarters of an elk in one bag.). What doesn't fit inside can be tied onto the strong external frame. The only limiting factor is your ability to carry it fully loaded.

The same features can be found on the Rocky Mountain Rhino pack system (See the center order form – item code RHFR.). The advantage of this pack system is that the main-frame can be dismantled down to a small, compact roll for easy transportation. This pack saved my bacon last hunting season in the Sawtooth Mountains of Idaho. My mule went loco. After the dust settled and I picked myself out of the rocks, I used the Rhino pack system to carry my equipment the remaining six miles to the trailhead. Two weeks later I found my mule.

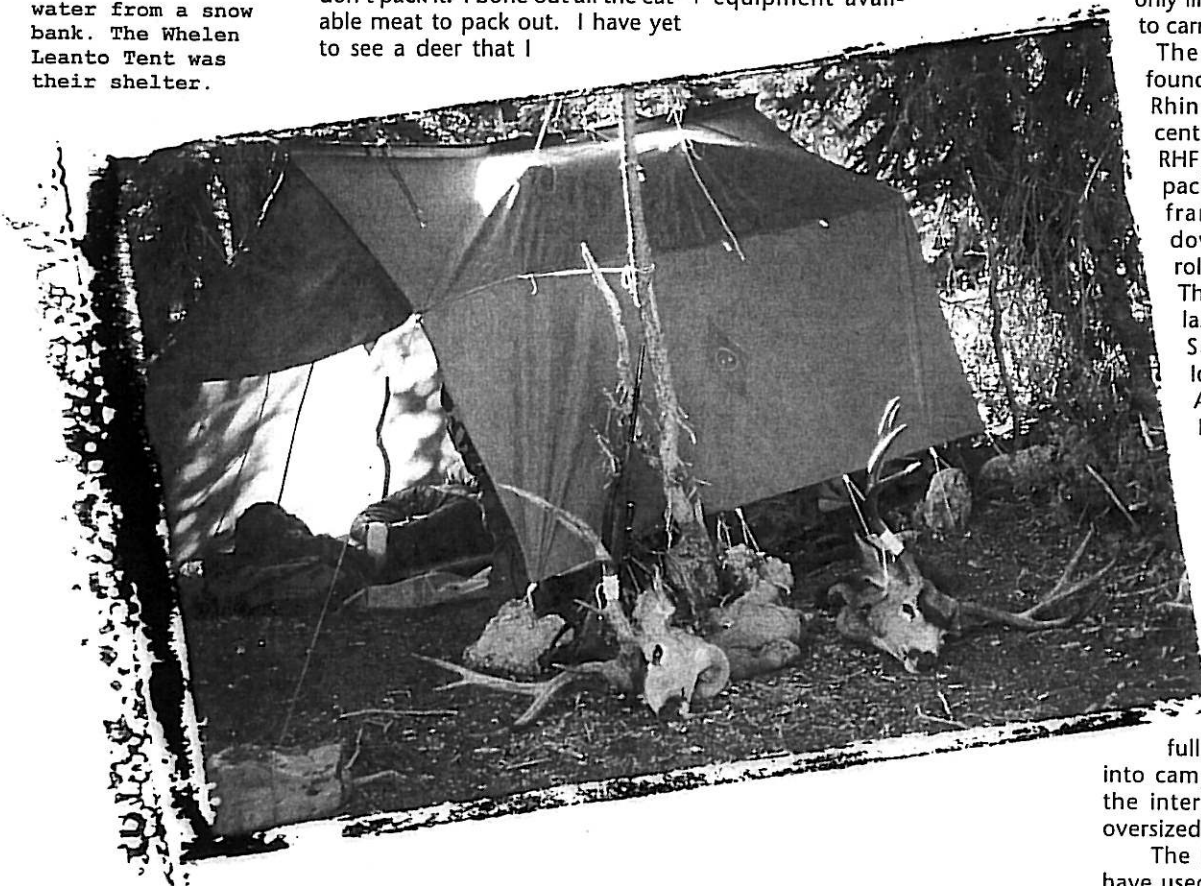
McHale makes the best internal frame pack I have found.

