

The Mountain Canary Companies Horse and Mule Packer's Information Bulletin #3

“Where Did That Rock Come From?”

This has been a question off every backcountry sleeper's, sleep-desiring lips, since the cave dwellers. It does not matter how well one surveys the ground under your bedroll or tent, because that illusive lump will show up as if it was hiding, until you laid your tired body down. Unfortunately, this is not the only problem a packer will have to face when planning how to get a good night's sleep.

The first thing I look for is a site where I can see the highline clearly. You want to be able to see what is going on with your pack string at all times. I have had a mule playfully untie itself, only to stand quietly as if still tied. Anything can go wrong when you have a gang tied closely together. Lead ropes may tangle, a disagreement may arise between neighbors, and an unwanted animal may visit the site, etc. You need to be nearby.

The next thing on my list is weather related. Is it going to be clear weather or is it going to be inclement? Sometimes there is no question about the weather; it is already running down the back of your neck. You need to find a site where you can erect some kind of shelter to keep the rain or snow off. My preference is one with a slight slope. If you have a choice, a slope will usually eliminate the danger that you have set up in a hole. “Look up and live” is a fire service saying. In this case, that relates to looking up for any dead fall, loose tree limbs above your chosen site that may come down during a wind. The urge to snuggle into a grove of trees may not be the best idea. Besides the apparent danger from dead falls in this area, rain runoff will continue to fall on your bed, long after a rain incident has past.

In addition to blend with the above needs, you must find an area big enough to accommodate your bedroll or tent. You will be surprised how hard this can be at times. The balancing act between a rock, a root, a six foot across tree or two, a slope; by the way where did that log come from? Often, you will be doing this in the dark or after you have angered the rain gods. This is when one of those gremlins sneaks in and places a rock under your sleeping bag. One will be able to evaluate the quality of their sleeping location, only after they crawl into that cold sleeping bag; more often than not, it will not be a perfect blend. However, exhaustion is a great equalizer to help you to make the most of it.

On a particularly rough pack trip, my wife Sue laid out my bedroll prior to Denny Dargan and me getting back to camp at 10:30 pm. She picked, at first blush, a great spot in the meadow, clear of trees, with a great view of the highline area. The sleep angels finally called my name as I crawled into my sleeping bag about mid-night. In the dark, Sue had inadvertently missed the fact that the meadow grass was actually bunch grass. Oops, there was a lump here and another lump there, goodness. A tired body is a wondrous tool for invention. I snuggled between this lump and that lump. This ended up being one of the finest night's sleeps I can remember. More often than not, you may find yourself in a similar situation and you will just have to make the most of it.

The quality and type of your sleeping gear needs to be planned out long before you pick out a lay-me-down site. There is a huge industry dedicated to making the best tents, air mattresses, and sleeping bags. I do not propose to second-guess them, but instead to select from their products, to find what suits my needs. Pack tarps, cowboy bedrolls (with blankets), tents, ridged foam mattress (Therm-a-rest) and air channel mattresses with insulation, all have been part of my on-the-ground bedding over the years. The following information is about my current choices.

I have chosen a sleeping bag that is one of the most sought after, by the individual special U.S. troops, a “Wiggys” sleeping bag. Check it out at www.wiggys.com. The main reason why Sue and I use these bags is for their water resistance. The insulating fibers of this bag are impregnated with silicone; this makes it impossible for the fiber to absorb moisture. In other words, moisture from body heat goes into the bag and body heat pushes it up and out of the bag, please note: moisture in a sleeping bag is a kiss of death to warmth. Water or moisture has the capacity to absorb enormous amounts of heat (B.T.U.'s). Ask any firefighter. Wiggy's insulation, will keep one warm even if you were sleeping in that hole, now puddle, that you missed in your site inspection. In sub-cold arctic temperatures, it has been reported that a different bag that started out weighing 17 pounds at the end of one week weighed 54 pounds from accumulation of frozen condensation. The choice of their mummy bags is a good idea, because they can be cut wider so you get the positives of a mummy bag without feeling wrapped up like a mummy.

Therm-a-rest types of pads are a great sleeping aid, but they are a bit cumbersome to pack. This last year was an experiment to find the best smallest, yet most comfortable mat possible. It was a great success. The Pacific Outdoor Equipment www.pacoutdoor.com



“Ether thermo 9” is the pad that has worked out wonderfully. This is an air mattress, type of pad, insulated to remove the cold negatives from the normal air mattress. Goodness, it is very comfortable. As far as size goes, it rolls up to the size of a three pound coffee can. One can grow very fond of this pad.

The shelter around your bed is the next and maybe most important item for a good night’s sleep. You can get by with a tarp, but before long, a light will come on. After a few nights spent with visits from friendly rodents or worse, some kind of enclosed shelter will soon be on your Christmas list. The first photo is a one-person tent called a “Zoid 1,” manufactured by Mountain Safety Research www.msrgear.com . It is a very handy tent, with a user-friendly side entry. The only thing one could wish different in this tent was that it was free standing.



The shelter shown above is my very favorite. It is a three-wire bivy-type of shelter, simply a bedroll with a tent for your head. “Event” is the very breathable and yet water proof material that it is covered in (it really works), “Big Agnes” manufactures it www.bigagnes.com. Big Agnes also makes some very good one-man tents that would fill that bill well.

The choice of using a one-man tent is a very practical one. There is usually very little space to set up in the brush near the critters. A small tarp will be a great comfort, set up over your shelter during or prior to a rain storm. This tarp will shelter the area around your habitat, facilitating getting you and your gear in and out of the shelter dry. Buy a footprint, or make one, when using one of these shelters. A footprint is simply an additional piece of material placed under the shelter, between the waterproof bottom and the ground, to protect your shelter from punctures. Do not skimp when purchasing this kind of equipment, if necessary it will protect you from the dangers of unnecessary exposure to the wet and cold. In this tent or bivy sack, there is enough room under the fly or at the bottom of the bag to store items out of the weather. Neither takes up very much room in your pack. A flash light is necessary to light up the area when checking on your stock. I suggest that you take a bottle or canteen of water with you and keep it handy at night. Dehydration from sweating or normal body evaporation will lower your body temperature. Take the occasional drink during the night and you will sleep warmer. A point to remember in freezing conditions where frostbite is a danger, increased water intake forestalls its effects.

I hope that some of the ways we have developed for our own comfort will give you some information and help you plan to make your stay in the backcountry as comfortable as possible.

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