

# TrailGroove™



Issue 1 - March/April 2012

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## March/April 2012

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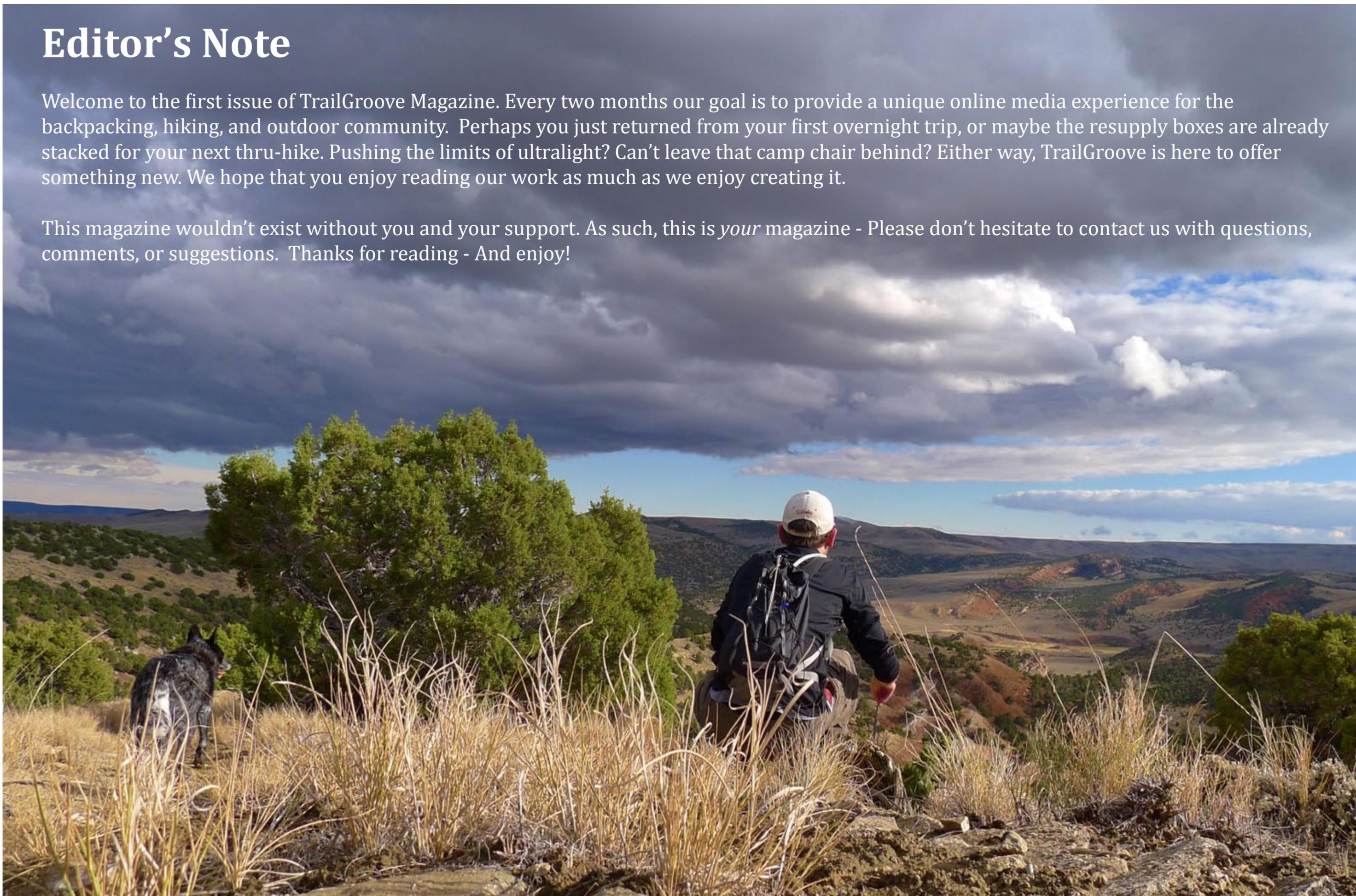
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# Editor's Note

Welcome to the first issue of TrailGroove Magazine. Every two months our goal is to provide a unique online media experience for the backpacking, hiking, and outdoor community. Perhaps you just returned from your first overnight trip, or maybe the resupply boxes are already stacked for your next thru-hike. Pushing the limits of ultralight? Can't leave that camp chair behind? Either way, TrailGroove is here to offer something new. We hope that you enjoy reading our work as much as we enjoy creating it.

This magazine wouldn't exist without you and your support. As such, this is *your* magazine - Please don't hesitate to contact us with questions, comments, or suggestions. Thanks for reading - And enjoy!



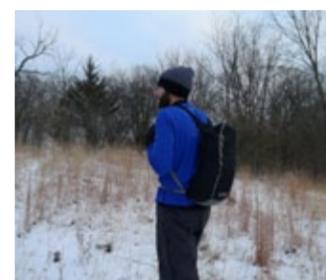
# Contribute

Interested in contributing to the magazine? Please email us at [info@TrailGroove.com](mailto:info@TrailGroove.com) with your idea. We're always on the lookout for quality content, and compensation is offered for quality submissions. Our list of requirements isn't too long, but please keep the subject focused towards backpacking or hiking. However, submissions related to other outdoor activities will be considered. (Backcountry fishing or wilderness photography, for example). Page through our magazine for the general idea of what we're all about, but even if you have something you haven't yet seen in an issue our ears are open. Please send us a note with a broad overview and sample of your idea, as well as an approximate word and picture count. Original and factual material is a requirement. Once received, we'll evaluate your submission and contact you for further discussion. Questions before you start? Just let us know.

A few examples of what we are looking for:

Destinations  
Gear Reviews (Objective)  
Photography  
Video  
Skill & Technique

Art / Illustration  
Short Stories  
Interviews  
Backcountry Cuisine  
Your New Idea



## TrailGroove Magazine Review Policy

The products we review are obtained via normal consumer retail channels. We do not ask for or accept review samples from manufacturers, and we do not obtain the products we review under the TrailGroove Magazine name. As such, we're reviewing the same products that you would obtain - Not cherry-picked review samples. Even though we like free gear as much as the next person, but we won't bend on this rule! As a result of this philosophy, we are also able to experience and comment on the same level of customer service that the typical consumer would receive.

Note that this policy does not apply to any pre-release products that we're able to obtain prior to market release for review. In such cases, we will clearly state that the product was obtained from the manufacturer for a sneakpeak, pre-release evaluation in the review.

We use a 5-star rating scale for our reviews:

★★★★★ Excellent

★★★★☆ Very Good

★★★☆☆ Good

★★☆☆☆ Average

★☆☆☆☆ Poor

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## Random Trail Tip

We've all been there...

It's 2am and you had one too many hot chocolates a few hours before.

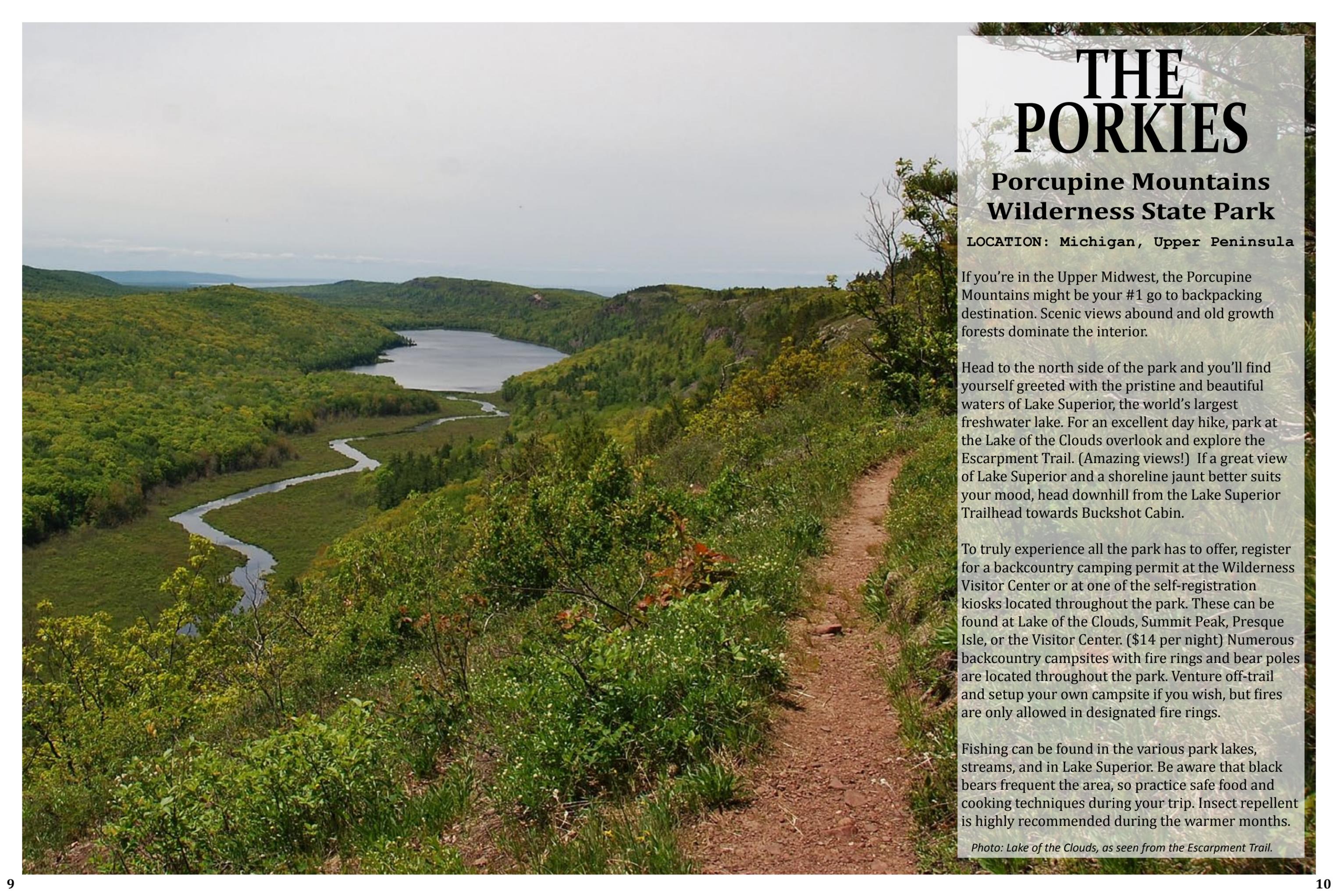
Instead of blowing your night vision out with your state of the art LED headlamp to find that zipper, use a short length of glow in the dark paracord as a zipper pull for your sleeping bag and tent zippers. Now you can answer that midnight call of nature without lighting the forest up like it's Christmas.