You can extend the length of the pack for full payloads when packing into camp, and then break down the internal frame for use as an oversized day pack.

The best day-hunting pack I have used is the Yukon Pack (also

Sometimes horses and mules could handle the terrain, but the food and water for maintaining them was not sufficient.

The camp used by the author and his son, Morris III, in Wyoming. The only water available was a small trickle of water from a snow bank. The Whelen Leanto Tent was their shelter.



available on the center order form—item code YKNPK). It doesn't take very long to see that a hunter designed this pack. The right external pocket is just the right size for a laser range finder and handy to reach while you are wearing the pack. Two other external pockets provide fast, easy access to extra ammo and other items. The two large internal pockets are large enough for all the day hunting items you want. The shoulder straps keep the pack balanced and help carry part of the load while the pack rides low and close to your back, allowing you to move through the brush without snagging. You can use your rifle sling without interference when mounted on your shoulder.

I strap the Yukon pack, with my day-hunting equipment packed inside, to the top of my main pack. That way, if I see a good buck while packing in, all I have to do is drop the main pack, pull off my Yukon pack, and I am hunting! I put all my day-hunting items back into my Yukon pack at the end of the day so I don't have to fumble around in the dark for equipment.

Here is a list of what I keep in my Yukon pack:

- ▲ 7-minute topo map of the hunting area plus a small plastic compass
- ▲ short no. 2 pencil and a small note pad (I make notes to myself on equipment and food that I like or don't like and articles I need to leave behind on my next hunt.)
- ▲ Rayovac Roughneck 2AA battery flashlight with new batteries
- ▲ Bic-type lighter
- ▲ Nylon cord
- ▲ 35mm Olympus Stylus Epic camera with new batteries and an extra roll of film. This camera is ultra compact, lightweight, weather-proof, and focuses to one foot.
- ▲ extra shells—I usually carry the rifle full plus 8 extra and leave 6-8 more in camp
- ▲ gloves
- ▲ raincoat
- ▲ water bottle
- ▲ two candy bars—just in case
- ▲ 2-blade folding pocket knife
- ▲ coyote call
- ▲ Handi-wipes in a Ziploc plastic bag
- ▲ medication, if needed
- ▲ watch that displays the month and day of the week
- ▲ chapstick
- ▲ 10 x 40 binoculars
- ▲ 800-yard range finder
- ▲ dropchart for my rifle showing bullet drop, made from actual shooting at measured distances up to 600 yards

The author using his McHale Pack with a 7 pound, 12 ounce 7mm/.300 Winchester magnum with a 26" barrel and his B&L spotting scope and range finder.



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Backpack camps can be comfortable, as shown in this mule deer camp in the Sawtooth Mountains of Idaho.

