

Why Do You Carry All That Gear?

By Tom Rankin

I frequently meet people on the trail who have little or even no equipment with them, sometimes nothing more than the clothes on their back. Even many of those choices are inappropriate for hiking, such as jeans, sandals, cotton t-shirt, etc. Once in a while they ask me why I carry all that stuff!

My response is usually about safety. It's true that almost everyone who goes hiking gets back to the car safely. But here are a few things I carry and why.

Backpack : I see a lot of people just carrying things in their hands. Granted, it adds a few pounds, but a pack keeps your hands free, and your arms will get tired before your back and shoulders.

Hiking poles: These are helpful for balance and for testing water or mud depth. They also help protect your knees on descents, let your upper body share in the workout and are a defense against spider webs, briars, snow on tree limbs, etc.

Non-cotton clothing: Denim or any form of cotton takes a long time to dry, and as it does so it draws heat from the body, potentially leading to hypothermia. This is not just a wintertime issue; it is possible to become hypothermic in temperatures as high as the fifties. For summer, a pair of durable nylon shorts or pants will dry quickly, and is inexpensive. Synthetic shirts are also good, although I favor lightweight merino wools in almost all temperatures as a base layer as they tend to get far less stinky than synthetics while possessing similar wicking and relatively fast drying properties. The downside is that most will tear if poked with a branch, as thin wool is less durable than nylon or poly-based fabrics (a factor to consider when hiking off-trail).

Boots and gaiters: Boots provide protection for toes and ankle sprains. Gaiters are handy against poison ivy, briars, water, mud, and prevent rocks, leaves snow etc. from falling into the boot. Gaiters are less useful in well-maintained trails in the summer months, but on an overgrown, thorny trail they are worth their weight in gold.

Rain jacket (shell) or poncho: Again, dampness can lead to hypothermia, and staying dry is much more comfortable than being soaked. A basic rain shell is essential protection against wind and rain. Cheaper rain shells tend not to be made of fabrics that are permeable to the body's moisture, so it is possible to be well protected from the rain, but still be soaked from trapped sweat and condensation. In truth, even the most hyped fabric shells are still far from perfect in this regard, but are a distinct improvement over a basic coated nylon shell. These more breathable garments can also be quite expensive. A pair of lightweight rain pants completes your coat of armor and is appropriate to bring along in all but warm/hot conditions.

A thin lightweight windshirt can be a useful addition (the typical example weighs a few ounces), but as the name implies these are better at stopping wind than all but light rains.

These are better as an extra layer than primary rain protection. A step up from this in both weight and protection is a softshell jacket. These usually breathe better than a fully waterproof garment and can be very handy as an active layer for protection in light rain and against summit winds. A softshell will not usually provide adequate protection in a full-on downpour and should therefore usually be considered an additional option rather than a substitute for full-on raingear, a hardshell jacket or a poncho. One advantage of most nylon rain ponchos is that in an emergency, they may be fashioned into a simple shelter with a few twigs and cords. This ability can be vital if a member of a hiking party has a misadventure in adverse conditions. They are also handy as groundsheets (I often use one this way when camping).

Extra clothes, hat and gloves (mittens): Weather is unpredictable in the mountains. Wind can make you feel cold very quickly. Summer or winter, the best approach is to layer. Even if the layers are thin and lightweight, the trapped air between layers acts as an insulator. Consider carrying a thin puffy vest or jacket in summer. You most likely won't want to wear it while walking, but it is very cozy for sitting, especially as the day wears on. Gloves generally afford greater dexterity than but are usually not as warm as mittens. In cold weather some opt to use a combination of glove shells, mittens and liners (again, the layering principle. Bring extras as hand wear easily gets wet or lost. Always check the nighttime forecast and carry enough clothing to survive an unplanned bivouac.

One thing to avoid (potentially a real threat) is to allow one layer to get soaked in sweat, then (as the sensation of cold sets in) to cover it with another, then another... This is a real risk on winter hikes, and I have seen it lead to near-hypothermic states. The ideal condition in colder temperatures is to be a bit cool (not cold); as a result the body doesn't sweat. The time to throw layers on is when stationary.

First-aid kit, emergency whistle, toilet paper, sunscreen, bug spray, eye protection: The contents of a first-aid kit may vary slightly from individual to individual. An asthmatic may want to carry a spare inhaler, for example; indeed, anyone who is dependent upon regular doses of medication should carry a small supply. A good first aid kit should be reasonably complete without weighing you down (good coordination among group members can minimize unnecessary redundancy). Where toilet paper is concerned, in the Northeast it is best to bury human waste and paper; whatever you do, don't leave the paper around on the surface. It degrades slowly, and is unsightly. Also consider bringing a small bottle of alcohol-based hand cleanser. Aside from keeping you more comfortable, bug spray may help prevent the spread of Lyme disease and other tick/mosquito-borne illnesses. Select sunscreen and eyewear that protect against the harmful effects of UV rays. Protective eyewear, while always advised, is particularly useful when hiking up trail-less peaks or doing trail work.

Map, Compass, GPS: If you don't know where you are, how can you get back to your car? Make sure you know how to read a map, even if you carry a GPS. These can fail unexpectedly, and without a backup map (on which you have noted your progress) the results can be awkward at best and disastrous at worst. Without a compass, a map is only marginally useful. An ideal compass has a mount with straight edges, and a sighting/signaling mirror in the lid. Practice compass skills, as these are not intuitive.

Light: You can easily be out longer than you planned and now it's dark. What do you do now? A keychain light weighs only ¼ ounce, but a lightweight LED headlamp is the ideal, together with spare batteries (even a spare lightweight light in case your other one breaks). For winter hikers, it is best to use lithium batteries; standard alkaline batteries perform poorly at low temperatures and rapidly drain.

Food and water: lack of food and water can lead to fatigue and dehydration, which can devolve into to nausea, headache, confusion, stumbling, and possibly injury. While there is not always easily accessible drinking water on Catskill ridgelines, consider carrying water purification tablets just in case. A small quantity of emergency rations (dried fruit and nuts, chocolate, a health bar) is well worth the small extra weight.

Fire starter and matches: Fires can be used for cooking, warmth, light, and signaling. Matches should be waterproof. A simple butane lighter also works well in all but very cold conditions, and there are specialized lighters for outdoors use that will work in just about any conditions. Cotton balls (or lint from a clothes dryer) can be immersed in petroleum jelly and stored in a small container to be used as tinder to help get a fire started.

Bivy sack: This item is useful for conserving heat and keeping dry in an emergency. Thankfully, I've never needed this, but they are very small and light, usually made from Mylar.

Multi-tool: You just never know what you might need to do out there. Cut, saw, trim, repair; a multi-tool can make it happen.

When you are hiking along and someone zips by you carrying nothing but maybe a small fanny pack, it naturally prompts the thought “do I need all this gear that I am carrying?” Adding all of this gear up does not amount to more than 10 pounds of extra weight. At that rate, safety is reasonably priced and you are hiking responsibly; the way it should be done.