3/32" size works well; be sure to singe each end of your cord with a lighter to prevent fraying. We've had good success sourcing the needed cord from [www.lighthouse.com](http://www.lighthouse.com) - Sometimes it's the little things!

## Jargon

**Hexamid** \ˈhek-sə-,mid\

*A six-sided ultralight shelter invented and produced by Joe Valesko of ZPacks. Made of .51 oz / sq yard cuben fiber material. Total shelter weight 3.3 to 11.1 oz depending on choice of size and options. For 1 or 2 people. Renowned for the innovative use of an ultralight insect netting floor.*



# THE PORKIES

## Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park

**LOCATION:** Michigan, Upper Peninsula

If you're in the Upper Midwest, the Porcupine Mountains might be your #1 go to backpacking destination. Scenic views abound and old growth forests dominate the interior.

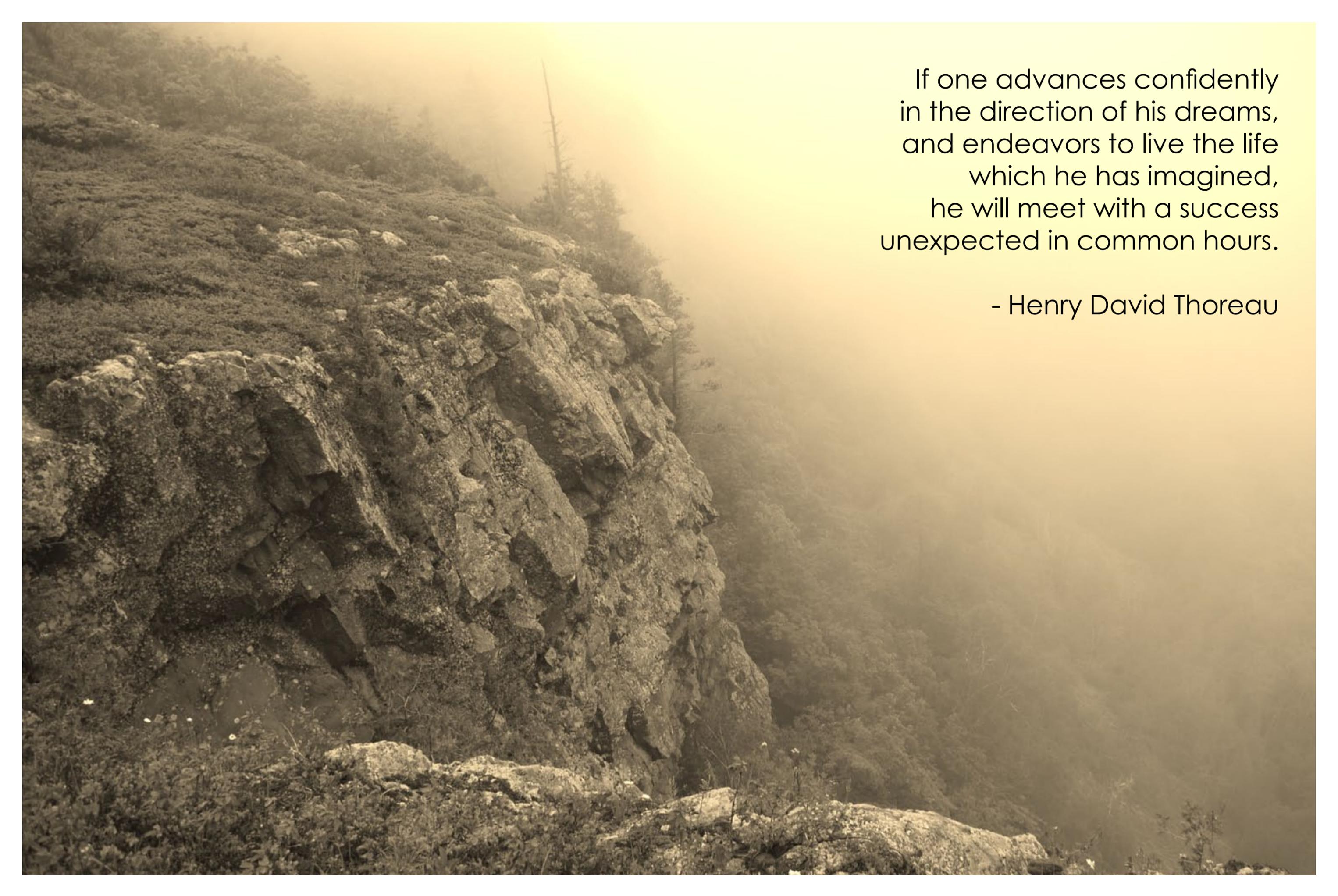
Head to the north side of the park and you'll find yourself greeted with the pristine and beautiful waters of Lake Superior, the world's largest freshwater lake. For an excellent day hike, park at the Lake of the Clouds overlook and explore the Escarpment Trail. (Amazing views!) If a great view of Lake Superior and a shoreline jaunt better suits your mood, head downhill from the Lake Superior Trailhead towards Buckshot Cabin.

To truly experience all the park has to offer, register for a backcountry camping permit at the Wilderness Visitor Center or at one of the self-registration kiosks located throughout the park. These can be found at Lake of the Clouds, Summit Peak, Presque Isle, or the Visitor Center. (\$14 per night) Numerous backcountry campsites with fire rings and bear poles are located throughout the park. Venture off-trail and setup your own campsite if you wish, but fires are only allowed in designated fire rings.

Fishing can be found in the various park lakes, streams, and in Lake Superior. Be aware that black bears frequent the area, so practice safe food and cooking techniques during your trip. Insect repellent is highly recommended during the warmer months.

*Photo: Lake of the Clouds, as seen from the Escarpment Trail.*





If one advances confidently  
in the direction of his dreams,  
and endeavors to live the life  
which he has imagined,  
he will meet with a success  
unexpected in common hours.

