

Lighten Your Load

ALIDA MELSE: Hello, welcome. We're from the Outdoor Recreation Center here at WSU. And today, we're going to be talking about ultralight backpacking.

So my name is Alida Melse. I've been at the ORC for three years now. And I'm excited to share with you.

LIZ WELLS: I'm Liz Wells. I've been at the ORC for just under a year now.

ALIDA MELSE: So let's start out by talking about, what is ultralight? Maybe some of you have been backpacking before, and maybe some of you have even weighed your backpack before you add things like your food and water. And I'm guessing none of you came up with something like 10 pounds.

This isn't a real, like, this is ultralight. This is light. This is traditional. They're more just general benchmarks when people talk about light and ultralight. So next time you get out, maybe it would be a good idea to go ahead and weight your pack and see where you fall. But goal is lighter so that you can go farther.

LIZ WELLS: So there are some pros and cons to going ultralight. Some pros are that, like Alida said, you can go further. You don't get tired as easily. And it just kind of simplifies the entire experience. But some cons are that you cut some comfort. And it also can be a little bit more costly to buy ultralight gear.

ALIDA MELSE: Sure, cool. So we came up with the list of dos and don'ts. Let's talk about the dos first. It's developing that less is more mentality, realizing that each thing that you take off of your backpack is an extra little bit that you can go further.

So just developing that mentality can take some time. But once you get out, and you have the feeling of walking around with what feels like a hiking backpack, and then all of a sudden, you can go for a while, it feels good. So weighing your backpack before each trip can help you realize what things you're using, what things you're not using, where your weight is, where you could reduce it even further.

Building the skill-set; more skills, less gear. If you can set up a tarp shelter, and you're fairly good on how to do that, then all of a sudden, you don't need a tent anymore. And if, let's say, you want to hang your backpack and do that for bear storage, you don't need a bear can anywhere, and your backpack just got a lot lighter.

And then finally, with food, as you're trying to put that into smaller containers, you don't take the whole box that your macaroni came in, so you put it in a plastic bag. And all of a sudden, you don't have the weight of the box.

LIZ WELLS: One thing you can also do is you can make a trip log when you go out. And you're like, I don't know. I'm bringing a lot of stuff.

And you can make a list of things that you use and you don't use so that you can find a pattern. Like, oh, I never use this. I don't have to bring it. And there you go. You'll lose some weight from your pack.

Some don'ts are definitely don't eliminate your key essentials, like your maps, your compass, your first aid kit, clothes, food, safety equipment. You never want to leave those. And don't also sacrifice your enjoyment for the entire trip just to be like, oh, I want to go ultralight. It doesn't matter if you're going ultralight if you're just completely miserable. It's not a fun time.

ALIDA MELSE: Yeah, for sure. And when you're looking at these key essentials too, it's definitely good to think about, what am I actually going to use? I know when I took the Wilderness First Aid course here at WSU, somebody asked, what's the best first aid kit that I could-- I should take? And the instructor's like, the first aid kit that you would carry.

So in my first aid kit, I have ibuprofen, athletic tape, a couple of Band-Aids, and I think I put some latex gloves in there, but it's things I think I might actually use rather than a gigantic first aid kit. But it's good to just take a look at that and think about what you need and still make sure that you have everything you need to stay safe.

So here's an image of what not to do. You may have heard the quote, "Don't pack your fears." You don't need to pack everything you think you might need. Instead, you want to pack what you think you'll actually need.

And this is where the equipment use log that Liz mentioned comes in, so that you can think about, well, you're weighing hiking versus hanging out at camp. And if your goal is to go a long ways, you're not even spending that much time at camp. So it really doesn't matter how comfortable you are if you're asleep. So it's just good to think about prior to heading out on your trip.

LIZ WELLS: And so now we're just going to talk about a couple of ways where you can cut weight in different parts of your equipment. So for shelters, you want to think about the-- what season it is and what the forecast for your trip is going to be, because that can significantly change what you're going to take.

So if it's going to be cold, windy, and rainy, you still might want to take a tent. But if it's going to be 60 degrees at night, clear skies, you might just be like, hey, I'm going to sleep under the stars, or maybe even just hammock or throw up a tarp. And those are all way lighter than tents, even the ultralight tents like they have, specially made tents that are ultralight, but they still weigh less than those tents.