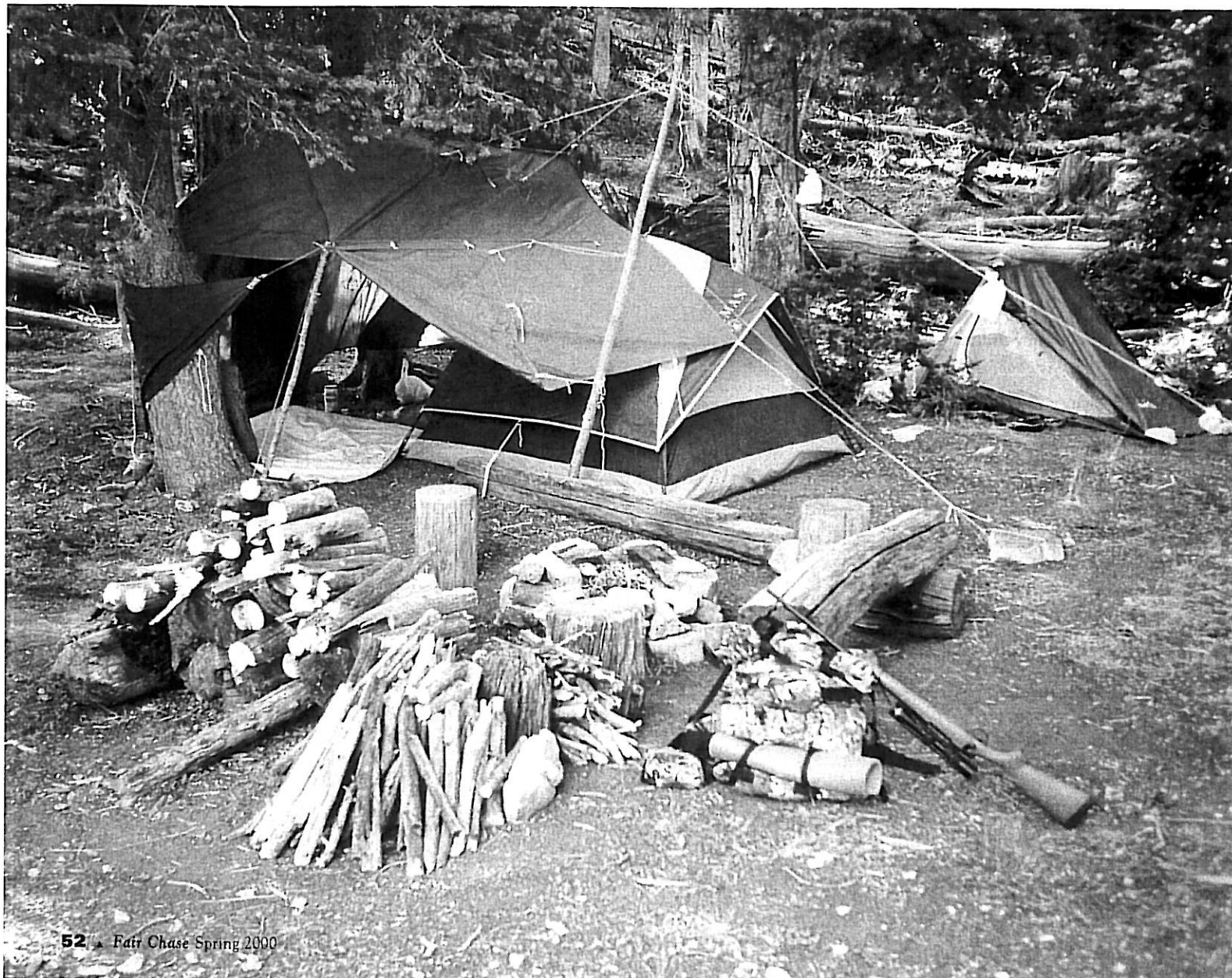
This camp served three hunters very well. Note how the Whelen Leanto shelters the cook area in front of the sleeping area.