- Henry David Thoreau



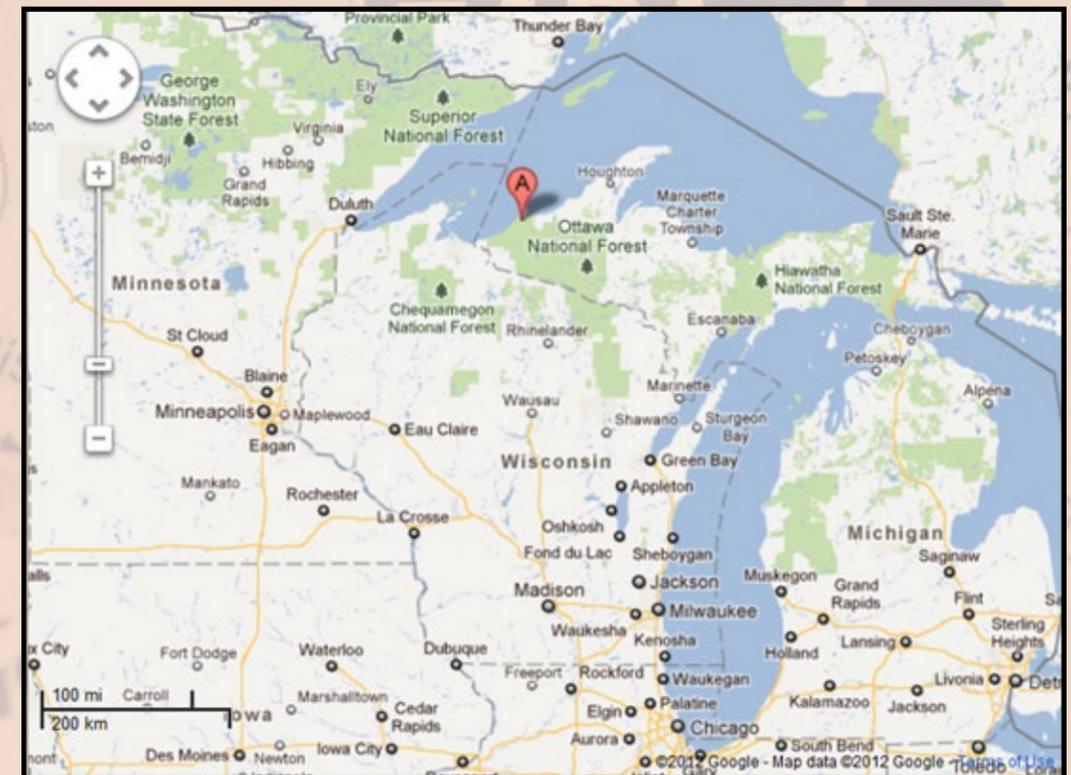
# Getting to...

## **PORCUPINE MOUNTAINS WILDERNESS STATE PARK**

Situated in the northwestern corner of Michigan's Upper Peninsula, Porcupine Mountains State Park is the largest wilderness area in the state.

### Driving Times:

- ~6 hours from Minneapolis, MN
- ~6 hours from Madison, WI
- ~3 hours from Duluth, MN
- ~5 hours from Green Bay, WI



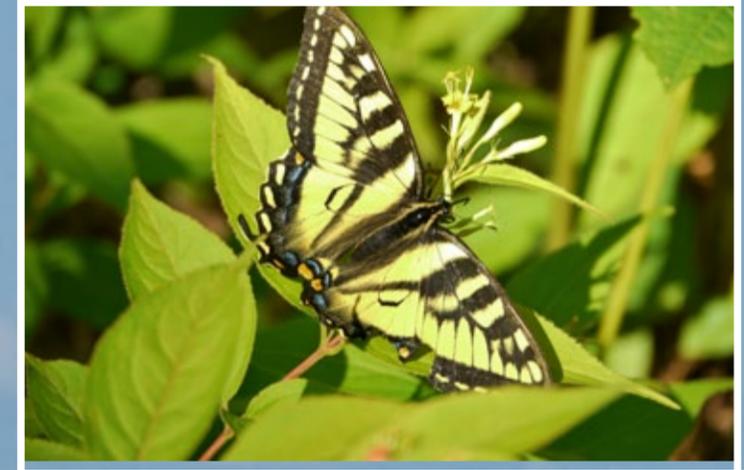
Camping information: There are several campgrounds ranging from rustic tent-only to those that offer RV sites with electric hookups. Rates range from \$15-\$28/night. Backcountry Camping is allowed for \$14/night, and there are also cabins that may be reserved. See the [Michigan DNR website](http://www.michigan.gov/dnr) for details:

<http://www.michigan.gov/dnr/1,1607,7-153-10365-32926--,00.html>

**Additional information can be found at the  
[Michigan DNR Porcupine Mountains Visitor Center](#)**

# Flora and Fauna of Porcupine Mountains State Park

Normally wildlife sightings are a nice surprise rather than the expected, but after several trips to the Porkies, sightings became the norm. The park is a haven for wildlife, and as you venture into the interior, you'll gain a nice glimpse at what the U.P. has to offer.





# REVIEW: REI Flash 18 Backpack

Choosing the right daypack for your needs can be a difficult task. In this review, we'll evaluate the features and performance of the smallest pack in the popular REI Flash series - The Flash 18 - a daypack that manages to stand out from the crowd.



### REI FLASH 18 BACKPACK

**Pros:** Affordable compared with many similar offerings. Lightweight and comfortable; a simple, clean approach. Plenty of volume for day hikes and can be stretched for longer journeys if needed.

**Cons:** No outside water bottle pockets; Not ideal for long torsos.

**Rating:** ★★★★★

With a market full of competitors, choosing the right daypack for your needs can be a difficult task. In this review, we'll evaluate the features and performance of the smallest pack in the popular REI Flash series - The Flash 18. (18 = 18 liters / 1100 cubic inches). In a sea of competing daypacks we felt this was one pack that has managed to stand out for the past few years – First due to an attractive current price of about \$35. However, with an attractive price we of course always have our concerns - Sometimes in the backpacking world budget priced gear can often result

in a solution much heavier than competing products and lacking in features that you may find yourself longing for down the road.

Personally, I hate excess gear. Don't get me wrong - While I love cool stuff as much as the next person - If I could own 1 pack that will get me through every situation, that's the way I'm going to lean. At least at first. I tried this out for a while, until one day a couple years ago when I found myself lugging around a pack designed to carry 10 days of supplies to my favorite Saturday getaway. It became apparent that gear can't always be viewed in

black and white terms. My pack was woefully empty, stays and load lifters there yet serving no purpose. It felt like I was using a semi-truck to bring home a few flower pots. I needed something clean, cheap, and functional. So with this in mind, I gave myself a great excuse to try out new gear. After hitting the local REI, I walked out with a Flash 18, which has been a frequent companion since that time. In the spring of 2012 REI released an updated version of the pack, and in this review we'll evaluate REI's offering and find out how it compares to the previous version.

Once we got our hands on the new version, the tags came off and the pack hit the digital scale. REI lists the pack at 11oz and our pack met this mark exactly. This is a bit heavier than the original version of the Flash 18 - Which while listed at 10oz, came in under spec at 9.3oz. The pack is extremely simple and clean, having no exterior pockets. A twin row of webbing daisy chains run the length of the exterior, with one larger "tool loop" at one bottom corner. These don't offer many options for carrying gear outside the pack without some ingenuity, but with a small time investment they can be used to greatly add to the usability of the pack.

The pack is top loading,

and in addition to the large interior compartment you'll find 3 additional pockets. The hydration pouch is found along the back panel, with a small loop sewn into the top should you wish to secure the top of your hydration bladder to prevent sagging when low on water. The hydration pouch itself easily accommodates a 3 liter

system. Above and centered between each top shoulder strap attachment point, a weather-shielded opening for your hydration hose can be found. The pack has a padded back panel that's removable, (Doubling as a sit pad according to REI) so behind the hydration sleeve you'll find the back panel compartment closes to





secure the pad using a thin hook and loop closure. The pad itself is quite thin measuring only 5 millimeters thick, and at .3oz, is very light. On the other side of the interior compartment you find a single zippered mesh pocket, and a hook and lanyard within, for additional organization. This pocket is pretty large – Holding around 20 (!) energy bars in our scientific testing.

A drawstring closure is used to close the main compartment, and a small flap covers the opening when cinched. This isn't weatherproof by any means, but if used with a pack liner you should be set for rainy conditions. A slider buckle secures the drawstring

closed or allows the pack to be opened when sliding the opposite direction.

The hip belt utilizes 1" webbing, with ¾" in use for the sternum strap. Each strap closes using conventional plastic buckles. The orange sternum strap buckle also features a convenient whistle, and the sternum strap height is adjustable. The sternum strap and hip belt can both be quickly and easily removed if desired, which will shave off 1.9oz. Shoulder straps use a different material - Relying on lightweight honeycomb nylon mesh that adds a very small amount of perceived cushioning. The ventilation of the mesh is excellent, and serves well to keep the wearer cool in hot weather.

The pack body itself is constructed of 140-denier rip stop nylon, of which you have 5 colors to choose from. This fabric has a much heavier feel than silnylon, but is still quite lightweight. REI claims to have enhanced the fabric with a polyurethane coating for weather resistance. In practice we found that water would not penetrate the fabric, but water is still able to penetrate the seams. The fabric is able to withstand substantial abuse, and there should be no problem hiking with the pack in rocky areas or off-trail where you might encounter a few tree limbs reaching out to snag the fabric.

The usability of this pack is excellent - With one caveat.