Another thing is a bivy sack, which is basically kind of like a rain cover for your sleeping bag, which can be used in the rain. And so those are kind of nice if you're only going to be out for a couple days. But again, you want to think about weather, because each of these kind of [INAUDIBLE] in what kind of weather.

ALIDA MELSE: And I know cost is sometimes prohibitive. So one of the images we have up there, the tarp, it's actually a piece of Tivek or Tyvek, however you say it, which can be cheaper. And it's something that's going to be durable. And you can definitely look into that if cost is a limiting factor, and you still want to use a tarp.

Cool so sleeping system-- this is one of the most important things when you're going backpacking. The difference between hiking and going backpacking is that you're spending the night. So what are you going to sleep on? So the down versus synthetic insulation-- biggest pro of down is that A, it's really warm, and B, it packs down really small and tends to be lighter.

Synthetic is heavier, but if it gets wet, then you're better off, and it'll retain a lot of its warmth, whereas down won't. So definitely something to think about, and that's where thinking about the climate that you're going to be in can make a difference. If you think there's a good chance it's going to get wet, then maybe synthetic would be a better choice.

Finally, insulation in your clothing and in your sleeping bag-- if you have a coat as part of your layering system that, say, has down in it, or you know it's going to be warm, then maybe you can go down with the-- you can go with the lighter bag. Same with beefing up the sleeping pad versus increasing bag fill. There's a little bit of a trade-off there. And pad is definitely a way that you can cut weight.

I have a friend who is really into the whole ultralight backpacking, and he'll use his backpack as a pad, and it works great. The inside of the backpack even comes out. And he has his feet on the bottom part, which is the backpack. And then his upper body would just be on the part that came out of the backpack.

So you can definitely cut weight that way. And then same with a down quilt-- it's going to be a lot lighter than a sleeping bag, especially if there's two people, and you're comfortable with each other, you can share that quilt. And all the sudden, you've just cut a lot of weight.

LIZ WELLS: And a whole bag.

ALIDA MELSE: Exactly, and same with the sleeping pad. If it's a pad that it's only you who's going to be using it, you can pad it yourself, and then take half a pad, which will be a lot lighter. Did you have anything to add on that?

LIZ WELLS: Oh yeah. Just with the torso-length pad, you can cut it to just kind of fit your torso and lower back. And then you can prop your feet up on your bag as well to kind of insulate your feet.

ALIDA MELSE: For sure. And also, if you have any questions while we're talking, feel free to chat them in, and we will answer them during the webinar.

LIZ WELLS: Yes.

ALIDA MELSE: And it'll be recorded to.

LIZ WELLS: So backpacks are-- I guess there's multiple kinds. You can go with a high-tech fancy bag that's going to do everything you want. Or you can go with a more simplistic one. With more ultralight bags, they're going to be lighter, but they're also going to be slightly less comfortable and probably less padded. And they're going to be frameless, which the one on the-- the backpack on the left, the black one, has that metal bar on the back that's a frame.

And it's going to make it easier to carry heavy loads. However, if you're going ultralight, that may not be a big concern for you. But backpacks can contribute a lot to your overall weight. So if you have a backpack, I would encourage you just to weight the backpack and see how much that is adding to your pack weight.

And all backpacking backpacks have recommended volumes that they can hold. And you should try and fill it to its capacity without going over to make the most of your space. But in that, I'm not saying, take an 85-liter bag out and fill it to the brim. Try and go as small as you can while filling it to where it needs to be. That way, there's no extra space for-- you won't-- you don't think that that small extra part of your bag that's not filled is doing anything, but it's still adding weight to your pack.

ALIDA MELSE: For sure. And the picture on the right is a DIY backpack that somebody just made themselves. So for those of you who are feeling a little bit crafty, you can definitely go that route and get as customized as you want and potentially cheaper.

LIZ WELLS: Yeah, definitely.

ALIDA MELSE: So for navigation, I know maps can be heavy, especially if you're going a long ways. If you're already going to take your phone, and you have a reliable way to charge it, using an app on your phone can work great. You can always use the whole map and compass if you want.