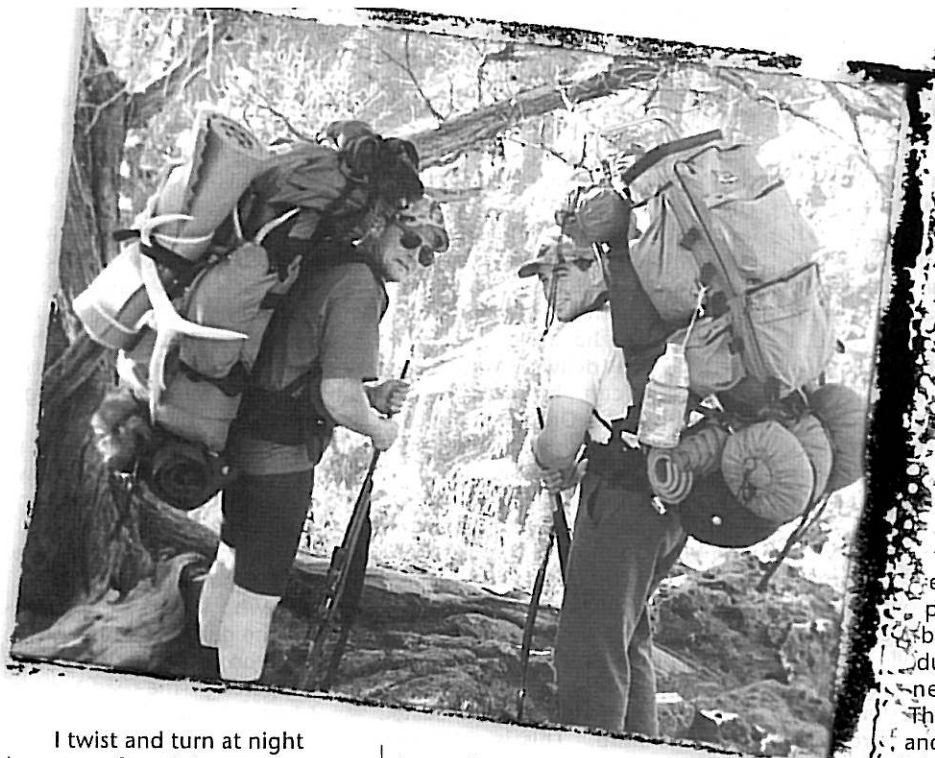
- ▲ handkerchief
- ▲ sunglasses
- ▲ 16" x 20" blue closed-cell foam pad for sitting on wet ground
- ▲ Bausch and Lomb 15-45 x 60 spotting scope. This is the best quality, weight, and size spotting scope for backpacking. I do not carry a tripod because I rest my spotting scope on my day pack or on rocks for viewing.
- ▲ "kill-kit."

A kill-kit is made up of articles that I use when I harvest a buck: (1) Hunting license and tag, which are kept in a plastic Ziploc bag with a nylon cord and wrapped around my knife with a rubber band. When my knife comes out to cape and bone the animal, the tag goes on first. This prevents having to explain to a judge why you "forgot" to attach your deer tag to the buck. (2) Custom-made knife that will cape, bone and cut up three deer without resharpening. This saves time in the

field and saves weight because you don't have to pack sharpening equipment. I always sharpen my knives prior to the hunt. (3) Folding meat saw (wood handle tree-pruning saw type). I bore large holes in the handle to save weight. The saw is used to cut the skull plate off the head at the kill site. The saw also comes in handy if you have to lay out overnight with just your day pack. (4) 6-8 sheets of high-grade paper towels for cleaning your knife, saw, hands, etc. (5) Three large plastic bags. All of the kill-kit items are rolled in a tight bundle with the bags and held together with rubber bands. One bag is used to transport the cape back to camp. The bags can also be used for an emergency shelter to keep you dry and warm. I keep the kill-kit in the bottom of my Yukon pack until needed. It's a good way to avoid rooting through your pack with bloody hands—it's all contained in one ready-to-use unit.

A person spends about one-third of a hunting trip in a sleeping bag. Without a good night's sleep, you can't be alert while hunting. At last count there were over 500 models of sleeping bags. I have used both down and synthetic, but I don't think you can beat a high-quality down bag for warmth-to-weight ratio. Purchase a bag that has a Gore Dryloft outer shell or a Gore-Tex type outer shell that will add another 12 to 16 ounces of weight. The bag should have a down fill of at least 650. One of my favorite bags has been the Feathered Friends Penguin model, custom made with a 800 down fill, cut extra large for comfort, and weighs only 4 pounds, 5 ounces, including the stuff bag. My other bag is a Marmot Mountain bag for early fall hunts with a 700 down fill. If your bag does not have a Gore-Tex type water repellent outer fabric, then buy a Gore-Tex type outer shell with which to cover your bag. This will only add about 1 pound of weight.