Since the simple and elegant approach that REI took with this pack eliminates all outside pockets - We found that hydration system users should be quite satisfied. If you prefer a bottle approach and won't be able to adapt to a hydration system for use with this pack, you may walk away unhappy and the addition of at least one side pocket to hold a water bottle or two would have been appreciated by many users. On the other hand, one outing with the pack involved a day trip fly fishing for 8 hours along a local stream. The pack easily swallowed breakfast and lunch, leaving plenty of room for photography and rain gear. The slim profile allowed for a complete range of motion as we snuck through the streamside brush and dipped under fallen trees - Something outside pockets may have hindered.

According to REI, when turned inside out the Flash

makes an excellent stuff sack to use inside a larger pack that you would use for longer expeditions - Allowing for a summit pack or daypack to range with from base camp when needed. However, at about 11oz, the Flash makes a heavy stuff sack. If you're simply looking for a day pack to take along with you on longer trips to explore away from base camp, lighter options exist. Additionally, the removable back pad panel doubles as a sit pad according to REI, but we found the pad to be on the small side for this type of use. (Perhaps this



is a personal problem...) Since it's so thin, it also doesn't really add any cushioning and durability is a concern - We had several holes in the pad just from the first use. We were hoping that the foam back panel might add a bit of rigidity, perhaps forming a frame of sorts allowing us to stretch the comfortable carrying limit of the pack, but it's quite floppy and doesn't really add any structure. If you're using the pack without a hydration bladder, you might find that the panel takes the edge of any sharp or pointy objects contained



within the pack, but when used with a hydration system the bladder itself served that purpose for us and we left the pad at home.

At this point it should be safe to say that the Flash 18 is an admirable day hike performer, but can its limits be stretched? Absolutely. For less than \$5, a 5 minute time investment, and less than a 1 ounce weight penalty a shock cord system can be added to the outside of the pack to greatly increase its "Range". Here we're using about 8' of 1/8" shock cord and one properly sized cord lock. This allows you to carry whatever you please and should enable most ultralight packers to easily use this pack on mild

3-season overnight trips and possibly longer, simply depending on how light you pack and how much of your gear you can manage to carry outside of the pack. Below is the Flash 18 fully ready for an overnight jaunt with gear, water, and food.

How does the pack carry? Quite well assuming you don't push its limits. We were generally comfortable packing weights up to about 15 pounds. Up to about 20lbs the pack was manageable but comfort began to suffer. The minimalist hip belt is actually able to perform some load transfer when the pack is tightly packed, or when a sleeping pad (Of thicker and denser foam

than the included panel) is used internally to create a virtual frame. However, above the 15 pound mark the hip belt became unable to offer any type of noticeable load transfer to the wearer's hips. Some users may wish to remove the hip belt and sternum straps to lighten the pack even further than its already admirable 11oz, but we found them critical not only for carrying loads comfortably as just described, but also for securing the pack tightly when engaging in highly mobile activities like off trail hiking or mountain biking. Per the REI specs, this pack only fits torsos in the 17-19" range and with a hip belt range of 26 - 42 inches. We were able to use the pack

with a longer torso comfortably at the low to mid weight ranges, but if you'd like to push to weight limits of this pack longer torsos should shy away. At the higher weight ranges, tightening of the shoulder straps becomes necessary, raising the hip belt uncomfortably high for longer torso users. Hopefully, REI will release multiple sizes in the future.

#### **Comparison to Previous Model:**

REI has implemented quite a few changes this year compared to the previous version of the Flash 18, and it's a mixed bag. Both the price and weight have increased. The pack is currently listed at \$34.50, \$5 higher than last year. The previous model was listed at 10oz, but our previous generation pack came in impressively under-spec at 9.3oz. The new pack, as previously stated, is listed at 11oz and the weight of our pack tested exactly at the listed mark. While heavier and more expensive, the new pack does allow for some customization that can get the weight down under 9oz, but you'll have to lose the functionality of the chest strap, hip belt, and new foam back panel to make that happen. The shoulder straps have been widened slightly and are now woven into a honeycomb pattern



that offers a bit of padding, and we did find the new pack a bit more comfortable and stable on the shoulders. The closure system has been updated with a slider buckle, and the entire system is easier to understand than before. However, we found that the old version was easier to open and close in a single motion. A loop has been added above the hydration sleeve – Clip your bladder in here if you want to prevent sagging as you drink. The foam back panel and matching sleeve using a Velcro closure were added, and we feel the interior pocket system has been improved. Previously, there were two interior mesh pockets for small items placed just on the other side of the hydration sleeve against the back panel side of the pack. These had no closure and relied on gravity to keep your items in place and it seemed as though you were fighting against your hydration bladder to place or retrieve items from the pockets. The pockets also sat lower in the pack, where it was difficult to see the exact item you might

be trying to retrieve. Now, REI has moved to the other side of the pack, and uses only 1 larger sized but zippered pocket that sits near the top of the pack. Much easier – And you won't have to worry if your keys fell out of the pocket last time you put your pack down. If you're really worried about your keys, another item, or if you want to just be able to retrieve something quickly, you can even clip your keychain or item into the pack itself using the ribbon and clip that sits within the pocket.

**Conclusion: Overall REI has it right with this pack. Simple value. Currently retailing for under \$35 you'll be hard pressed to find a pack in this category, this well built, for a better price. Granted, there are a few drawbacks, but they are workable drawbacks and don't apply to every user's style. We're a bit worried that REI has started to increase the price, weight, and features compared to the previous model, and even though some changes are a definite improvement, we hope that this trend does not continue. We feel that the best part of the Flash 18 feature set lies in its low price and simplicity. However, it's hard to complain about this much usability at such a great price. Overall Very Good -**



# SIGNAGE



YEBEL RANGERS + BAS

2000



BARNES LAKE  
COYOTE LAKE  
LAKE GEORGE











NO CAMPING  
NEXT .5 MILE

Buckshot  
Cabin





# REVIEW: Trail Designs Caldera Ti-Tri Sidewinder Stove

An Evaluation of Alcohol and Wood Modes Using the  
Evernew 1.3L Pot

In 2010 Trail Designs released an update to their extremely popular and game changing Caldera Cone Series - The Ti-Tri Sidewinder.

When used with wider pots, such as the popular Evernew 1.3L pot used in this review, previous versions of the Caldera Cone system forced you to carry an extra caddy supplied by Trail Designs for storage. The caddy weighs in at a respectable 2.35oz and with its food-grade plastic can double in your camp kitchen, but it does take up significant pack space. Also, in the never ending alcohol stove vs. canister stove battle, adding the caddy weight to your stove system began to blur the line between the lightest option on some trips.

No matter which Trail Designs system you choose, you must choose the system tailored to your cooking pot of choice. As stated earlier, we'll be using the Evernew 1.3L pot in this review and the corresponding Sidewinder system from Trail Designs. In addition to this system, Trail Designs offers solutions for 18 other pot types. These pots are often rebranded so don't immediately give up hope if you have a pot of the same volume but manufactured under another brand. If in doubt, contact Trail Designs

## TRAIL DESIGNS CALDERA SIDEWINDER STOVE

**Pros:** A well built, weather worthy system offering admirable weight and performance characteristics with few, if any rivals.

**Cons:** High entry cost, rusty hardware, fiddly stake system, no simmer option, less than impressive performance in cold windy conditions.

**Rating:** ★★★★★

first - Who at least in our experience will bend over backwards to help! The basic Sidewinder system currently comes in at \$79.95 for all pot configurations. Marketed as supporting 3 types of fuel - Alcohol, wood, and Esbit solid fuel tabs, we'll test perhaps the two most popular of these 3 supported fuels in this review - Alcohol and wood.

Coming from a standard Caldera Cone system we were immediately impressed with the Sidewinder system upon arrival from an aesthetic standpoint. The cone must be made of titanium in order to support the heat from wood fires, and the material has a much more refined look and feel than the aluminum composition of the original Caldera Cone. When rolled for storage, the titanium cone is quite resilient and resists kinking extremely well, whereas care is required with the original aluminum cone to

prevent this. By switching to titanium, you'll also save half an ounce on the cone itself compared to the original cone for the 1.3L, and because you can store the cone within the pot, you'll save another 2.35oz by leaving the caddy supplied with the original system behind. As usual from a Trail Designs offering, the construction is solid and professional. The dove-tail connection smoothly slides into place, the ventilation cutouts and stake insertion points are cleanly-cut and symmetrical. In the past we'll admit we've constructed a few windscreen / pot stands of our own, but nothing that can compare with the build quality (or performance) of the Sidewinder. Unfortunately, we found that the rivet used for the dovetail connection quickly rusts, but at this point strength has not been affected and this remains a strictly cosmetic issue.