Alternatively, if you are going in an area that you know, you may not need a map at all if you know it really well. And then with the tools and knife, that's more if you get lost, make sure you're prepared. So same with headlamp and lighting; that's really essential if you do end up out after dark in a place that you don't know that well.

The Garmin InReach-- that's the orange one-- that's what we use at the Outdoor Rec Center. And I can't speak for the other ones, but I know that one has an exceptionally long battery life and is a reliable way to have all of the maps for wherever you're going just on one device.

LIZ WELLS: I also know that Garmin makes a smaller satellite messenger that's about 2/3 the size of that orange Garmin one. And it actually connects to your phone so that you can actually get service through your phone, so that could also be an option. So it's small, and it still does the same thing.

And as for the headlamp, you don't need-- and lighting-- you don't need a super fancy one. I wouldn't say cheap, but a less expensive headlamp that does the job is pretty much all you need. And again, if you're going for long distances, all you're pretty much going to be doing at camp is sleeping. So you may not even need something like a lantern.

So footwear-- so I'm sure if you guys have ever tried to pick out hiking boots, there are some that are super heavy, super dense, and some of them that are a lot lighter. So one way, if you still want to have a hiking boot, you can go with a lighter-weight boot that still does the same thing. And their new technology is making these hiking boots lighter and lighter. So there definitely are lighter possibilities out there.

But you can also do trail runners and minimalist shoes. So the trail runners would be like the photo on the bottom left, trail runners. And then the one on the right is minimalist shoes. I would definitely recommend getting ones that are comfortable for you and not necessarily paying attention to, if you're like, oh, I could do a minimalist shoe, but it's going to hurt your feet, you're going to be miserable out there. So I'd go with the lightest-weight option that works for your feet.

And then also socks, depending-- this is also you want to think about the weather. If it's going to be hot, maybe you don't need those thick mountaineering socks. And you can go with lighter pairs of socks. And no one says that you need a new pair of socks every day. It's nice, but it's not necessary. So really cutting down, it's like, how many days could I really go without changing my socks? Am I going to die if I don't change my socks? Probably not.

ALIDA MELSE: For sure. And one more thing to add on this-- a lot of people like hiking boots that have the higher ankle support when they have a heavy pack. But if you don't have a terribly heavy pack, then it's a lot easier to go to one of those lighter shoes that maybe has less support, but you don't necessarily need it.

LIZ WELLS: And they still pretty much do everything that the high ankle ones do. They just don't have the high ankle.

ALIDA MELSE: Good, cool. So let's talk a little bit about layering. Layering is a great way to have multiple-- or to be prepared for multiple types of temperatures with the fewest amount of clothes that you need to take. So just by taking off a couple of layers, all of a sudden, you're ready for warmer weather. And then by adding a few more layers on, you've transformed your lighter jacket into a heavier one.

So here I have a diagram of how the layering system is supposed to work. You can add more layers or fewer layers. But this is the same idea.

The outer layer is for repelling wind and rain. So if it's not windy, and it's not rainy, and it's not super cold, you won't necessarily need it. The middle layer is where all of the warmth comes from. So that might look like a synthetic or a down puffy jacket. Or it could look like a polar fleece or just something to add some insulation. And then the base layer goes against your skin.

And with all of these, it's really important that none of it is cotton, because when cotton gets wet, it will stay cold. But the base layer can be wool or a synthetic like this. This is synthetic. And that should just remove any of your perspiration and move it to the outside--

LIZ WELLS: While retaining your body heat.

ALIDA MELSE: For sure. And it's really important that when you are selecting your clothes, you only have one of each type, especially if you don't think it's going to get wet. You don't necessarily need to bring pajamas. You can, but you don't have to.

You don't need to bring a change of clothes. You just wear the same clothes every day. And then you're not carrying clothes. You're wearing them.

LIZ WELLS: A good alternative is you could bring maybe underwear and socks versus like an entire new outfit. That way, you're at least cutting some weight.

ALIDA MELSE: For sure.

LIZ WELLS: So I'm going to start from the bottom. So Alida was talking about earlier a bear-proof storage. So a lot of the times, when you're in the back country, there are bears around. And you want to protect your food, one, so that you have food to eat, and two, so that it doesn't lead bears to you.