I twist and turn at night because of an injury and cannot sleep in a true mummy-style bag. The best compromise is a semi-rectangular shaped sleeping bag. It gives good freedom of movement without adding a lot of excess weight. My bags do not have a channel block dividing the top and bottom of the bag, which allows me to shift the down around as temperatures dictate.

Sleeping bags work well if they are kept dry. Even if you have good weather during your hunt, your sleeping bag will accumulate moisture from your body each night. Lay your bag out in the sun as often as possible during the hunt. Be sure to let your bag dry out for several days before storing it for the season. Never store your bag in the stuff bag during the off-season. Instead, hang it up full-length, and you will enjoy years of service from your sleeping bag.

Remember, the compressed down you lay on has little insulating quality, so you need a pad for warmth and comfort. I use a 2-1/2" Therm-a-Rest pad in conjunction with a foam pad. Unless you have back problems like I do, most people can get away with one pad. A closed cell pad is very lightweight and provides excellent insulation. Use a full-length pad, as opposed to the three-quarter length. The extra 50 ounces are worth it for comfort and keeping your bag dry.

There are a few neat tricks that complete my sleeping bag system. I store a balaclava hat in my bag to keep my head warm at night—it is better than the sleeping bag hood, particularly if you toss and turn at night. For my pillow, I build a base using my boots laid flat in a plastic

bag. On top, I stuff a down vest and coat in the sleeping bag stuff sack. In freezing conditions, I place my water bottle in the stuff sack or in the bottom of my sleeping bag to prevent the water from freezing overnight. You can make an excellent water bottle from a one liter, wide mouth, plastic, soft drink container. They cost almost nothing, are very lightweight, do not leak, and are disposable at the end of the hunt.

Backpacking food has only one purpose: supply you with enough energy to keep hunting. I don't go hunting to eat gourmet food, but there are hunters who do and they usually hire an outfitter. The simplest way to cook on a backpack hunt consists of boiling water to prepare oatmeal, hot drinks, and freeze-dried dinners. Some helpful hints for your freeze-dried meals—take along a spring-loaded clothespin. It is perfect for keeping the dinner bag sealed to hold in the heat. Also, you can get by with one freeze-dried dinner for two hungry hunters if you add an extra handful of noodles or couscous and an extra cup of water.

Before hitting the hay, I lay out my food for breakfast, pre-pack lunch and put it in my day pack, and fill my water bottle to help speed up the process of getting away from camp in the morning. I pre-pack my meals in different plastic bags, as this makes it easier to look for food items in the field. Breakfast is always the same: instant oatmeal with raisins, dates, and walnuts along with Morning Thunder tea. Lunch varies, and dinner is a freeze-dried meal with hot chocolate. I try to plan meals that are fast, simple, and provide enough

nutrition to keep me going.

I use a butane/propane canister-style stove. It is lightweight and does not leak fuel in your pack. My cooking equipment consists of a plain aluminum coffeepot with lid (throw away all the removable inside parts). The stove and fuel canister fit inside the coffeepot for traveling. I carry one plastic mug, a plastic bowl, and a heavy-duty plastic spoon. I never carry matches. The Bic lighter is faster

and more reliable. I carry one lighter in

my Yukon pack and leave one in camp.

One item you must have is a water filter. At 11 ounces, the Pur Voyager model water filter seems to be the perfect size and weight. I carry the filter in an outside pocket of my pack in case I need it during the trip to base camp. To keep it from freezing at night, put the filter in a Ziploc bag, wrap it in a sock or T-shirt, and then put it in your sleeping bag. I bring several two-quart juice containers for storing camp water. You can tie them to the outside of your pack on the way in and cut them into strips on the way out.

In the hygiene department, I take high-grade paper towels plus two Ziploc bags with baby wipes—one for camp and one for my day pack. These are good for cleaning your hands as well as an excellent substitute for toilet paper. Just because you are hunting a buck in rut doesn't mean you have to smell like one.

To avoid blisters and chafing, I use a "secret" sock system. The system consists of a thin double layer inner sock and a

This is a good example of what NOT to do.

