

The Ten Essentials for Hiking/Backpacking

With all the "excitement" that the wilderness can throw at you (weather, critters, rough terrain, accidents), it seems to be only common sense that the hiker should be ready to meet it with at least the bare minimum of equipment. This minimum is usually referred to in hiking guides as the Ten Essentials. (The exact number and composition of such a list can often consume hours of debate around the campfire, or anyplace else where hikers congregate.) Briefly, the Ten Essentials are those items that you should never leave the trailhead without. And that means NEVER! EVER! It is absolutely amazing how many hikers have heard this, and yet fail to heed the advice. Why not? Laziness. Stupidity. The old "It can't happen to me!" syndrome. Well, maybe not, but are you willing to bet your life on it? The couple of pounds that the essentials represent are not "extra." They are absolutely critical. There is no way to emphasize this point too much. "OK, OK," you say. "I'll carry them - but what are they?" Again, the list will vary depending on who you talk to, but the following are some that almost everyone can agree on. Furthermore, some say your brain should be No. 1 on the list. It is important to emphasize you not only need to carry these items, but also have the knowledge of how to use them.

First Aid Kit: The casual hiker can purchase ready-made kits, or you can fabricate your own. You don't have to be prepared for cardiac bypass surgery on the trail. Keep it simple: A few band-aids, some gauze and adhesive tape, an elastic bandage for twisted knees or ankles, some butterfly bandages for deep cuts, a few antihistamines for bee stings, and some pain killers are most of what is needed for day hiking. For extended backpacking trips, you might want to add a few more things. Talk to your family doctor about which prescription medications you might want to have.

Maps: Many areas are covered by guidebooks. At least carry one of those with you. Better yet, carry topographical maps. You say you don't know how to read the maps? Learn. C'mon - it's not that hard. Compare a topographical map to a state highway map. I'll bet I can tell you which one is more complicated. Anyway, it is really important that you have basic map reading skills. The complexity of the terrain in the many parts of the United States is almost unbelievable. Unless you are on a very well maintained trail, it is easy to get on to a less well maintained spur, and before you know it, you are in the next valley.

Compass: Do not assume you can find north on a cloudy day without instrumental assistance. Yes, moss does grow on the north side of a tree. But in many forests it also grows on the south side, and the east side, etc. You don't have to spend much on a good compass. However, invest ten minutes worth of your valuable time reading the material that came with it. It can be really stupid to carry a compass and not know how to use it.

Emergency Shelter: If you're carrying a tent, you're covered. Other options are plastic tube tents or an extra-large plastic trash bag. But on day trips you should at least pack a space blanket, in addition to your rain gear. Take rain gear, even on a bright, sunny day. But don't feel like you can't leave the trailhead without a \$350 Gore-Tex rain suit. Sure, they are great, but so is anything that will keep you dry: Garbage sacks, ponchos, coated nylon rain suits. Some hikers even carry umbrellas, just to add a touch of civility to the whole experience. And backpackers,

don't forget a cover for your pack. Even the coated nylon pack bags will let water seep in and dampen your sleeping bag or extra clothes.

Extra Clothes, Including a Wool or PolarTek Hat: You lose at least 35% of your total body heat through your head. That 35% can make a tremendous difference in cool weather. It may be the thing that keeps you alive through an unscheduled night out. But most of all, it keeps the brain warm, so that you can think your way out of any predicament in which you find yourself.

Matches: Get the waterproof variety, or put the regular ones in a waterproof container. Lighters are very convenient, especially for starting backpacking stoves. But try to use them after the flint has gotten wet and you'll see why people who carry them also carry matches. Remember that starting a fire can sometimes be difficult, especially when it has been raining for a few days - or even a few hours. Don't be afraid to assist the start-up with a little toilet paper, or a few pine cones.

Knife: We're not talking here about the 40-tool, everything-including-the-kitchen-sink Swiss Army variety. Just a simple, one or two blades type will do. To cut fabric, shave kindling, cut some cord, etc.

Flashlight: This one seems to raise the most eyebrows among novice hikers. "Why do I have to take a flashlight for a day hike?" Of course, the answer is because it's only light about half of the time. Sometimes it's difficult to judge the amount of time that it will take to complete a hike. Or maybe you just want to watch the sunset from an overlook four miles up the trail. There is any number of reasons why you might be out after dark. But walking in the dark on a trail, without a light, can be a terrifying experience, especially after the fourth fall. For most situations, a small light powered by a couple of AA alkaline cells will be fine. Just make sure that the batteries are reasonably fresh, or that you're carrying spares. For extended trips, always carry a spare bulb or two.

Extra Food and Water: "Extra" implies that you have some food and water with you to begin with. You can live days without food, but not long without water, and dehydration can sneak up on you. Always carry at least one water bottle per person, and it's a good idea to pack iodine tablets to treat additional water, or carry a filter. We know that no one is likely to starve to death, even if you go without food for a week or two. But that extra snack bar will give your body a little charge to help keep warm on a cold day, and may help you think straight. And relax. Don't worry about nutrition. Anything that is high in carbohydrates will be fine. This is your one chance to justify all of those things that you don't eat the rest of the time because you want to stay healthy. So go ahead, pour in the Twinkies and the M&M's. This is not the time to be dieting.

Sun Protection: This is critical in the mountains, especially on snow. Sunglasses should provide ultraviolet protection; dime-store cheapies may not be worth a plug nickel on snow. Sunscreen should be rated at least SPF 15.

The Eleventh Essential: Everyone should try to take along a good load of common sense.