So in the bottom right-hand corner, you can see that picture is somebody pulling their bag into a tree. And normally, you would do this with a box or a tarp. And you close it on your food and hoist it up there. But you can totally do it with your pack as well, which cuts down on bringing an extra tarp, which doesn't weigh that much. But if you're bringing a little bit of this and a little bit of that, that can really add up.

And then I guess I'll go back to the top; kind of jumping around. When you're bringing food, you want to focus on going calorie-dense. So bringing things like peanut butter or things that get you the most calories per weight of the food, that takes a little bit of research, but it can-- it's totally doable. And if you're really looking to go ultralight, then I'm assuming you're already doing a lot of research.

One way you can also cut weight is going instant, like in the morning, instant oats, instant pasta, stuff like that, and also, dehydrating your food at home. That is costly to buy a dehydrater. But you can also buy dehydrated meals to go ahead and take, which does the same thing.

A dehydrater is more, I think, a long-term investment. But it's also a way to cut cost on your food. And it kind of does pay for itself-ish, because dehydrated meals can be kind of pricey.

And then when cooking, you want to think about what you're actually going to use. So maybe you don't need to bring a fork, a knife, a spoon, a bowl, a plate, a smaller plate, a salad bowl. You don't need all those things. When I go out, I bring-- it's like a-- it's got a knife on one end. Or it's got a spoon on one end, and it's got a fork on the other end. And on one of the edges of the fork, it's got a knife.

And I'm like, it's not the best knife, but it gets the job done. And I bring a bowl, and that's it. And then I bring one pot to cook in. And I try to do one-pot meals because it's easier for cleaning. And also, it's less weight that I have to carry.

Also, for fuel efficiency of your cooking, it's another piece of gear that you could, you have to invest in. But there's all kinds of back-country stoves. You can make one out of aluminum can with a firestarter bowl. That's a thing and that's super lightweight.

Or you can use something like a JetBoil that is like, it's a pot. And it basically screws onto a fuel can. And it boils water really quickly. But that does limit what you are able to cook. That would be limited to instant food and dehydrated food. So that's something to think about.

And I guess that brings me to the stove versus fire versus uncooked meals. So stove, kind of already talked about a little bit. But the fire, when we go into the back country, we try to minimize how much we're using fire, because as an LNT principle, we want to leave the area untouched. And if we're making fires everywhere we go, we're not really living it untouched.

So keeping that in mind, it would minimize what you have to carry, 'cause you can just start a fire at every place you go. But it's not necessarily great for reducing our impact where we're going. And then the uncooked meals, like granola bars, stuff that doesn't have to be cooked, cheese, salami. Those are great options.

ALIDA MELSE: For sure. One example of food and how you can make it your limiting factor so that the only thing that's preventing how far you can go is how much food you can put in your backpack, I ran into someone in the North Cascades last summer who was going from Canada.

And I forget how far he was going. He was going past Stevens Pass. But he had a really, really lightweight setup. He said, my backpack is only food.

He has such a lightweight setup for his sleeping system and all of that that the majority of this backpack was food. And he just had a big, gigantic bag of instant rice, another large bag of

instant or dehydrated vegetables that he'd gotten off of Amazon. And then every night, because there were fire pits at the back country campsite, so it wasn't really going to be an impact on the environment, he would just cook up a tiny bit of that food.

And then he would go the next day. And he was able to get really far in that night. He would just hang his backpack that was full of food. And that was all he really needed. And that worked great. So something to think about is that by cutting out something that's canned or something that's not dehydrated, you can go a lot farther.

LIZ WELLS: Yeah, most definitely. Also, if you do want to bring foods that are in cans, or instead of bringing, like, a whole pepper to put in your dinner, you can pre-cut things at home and carry them in little plastic baggies or reusable bags that are better for the environment. But that's hearsay. But it also cuts down on what you have to bring. And like I said, that aluminum can doesn't add a lot. But if you're bringing four or five of them, that many can add up.

ALIDA MELSE: For sure. Cool. Let's talk a little bit about water storage. I know when most of you think backpacking, you think Nalgene, a big heavy plastic water bottle. And they are heavy. You won't necessarily realize it.