Of course the package also includes the venerable 12-10 alcohol stove as well as a fuel bottle kit, measuring cup, 2 titanium shepherd's hook stakes to create the needed stand for your pot, the Gram Cracker solid-fuel kit, and a tyvek sleeve for cone storage. (In the end we left this sleeve behind and used a rubber band for ease of use). All of these components nest nicely in the Evernew 1.3L pot for packing, except for the stakes, due to their long length and the space that the rolled cone occupies. If the stakes were 1/2" shorter the problem would be solved and the stakes would still be long enough to use with the cone. An easy modification, but we're not sure if it's Trail Designs approved. Alternatively, by carrying the

fuel bottle outside of the pot the cone can be rolled tighter allowing room for the stakes. Basically, you'll either need to carry the stakes or the fuel bottle separately unless you shorten the stakes.

**Weight breakdown:**

Component	Measured Weight (OZ)
Sidewinder Cone	1.5
Tyvek Cone Sleeve	.1
Fuel Bottle Kit	.65
Fuel Measuring Cup	.05
2 Titanium Stakes	.6
12-10 Alcohol Stove	.55
GramCracker Stove	.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>3.55</b>

At these weights, there is little to complain about,

especially when a few of these components can be left behind and the stakes should really be counted as shelter weight.

Just how well does the Sidewinder perform as an alcohol stove? We'll let the results speak for themselves. First we'll evaluate the results of our boil time testing under controlled conditions. The tests took place at 2 different temperatures – 68 & 32 degrees Fahrenheit. 2 cups of distilled water were used, and the atmospheric pressure was equivalent to sea level. At higher elevations faster boil times can be achieved.

To take things further, at each testing temperature we tested the stove in completely still, 0 wind conditions, and then again in a steady 20 mph

wind. All components of the test were brought to the testing temperature before starting - So for the 68 degree test, everything registered 68 degrees to start. Same for the 32 degree test. (Water, fuel, stove components, etc.) 95% alcohol was used for fuel. Time started upon lighting the stove and stopped when the water temperature reached exactly 212 degrees

- A rolling boil. No "Calling it" early when a few bubbles appeared on the bottom of the pot here. Using these methods allows us to view the performance of the stove system in a wide variety of conditions that most backpackers will face – From cold, windy days to still, pleasant nights.

Please note that the instructions supplied for the

12-10 alcohol stove used with the Sidewinder system were followed exactly for this test. The instructions detail a wait of 20-30 seconds after lighting the stove before placing the cooking pot on the cone, presumably so the stove can achieve full flame in an oxygen-rich environment. We followed this procedure (Using 30 seconds) and included this "Prime time" in our figures below. Additionally, for cold weather operation the instructions suggest adding 15-20 drops of fuel to the integrated primer pan. Lighting the stove from the primer pan ignites the main fuel reservoir and helps to heat the stove, achieving full flame much faster in chilly weather. For our 32 degree test – This method was used



(Using the full 20 drops) and the additional fuel was factored into the fuel required results. This method was not used for the 68 degree test. We also tested the total burn time in each scenario using the maximum fuel capacity allowed (40ml - 1.35oz) per the stove instructions.



**Here are the results:**

Temp / Wind	Time to Boil	Fuel used to Boil	Total Burn @ Max Stove Capacity (40ml)
68 Degree 0 Wind	6:49	.5oz	19:46
68 Degree 20 Wind	12:18	.85oz	20:21
32 Degree 0 Wind	8:26	.6oz	23:45
32 Degree 20 Wind	N/A	N/A	18:55

Surprisingly, wind is still a huge factor despite the wind shielding nature of the cone. Admirable time and efficiency results were recorded in both tests without wind, but time and fuel usage were severely affected in the 20mph wind test. We were able to achieve a maximum temperature of 204 degrees (Not boiling but still pretty hot!) in the 32 degree / 20mph wind test, but this was after a full 17:35 worth of burn time. As you can see at maximum fuel capacity you're looking at a total burn time of 18:55 in this situation, so to reach 200+ degrees you'll need to use nearly 1.4oz of fuel. We even refilled the stove immediately after it ran out of fuel in this test for another full run but were not able

to achieve a higher water temperature. This said, we are not discounting this system as a cold weather solution considering just how well the system performed in the 32 degree / 0 wind test. Taking the time to utilize natural and makeshift wind breaks will still enable the Caldera system to perform well in cold weather and extremely well in more favorable conditions. One thing to consider is that even in bad conditions the system remained usable, whereas a standard alcohol stove setup without a windscreen, or a windscreen without the coverage of the Sidewinder would not have been workable by any means. Some may wonder if any efficiency is lost using the shorter cone of the

Sidewinder system compared to the original Caldera Cone. During testing, we also tested the original Caldera Cone system for the Evernew 1.3L pot side by side with the Sidewinder.

In temperate conditions the original Caldera system posted slightly faster boil times, with slightly greater full usage. For instance, in the 68 degree / 0 wind test, the original cone was able to boil water at 6:07, but used an additional .2oz of fuel compared to the Sidewinder. However, in cold tests the fuel usage was very similar for both systems with Sidewinder winning on time. Over the broad range of conditions you are likely to face, we would pick the Sidewinder over the original Caldera Cone based on its greater efficiency in moderate weather (at the expense of speed), and faster performance in cold weather with no loss of efficiency. The original cone was also not able to boil two cups of water in our 32 degree / 20mph wind test.



However, real world conditions are a different matter. This was best realized on one northern trip quite late in the season. Of course the forecast had only called for a light dusting of snow, but our hike in on the first day was hampered by more than a foot of fresh powder. This slowed our progress and we arrived to camp after dark, headlamps lighting the way. After the tent was up and we were (somewhat) comfortably nestled against the cold weather in our sleeping bags, it was a hard sell to leave the relative comfort of the tent and sleeping bags to prepare a hot meal. Tired and cold, the break was made and the Sidewinder system setup outside in less than 30 seconds. Preparing a meal

and lighting the stove, we stood around mesmerized by the Sidewinder, a cool blue glow lighting the snow around the cone as the stove burned away. A few minutes later we enjoyed a steaming hot meal. It was 15 degrees and still snowing. In a situation like this, you just need a stove that

works and the Sidewinder came through. With its titanium construction, the Sidewinder Cone is able to withstand the heat of wood fires contrary to the aluminum construction of the original Caldera system, further adding to its already established "Cool factor".





In testing we were highly impressed with this mode of operation. The stakes are raised to the higher position for use with wood which allows you to feed additional fuel into the stove with your pot in place. (Handles facing away from the opening in wood burning mode) After finding a suitable location, we found the best approach was to prepare all of your fuel prior to starting the fire since the fire burned so fast and hot that little time could be wasted hunting or preparing fuel after ignition. We experienced good results with a handful or two of sticks and twigs of small diameter and no more than a few

inches long. (Think finger-sized) Once our fuel was obtained we built the base to start a small fire using even smaller materials that would fit easily inside the cone. Use the cone for wind protection when starting if conditions merit. If needed, use a fire starter of your choice or even a splash or two of the alcohol fuel you're most likely already carrying to get things going. Once the fire has been lit place the cone in the proper position and place your pot on top. Feed additional wood through the side cone opening as needed in a steam locomotive boiler type manner. The cone creates an oven-like effect and additional

fuel ignites easier and faster than a normal open fire. If a fast boil is desired build the fire up higher, if you're baking a cake keep it low and slow. Contrary to alcohol mode, great temperature control is possible here. The system is quite efficient and we were able to easily boil 2 cups of water in 20 degree weather using only a single large handful of fuel. Allowing the fire to burn itself out resulted in complete combustion - Only a small pile of white ashes were left. Keep in mind that you'll end up with a thin layer of soot on the cone and pot, so you may want to plan on isolating these components from your other

gear if you're concerned about keeping things clean. If even greater wood burning efficiency is desired, the inferno insert can be added for an additional \$40 and about a 1.5oz weight penalty depending on the pot system selected. Trail Designs also offers an optional floor (1/2 oz - \$10) if ground scarring is of a leave no trace concern.

Whatever your fuel of choice, there were a few nuances that we had to contend with. The stake support system works well, but due to the curvature of the stake near each hook, we found that there was some fiddle-factor with "Tuning" each stake for the perfect position so that

a level cookpot resulted. If not positioned properly, you'll end up with a slight tilt. In practice this was mostly an aesthetic concern on level ground, but became more important on slanted terrain to ensure spill-proof operation. Also, in cold weather the instructions call for use of the integrated primer pan on the 12-10 stove as previously discussed under our testing methods. This worked well, but was easily foiled by windy conditions. In those cases we were able to light the stove from the main fuel reservoir each time, but had to wait just a bit longer for full heat.