The author (left) and Matt Swartley of Napa, California, showing over loaded packs. The author is using an internal frame McHale pack. Matt has two external frame packs piggy-backed to each other.

PRODUCT INFORMATION

Backpacker Magazine

Box 7590
Red Oak, IA 51591

Cabela's

One Cabela Drive
Sidney, NE 69160-9555
800-237-4444

Campmor

Box 700-E
Saddle River, NJ 07458-0700
800-525-4784

Camp Trails

1326 Willow Road
Sturtevant WI 53177
800-572-8822

Feathered Friends

119 Yale Avenue North
Seattle WA 98107
206-292-6292
www.featheredfriends.com

McHale Packs

6341 Seaview Avenue N.W.
Seattle WA 98107
206-783-3996

REI

1700 45th St. East
Sumner WA 98390
800-426-4840
www.rei.com

Rocky Mountain Pack Systems

1505 Eastridge Drive #11
Pocatello ID 83201
208-234-4584

Sierra Trading Post

5025 Campstool Road
Cheyenne WY 82007-1898
800-713-4534
www.sierratradingpost.com

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well-padded outer boot sock such as those made by Thorlo. To prevent chafing in the groin/leg area, I purchase an inexpensive pair of very lightweight long underwear. I cut the legs off an inch or so above the knee and wear them under my hunting pants. Also, I save all my old underwear and T-shirts to use as hunting clothes. Instead of packing out dirty clothes, I burn the used garments in the campfire. This helps lighten the load, particularly if you are packing out meat.

After 25 years as a game warden, I have come to some conclusions on the controversial subject of the perfect rifle, caliber, and cartridge for this style of hunting. From zero to 400 yards, a 7-1/2 pound .270 Winchester that is hand-loaded with a good premium bullet such as the Nosler may be the "perfect" backpack deer rifle. The rifle I am holding in the picture with my Yukon pack is a custom-made 7 mm S.T.W. that weighs seven pounds, five ounces, including the 2-1/2 to 8 power Leupold scope. This rifle is built in a small ring H.V.A. blind magazine action, with a 26" 1-in-10 twist barrel, that shoots a 132 gr. Bitterroot molly-coated bullet at 3,600 feet per second. Another one of my backpack rifles is a seven pound, 12 ounce, Model 98 Mauser, with a blind magazine and a Leupold 3 x 9 compact scope. It has a 26" barrel chambered for a 7mm/.300

Winchester magnum (a .300 Winchester magnum necked to 7mm). This gives a 160 gr. Nosler 3,220 feet per second and duplicates the old 7mm super Mashburn magnum that Warren Page and Bob Hagel used so successfully for years. Both of these rifles have wood stocks. The big 7mms deliver as much recoil as I can handle for a lightweight rifle. One of the "backpack" laws of physics is this: gravity is perpetual and recoil is momentary, but it must be kept tolerable. If you're man enough to pack a nine pound rifle with the recoil of a .30/.378 without a muzzle brake, then congratulations!

Here are some other tips. I always place a piece of electrical tape over the muzzle before leaving for a hunt to keep out dust, rain, and mud. This is a three-cent safety precaution that can

save you grief without affecting bullet performance. Also, before any hunting trip, I shoot all of my rifles from 100 yards to a measured 600 yards in 100-yard increments in order to determine the exact bullet drop; it seldom corresponds to what the reloading manuals tell you. For backpack trips that are more than two or three hours from the trailhead, I recommend buying a Rapid-Rod cleaning device.

Do your homework today to ensure a successful hunt tomorrow. And remember, hunters fit into one of three categories:

- ▲ Those who make things happen—the backpack hunter,
- ▲ Those who watch things happen—the guided hunter,
- ▲ Those who don't know anything is happening—the road hunter.

I hope this article encourages you to "make things happen!" ▲▲▲

Those who make things happen - the backpack hunter.

Air out your sleeping bag as often as the weather will allow.