You're like, oh, it's just a water bottle. It's empty. It can't weight that much. But then if you compare it to something that's thin plastic that's maybe flexible, then all of a sudden, you realize that it can weigh a lot.

So I would recommend having something that's collapsible, the top left, the Platypus container. There's lots of brands, not just Platypus, that make those. But it's something that can hold a lot of water when you're filtering water. But it can also pack down really small into your backpack. So it's not taking up much space, and it also doesn't weigh very much.

In the bottom left, we have the iodine tablets. This is really the lightest water purification system. There's plenty that you can use. There's plenty of lightweight water filters, but these are just tablets. You can just add them to your water, and then you're good to go.

One thing I would caution is that iodine is not great to use over the long term. If you don't go backpacking that often, and you want to do an ultralight trip, or even just a somewhat light trip, they'd be a great option for a week or a weekend, but not great if you're going to spend your entire summer drinking water that's been filled with iodine.

LIZ WELLS: Just a couple more options that some hardcore people do, it's something that's called like a LifeStraw. This is a mini filter. And LifeStraw is basically like a tube. It's about this big. And it's got a little mouthpiece on it. And you just basically sink the bottom of it in a running stream, and you just suck water out of it there whenever you come across a source. So you're cutting down on the water that you actually have to be carrying.

And then they also have similar things for bladders, for like a CamelBak. It has a tube, and it's got a filter to the mouthpiece. So that could also be an option if you only want to be like carrying it on your back, which would at least reduce the amount of torque, and it's not sitting on the side of your bag.

And also there's a thing called "camel up" at water sources, which is basically drinking a whole lot at each water source that you go so that you can cut down on the amount that you're also actually having to carry.

ALIDA MELSE: Sure And I wanted to point out that you can do this when you're just going on a hiking trip. So you do the 180-mile trail that's through the Enchantments near Leavenworth that you've heard so much about. And it's really long, and for your hiking trip, you don't want to be carrying that much.

Just bringing a water filter. And then a couple hours into your hike, stop at a stream. Drink a bunch. Fill up your one water bottle. Keep going. Do it again. And you're not carrying much for your day hike either.

LIZ WELLS: Another option is also a SteriPEN. So it's a type of water filter. It's, again, about this big. And it uses UV light, and you kind of swirl it around for a while. Some of them give you a smiley face when it's OK to drink.

And that's I guess a lighter-weight filter option. You're seeing, oh, if you want to just fill up one water bottle at a stream, like Alida was saying, and you don't want to carry a whole huge gravity filter. But those can also be more costly. So that's just something to keep in mind.

ALIDA MELSE: A few things that you can do to cut down on your cost-- we know that can be a barrier for some folks-- making your own gear, like we talked about, and just realizing that even-- or that the ultralight gear that you are purchasing might not necessarily cost as much, so just keeping that in mind. One thing I do want to point out is that if you're trying to cut down on things that you need, that's also cutting down on the cost. So if you don't need to buy a really expensive water filter, instead, you just buy the iodine tablets at Walmart.

LIZ WELLS: For like \$5.

ALIDA MELSE: You've saved a bunch of money, and it's a lot lighter. And not buying a really expensive mountaineering tent; you just bring a piece of Tivek or Tyvek that you bought for not very much money. And all the sudden, it's cheaper and lighter.

LIZ WELLS: Like, whoa, what happened?

ALIDA MELSE: Yeah, cool. Anything else you want to add to that?

LIZ WELLS: I guess when you go ultralight, some of the-- when you are sacrificing some comfort, so taking one or two things that bring you joy, I guess, in the outdoors, like a book or something like a journal or binoculars, if you like birdwatching, that can be nice to think about. When you're on the trail, and you're like, wow, this path sucks, and I just-- I want to be done, you'd be like, I have a book I can read when I get to camp. And it just kind of-- it makes it more enjoyable, which is nice.

ALIDA MELSE: It's very much a balance, and probably something that you'll talk to your friends about. Just be like, ahh, I don't know if we should bring this pad or this pad. So it's a little bit of a game, but the goal is that you get outside, and you get to enjoy nature.

LIZ WELLS: Goals.

ALIDA MELSE: That's all I've got for you. So thanks for tuning in.

LIZ WELLS: Thank you.