**Conclusion: The Sidewinder system addressed the main drawback of the original Caldera Cone system (packability) with flying colors. In controlled testing and in real world scenarios the system consistently performed with good results. The entry cost is somewhat steep, but for the price you'll receive a well-crafted, reliable product that has few, if any competitors. There are a few minor drawbacks, but you'll be hard pressed to find a better alcohol stove system, and we feel you'll be satisfied if you choose the Caldera Sidewinder system for your cooking needs.**

Very Good - ★★★★★





# TREKKING WITH CANINES

## A Quick Guide To Bringing Man's Best Friend Along

Backpacking can be a challenging endeavor in itself – At times in our effort to get back to basics and simplify life by hitting the trail we find ourselves pouring over gear checklists, rushing to make the trailhead at a decent hour, or planning trips that just push the mileage a bit too far. With all this in mind, adding another component to the equation might not be the best idea. But once you find your rhythm, adding man's best friend can be a great addition to any trip – And there aren't many places where they could be a better friend than on the trail. Dogs make us happy. Similar to the way that a campfire can turn a cold and wet hiker into a contented backcountry soul, dogs can make tough situations bearable and provide something special in regards to companionship. Somehow, they can offer this companionship without hindering that feeling of being alone in the wild. This can truly be the best of both worlds. You'll get away from it all but still have someone to share it with all the same. However, a dog will depend on you more than ever in this situation and there are a few things to keep in mind.



### Age

One of the first things to consider is the age of your dog. If the dog is too young and still growing, you could risk lifelong damage by stressing those growing bones and joints too much too soon. Generally speaking, you'll want to wait until the 12-18 month age range prior to partaking in any strenuous activities, (Like backpacking) but this will vary from dog to dog and breed to breed. Too old... And well, your companion might just wish they could spend the weekend in the dog bed at home instead of out on some trail with their crazy owner. How old is too old depends on many factors, including the life history of your pet, their overall health, and breed. All dogs are different... For both cases, consult a veterinarian first.



### Training

Many people think that dogs, just because they are dogs, can immediately go from months of inactivity to 20 mile

days in a heartbeat. This usually results in a hobbling dog barely able to make it off the trail and back to the car. Just like people, dogs need to train for strenuous exercise and backpacking is no exception. At the very least, exercise several times a week with your dog, if not every day. Long walks and / or a running routine are perfect for this. This will rack up the miles and acclimate a dog's feet to the abrasion and abuse they'll encounter on the trail. To avoid exhaustion and injury, build up the mileage slowly week to week. As a general rule avoid increasing the mileage by more than 10% each week. Thus, if you're currently out with your dog walking and running a combined 20 miles per week, 22 would be maximum you'd want to tackle the next week, and so on. 10% is the max – Lower is even better. Keep building until the weekly mileage is at least as much as you plan to travel on a weekend hike, and include at least one long day each week that's close to or greater than the maximum daily mileage you're planning for a trip. As an example, if you plan a 20 mile weekend hike @ 10 miles each day, we would suggest building your dog's weekly mileage up to at least 20 mile + weeks with a 9-10 mile minimum long day. Prior to and after the backpacking trip you've been working towards, rest the dog for at least 2 full days prior, and 2 full days after. This will allow for a fresh start and ample recovery time. If you haven't noticed, the basic goal with all of this is to simply make the trip part of the training. A weekend trip would essentially be like back to back long days and fit into the overall training plan. Going for trips with longer mileage or more days? You'll need to build up the mileage in training even more beforehand. Avoid concrete as much as possible while training; it's rough on pads, joints, and claws. If you can find a short trail or nature area close to home this will be ideal. Sound like a lot of training? Well it is, but even if you aren't training for a particular trip it will be better for your dog, as well as you. Dogs and people need exercise.

Remember that dogs can't talk to tell you they've worked too hard, so if in doubt scale back the mileage and rest.



## Water

While training and on any backpacking trip, water is fuel, both for you and your dog. For anything other than the shortest training jaunt, carry water, and carry even more in hot weather. The best method we've found is to simply carry more of your own water – No special dog bottle, which only seems to complicate things in our experience. You should offer the dog clean water at least once per hour, or more often if they are showing signs of thirst. (Excessive panting, a dry tongue, exhaustion) For our test subject (A 50lb blue heeler) we found that a 1¾ cup plastic Glad or Ziploc container worked best as a water bowl. Leave the lid at home and you'll never notice the approximate ½ oz. weight of the bowl. Keep this in a convenient spot – An outside pack pocket works best. You may want to increase the size of the bowl for larger breeds. Frequently along the trail you'll encounter many natural water sources that your dog will likely gravitate towards. This is a personal call and one that you should discuss with your vet. Ideally you should only allow your dog to drink the same clean, filtered or treated water that you're drinking - It's best to discourage your dog from drinking this untreated water you'll find along your way. If the water source is especially pristine you might consider it, but only

for water that you might feel comfortable drinking untreated yourself. (Usually a rare occurrence) in any event, keep your dog's medications up to date and see a vet regularly.



## Food

Carry the same type of food that you feed at home when out on the trail, but you'll likely have to carry more of it. Consult your dog food bag – It should have printed guidelines for high activity dogs. This is a good place to start. Calculate the days that you'll be out and pack enough food to meet the guideline at a bare minimum. It's obviously best to pack extra until you learn your dog's exact dietary habits on the trail. Most of the guidelines are listed in cups per day, we like to weigh this amount and then pack by the ounce. Use a scale to weigh the food prior to the trip, and when you return weigh any leftover food. Note these amounts and after a few trips you should be able to calculate how many ounces of food per day your dog requires. We suggest packing the food in sturdy double-zippered large Ziploc bags. The Gallon size works well – Just avoid the slider type bags, they just can't hold up to any trip longer than a day or two. A secondary Glad / Ziploc hard container works great for a food bowl. Mark the bowl you'll use for food (A strip of tape on the bottom works well). Only use this bowl for food and the other for water. This way you can hang the food bowl at night along with your own food and still

have a clean water bowl to keep in your shelter should Fido become thirsty. You should taper the feeding schedule to your own pet's personality and needs; however we find that giving the dog as much as they'll eat at night and prior to departing camp in the morning works well. If they are hesitant to eat or have lost their appetite, mix some of your leftovers in with their food. Pack a few of your dog's favorite treats for each day and use these to bridge the gap between breakfast and dinner. (Lunch) Store these in another Ziploc in a handy location for quick feeding on the go – Like you would an energy bar for yourself. Energy rich foods will allow you carry less weight, due to the fact that they pack so much more power per ounce. Pick high quality food and treats / snacks – Look for reputable brands without "No name" ingredients and a higher protein content. (25% +) Avoid artificial flavors & preservatives and strongly consider grain-free options. At night, you'll want to hang this food religiously on your trip – Many backcountry critters find dog food especially tasty.

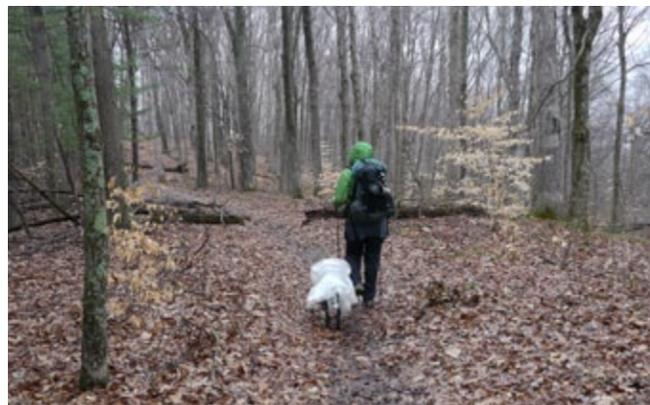


## Dog Gear

If catalogs are any guide, the dog gear industry is a big business! You could probably spend as much money as you want – Or as little – In this category and it seems that most items are marketed for the dog owner instead of the dog. The first thing that people usually look for is a backpack so that their dog can carry their own food. We've tested several

brands extensively, and have come to the simple conclusion that dogs are not pack animals. In our experience a dog is just happier on the trail unencumbered, and it's just so hard to really know if your dog is truly comfortable with a pack or if they're carrying too much weight. Many dogs will just continue to push even if they're in pain, not a good situation. In the end we feel it's best to muscle-up and carry everything your dog will need in your own pack – It's simply easier to tell if you're carrying too much weight instead of guessing how your dog feels. If you do decide to go the backpack route for your dog, not all dog packs are created equal. Select a lightweight option and make sure to find the perfect size. Fine-tune the fit and acclimate your dog at home prior to a trip. Never overload your dog – 10% of their body weight is more than enough. In cold or wet weather, we've found a weather-resistant dog coat to be a good asset. Fit is just as important here, you want something that will fit close to the dog's body without inhibiting movement or compressing against their fur too much, this might actually make them colder by inhibiting their own natural insulation system. Test the fit while training at home, halfway into a long backpacking trip isn't the place to find out that the coat you picked is a chafe factory for your companion. The oils that dogs naturally produce make their coats fairly water resistant, so avoid washing your dog right before a trip which will strip these oils away. Booties can be great for cold conditions where snow and ice will be encountered. Many booties are overbuilt with thick rubber soles and heavy fabric uppers. We've found that this type of boot only makes things worse. With such a heavy-duty construction, your dog won't be able to move their feet normally and won't be able to independently move each toe for traction and a normal gait. Instead, look for a simple bootie made of nylon fabric, such as those used by professional dog sledding teams. This will provide protection for the dog's feet, but still

allow them to move and walk naturally. They do wear out after 100-200 miles, but are cheap enough that you can buy many replacements for less than you'd pay for a single pair of the heavy, overbuilt dog boots you might see in a big box store. We suggest a pair with a stretchy Velcro closure and have had great success with [www.dogbooties.com](http://www.dogbooties.com). Finally, you'll need sleeping gear to keep your dog warm at night. We find that a closed cell foam pad works great, just make sure you're selecting one that's warm enough. Generally speaking, you'll want to evaluate the manufacturer's stated R-Value and at least match what you're using for your own pad. Catch your dog lounging around and measure their full extended length, then cut the foam pad down to size for weight savings. Leave the pad long enough so that your dog will have full coverage and won't find their paws hanging over the edges. Take a dedicated blanket if you prefer, but we simply assign double duty to whatever insulation piece we're carrying for that trip, such as a down jacket or synthetic fleece. Throw this on top and tuck the jacket in around the edges...In combination with the foam pad this should keep things quite toasty. For colder weather, take a warmer pad or double up while adding more and more insulation on top. We suggest keeping the dog inside your tent or shelter at night – Your dog will be much safer this way. In wet conditions, a quick towel dry before entering the tent seems to take care of any wet-dog-ruining-your-night worries.



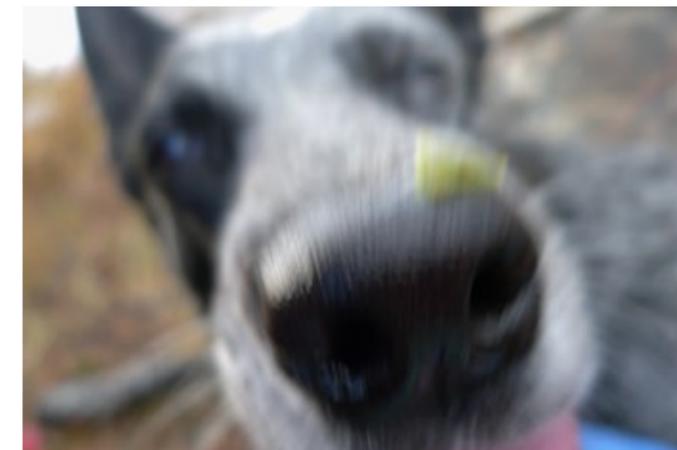
## Leashes and Regs

One item of gear not yet mentioned is a leash – Perhaps the most important item of gear you'll need. We suggest only unleashing your dog while on the trail once they're trained under strict voice command and they'll stay within a leashed distance at all times. This is where time spent at home practicing obedience will really pay off - Ideally, your dog should return to you when called and heel on command. Even if your dog is perfect in this regard, carry your leash where it's easily accessible. If you loop one end of the leash through the shoulder and chest strap of your backpack, then clip the hook to your pack in a convenient spot you'll be able to walk hands free but still have quick access. Always leash the dog when in the presence of other people on the trail. Remember, even if your dog is the kindest dog in the world, some people fear all dogs regardless of their demeanor. Others may find your beloved pet nothing more than a strong annoyance. Wildlife is another matter; the last thing you want is your dog running after a deer in the distance, or in other cases bringing wildlife back to you. (Bears) Leash any time you're in doubt, and if your dog does not stringently respond to voice commands yet, leash constantly. Remember that some areas will require your pet to be leashed at all times. Other areas, especially your National Parks, will not allow dogs on backcountry trails whatsoever – Check the regulations of any area you plan to visit well beforehand.



## Final Thoughts

All of this may seem like a lot of work – And it is. But it's work well worth the while. Companionship is something that you simply can't put a price on. Dogs love the outdoors. Dogs love exercise. People love exercising in the outdoors with their dog. Owning a dog is already a time intensive choice to make, but they'll be relying on you even more out on the trail. These guidelines should set you on the right track, but should be adapted to your own situation. When eased into the sport and with the necessary amount of care and preparation, tackling the trail with your canine companion will compliment your backcountry experience and enrich their daily life.





## Backcountry Cuisine: Chicken Enchilada Pot

For a taste of Mexican food on the trail, try this easy one-pot enchilada dinner. Although our base recipe contains lightweight, dehydrated foods for longer treks, this recipe can be varied to suit your tastes. You may wish to use real cheese instead of cheesy potato chips (although chips are super lightweight and give a nice crunch), use a gourmet sauce, or add instant rice instead of/in addition to tortillas. Muy bueno!

### Ingredients:

1 Pouch of Chicken	2 oz Cheddar & Sour Cream Potato Chips
1 Packet Enchilada Sauce Mix	1 Packet of Olive Oil
3/4 Cup Dehydrated Vegetables	1.5 Cups Water
4 Corn or 2 Flour Tortillas	



### At Home - Prep Time < 2 minutes

Combine sauce mix and dehydrated vegetables in zip-lock bag. Repackage crushed potato chips into zip-lock bag if necessary. Repackage tortillas (if not bringing extras for other meals). Keep chicken in original package.

### At Camp - Cooking Time < 10 minutes

Add chicken, vegetable/sauce mix, oil, and water into pot and heat until boiling, stirring occasionally. Continue simmering and stirring until veggies are softened. If you prefer your dinner in taco or burrito form, then continue to simmer until thickened, add chips, then spoon into tortillas. For a one-pot meal, shred the tortillas into strips and stir them into the pot along with the crushed potato chips, reserve some chips for a crunchy topping.

Feeds 2 hungry hikers with about 500 calories per serving. TIP: To increase the calories, use flour tortillas, add rice, use extra cheese/chips or use an extra packet of olive oil. Enjoy!

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THE DRIVE HOME

## A ROOKIE IN TRAINING

SOMETIMES IT'S NOT THE DESTINATION THAT MATTERS;  
IT'S WHAT YOU TAKE AWAY.

The phone rang again. And again I answered the call, for once with a slight smirk on my face as I listened, disinterested with the distressed voice that fired at me from the other end of the line. I didn't have to take it seriously today. In 5 minutes my desk wouldn't see me for another week. Fluorescent bulbs lit the scene, my eyes strained in the artificial light. I feigned interest in details that were being relayed in my right ear; hopefully the caller took the bait. In reality though, I didn't care. I was a 60 second elevator ride above the sidewalk, walled in without a view in one of the largest cities in the world. But today I was a 60 seconds and a 12 hour drive away from something new. I didn't know what was to come, or what I had been missing.

The outdoors had always been my home. Sure I'd been on a few hikes, and even a few overnight camping trips... All within ear shot of one major

interstate or another. Heck I loved anything outside really, and had dabbled in outdoor hobbies ranging from rafting to rock climbing. They were all amazing experiences, but in the end they had all failed to really hold my interest for long. At this point I wasn't sure anything could, but I hadn't given up. I was getting close, but hadn't quite found my niche yet. At some point I came to the realization that what I thought was my home – The outdoors – wasn't anymore. I hadn't taken a day off in 2 years. I seemed to have lost my way, fallen into a trap, without even realizing it. Backpacking – Really backpacking... Was something I hadn't tried yet. I decided to give it a shot. I asked for a week off. They said they couldn't spare me for that long. I said I had plans I couldn't alter, and that was that.

I think there are two distinct hurdles for a beginning backpacker going on a first trip. Gear,

and a destination. We've all seen the cool gear ads and the glossy exotic destinations. But when it comes down to it, for that first time...Where do I go, and what do I take can be difficult questions to answer. (And require trial and error as I would learn) I had assembled a haphazard pile of gear over the previous few weeks in preparation for whatever lay ahead of me. I was pretty confident that I had chosen all the perfect gear at the time... But I use few of those items on trips today. But it all still worked. As for a destination, well, I basically looked at a map of the continent, found a big tract of green about 12 hours by car away and for no particular reason decided I was going there. I wouldn't regret it, and that chance pick has been the site of many trips since.

"You're camping for how long?" I smiled, and replied to the border guard. "A week sir". Only a suspicious, confused stare met my smile. "Where is your gear, your equipment" It didn't seem like a question, more of a statement. I motioned with my head over my left shoulder towards the backseat, where my brand new pack, at the ready lay in wait. "It's all in the pack sir, I try to travel a bit lightly". The guard didn't seem impressed. He paused and looked at the pack, his eyes squinting, seemingly confused. Glancing again at my passport and slowly back at me, he said "Have a good trip" and the gate opened. I let the clutch out and moved forward. It was 5 AM. The signs changed. My tired brain fumbled as I tried to convert the speed limits to make sense on my American speedometer. "What the heck is a mile, anyway?" I pondered. Only 12 hours earlier I had been forced to listen to a rant about missed deadlines before finally walking away from my desk for the first time in 2 years. After work I managed to catch a few hours sleep until the alarm sounded at 1 AM and I stumbled to my car, where my pack already lay at the ready. Now my eyes drooped. I was far from the city – Any city - And hundreds of miles farther north than home. I rolled the windows down. More stars than I had seen in 2 years shone overhead. The pre-dawn air, more crisp than I was used to, flowed in and pushed me onward.

2 hours and a very large cup of coffee later I

found myself at the trailhead I had so carefully located on my GPS a few days earlier. I had anticipated wilderness, but strangely it was crowded. My cell phone showed 5 bars. Cars rushed by on the highway a stone's throw away. At this point things became a series of double checks, of triple checks. I'm not sure how many times I checked my gear, how many times I checked that my car was indeed locked. I spread the map out on the trunk of my car, tracing the loop I had planned out and trying to visualize what was to come in my head. Eventually, map in hand and not too sure of myself, I wove my way through a throng of tourists and found myself on the trail. After the first mile the crowds thinned out. I was excited to realize that the crowds I had passed earlier were mostly out to see the sights only for the day - A trend I would later learn applies to most trails. I wasn't against sharing the trail – But hey, I didn't come out here to people watch, either.

I thought I had packed light, but the pack sagged against my shoulders. My feet hurt. Doubt crept in. I sat there awkwardly on the only horizontal log next to the trail that I had seen in the past hour and for a minute thought about my car back at the trailhead, the motel I had passed on the way in. To be honest it was tempting. It was tempting because I knew that world. What lay ahead was a mystery. But I knew I would never forgive myself if I turned back. After all, these moments were why I thought I wanted to try this in the first place. I shouldered my pack and looked at my map yet another time. The destination that I had chosen for the night – Pine Lake, looked close. But inches on the map took hours on the ground. I crested hill after hill and rounded bend after bend only to see more forest blankly meeting my hopeful gaze. Eventually, as dusk was closing in I topped another hill and below me the first star of the night winked back at me from the surface of Pine Lake. Fear turned to hope and I slogged down the hill, my shoes soaked from the muddy trail, towards the water's edge.

Once I found a flat enough spot away from the trail, the next hour was a flurry of activity. I'm

sure it didn't look pretty but in the failing light I managed to get my priorities straight. Gear was strewn everywhere amongst my campsite, reminding me of my bedroom when I was 13. But I had managed to setup my tent, filter water, and even gather enough wood for a decent fire. Staying busy kept the fear of the unknown at bay. Bear spray close at hand, I struck a match and watched my tinder come to life in flame. A trail of smoke lead away out over the lake, now full with the reflection of dozens of stars. I slowly added fuel and light began to reflect off the pine boughs closest to me, as the darkness beyond only became more foreboding. But for the first time things began to feel like home. I turned the headlamp off and continued adding more wood to the fire. The trail had humbled me; I didn't even have an appetite. Mostly, I just wanted rest and sleep. I gathered my food and walked out into the forest. Compared to firelight, my headlamp now cast an eerie beam that glanced off the tree trunks in front of me. The color of the light reminded me of what I worked under every day. The light from camp now seemed far away and hidden, but inviting. I sat against the base of an old hemlock and opened my food bag. Nothing looked good. I forced down a candy bar and a package of cashews. I guess the pasta dinner and desert I had planned for would have to wait. Finally something worked as I had expected – One throw of the bear line zinged over a perfect looking branch and my rock-filled stuff sack crashed to the ground. I hauled the food up and secured the other end of the line to a suitable tree nearby. Proudly I returned to my fire, now diminished to a small round pile of glowing red coals.

Adding wood from the stash I had pre-arranged earlier, I brought the coals back to life. For once it seemed that I could relax for the first time that day. At the moment, I didn't have to walk, navigate, or filter water. My bear bag hung securely a hundred yards behind me, tent at the ready to my right. It should have been up in the bear bag for sure, but I had smuggled back a little wine to my campsite. I can't say that I had ever had wine from a plastic water bottle

before but hey, there's a first time for everything. I kicked back on my sleeping pad and mended my swollen, blistered feet. Venturing down to the lake's edge I lay witness to a sky full of stars. It was alive with satellites, and the occasional shooting star streaked across. At the time I didn't notice the lack of airplanes, the utter quiet. It just seemed normal. I walked back up the embankment and found the fire ashed over. I grabbed my pack and walked to my tent, the zipper breaking through the quiet of the night as I climbed inside. I wrapped myself in my sleeping bag. The forest was alive with sounds, the wind through the trees, some small animal out on its nightly rounds. I stared blankly out into the darkness; it seemed as if the night would never end. A few minutes later I was out cold from exhaustion.

The night did end, and I woke up later than I expected to the sound of a bee, buzzing its way around my tent. Stubbornly he tried to make his way inside for whatever reason, but consistently he was foiled by the nylon and netting that surrounded me. The sun beat down and the warmth helped me get myself moving. In the light the forest looked nothing like it had the night before, and it took a few tries to find the tree that held my bear bag, which I retrieved and brought back to camp. Holding my hand over the bed of ashes from the night before revealed a bit of lingering warmth. I scraped the top layer of grey ashes away, making my way downward to the few coals that had managed to stay alive. Gathering a fistful of the smallest twigs I could find I set them atop these coals and coaxed the coals with my breath. Within a few minutes the wood began to smoke and eventually caught fire. I added fuel but kept the fire small – After all I'd be leaving soon. The fire could probably fit inside the cup I was now using to boil water for coffee. I sat there and looked out at the lake, watching a pair of loons swim across while a flock of crows broke the silence out of sight to my right. I was tired and my blistered feet were killing me, but for once I actually felt alive. But there wasn't much time for reflection. At least unless I was walking while I did it. I packed my gear and put

my breakfast in my pockets. There wasn't anything left of my fire, but I made sure it was out and scattered the ashes. Map in hand, pack feeling heavy as ever, I browsed around camp and found nothing left behind. You could barely tell I had been there as I left my spot and ambled back toward the trail.

Over the next few days I began to tweak my routine and fall into a rhythm. Rhythm is one of the most important things, at least for me, on any distance backpacking trip. With a little care the blisters on my feet began to turn to callouses. I met a few kindred spirits along the trail those few days, but mostly I had the woods to myself. At least if you didn't count the moose that passed by camp two nights in, or the wolf pack that kept me awake well before dawn one morning, howling in the distance. Things seemed to get easier and my pack started to lighten, a bit. I had packed light items – I just had too many of those items... Things I didn't need. But live and learn. Every night I'd tuck myself away in the pines, or close by another gem of a lake. They all looked the same, but at the same time were all unique. Each night once things were setup and the bear bag hung, I found a bit of time to relax by the fire. I'd dig into the depths of my pack to find the cell phone I had brought along, and each time a smile drew its way across my face as NO SERVICE solidly stared back at me.

On my last day the crowds picked up again as I neared the trailhead. It seemed as though everyone I met had a question for me. I didn't mind, it was nice to have a conversation with someone after a few days of being mostly alone. Everyone I met was just out for the day. As we met on the trail they seemed to gaze at me as if I was some type of backcountry expert. Or maybe they were just amazed at how dirty a man could look. "Are we almost to the top yet?" an out of breath, anxious looking couple asked me. "You're almost at the top, just about another 10 minutes of hiking and the view is amazing. Keep it up!" I responded. Others asked me how long I had been out, and it seemed envy filled their eyes as I explained my route. I flew down the trail, not quite ready to leave, but I'll be the first

to admit I was darn sure ready for a burger and a shower. My loop hike eventually brought me back to the trailhead just after noon. The blisters on my feet were now calloused, and where my legs had been sore and my back a constant ache the first few days now felt solid. Glad to see my car still in one piece I loaded everything into the car and paused one last time to look back at the trail leading up the hill, into the woods.

Driving home I passed that motel I had thought about the first day; that moment now seemed like ages ago. "Vacancy" shined back at me from the sign by the road. Looking at the dusty pack in my back seat, I realized I had a room in the woods - anywhere. I looked at the 5 bars on my cell phone and had to pause for a second to remember what I needed those for. 2 days later I was on the road again in rush hour traffic. Back to work, but my mind was still on the trail. I thought about the third day, when I was trying to tell myself that those weren't bear tracks I just passed as I checked that my bear spray was still at the ready. Or how nothing felt better than slipping my down jacket on and huddling by the fire that last night, hoping my shoes would dry by morning. I thought back to the deer that – The car behind me, blaring its horn broke my thoughts. I looked up and the light was green. I moved forward and waved my hand in apology, the man behind me only gripped his wheel tightly with both hands and stared blankly ahead before he sped past me in the other lane. I just smiled, my priorities had now been set.





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