

# Paul Kirtley's Blog

Wilderness Bushcraft • Survival Skills • Outdoor Life

Hi there! Paul Kirtley here, author of Paul Kirtley's Blog and founder of Frontier Bushcraft.

Now, I get a lot of questions about kit, which is a little bit ironic because Bushcraft, fundamentally, is about knowledge of nature and what you can use from nature. But to be honest, most of us go out with some equipment. We don't go out in just our underpants and build a natural shelter every time we go out camping. We're going to take some things with us, particularly if the purpose of our trip is to move from A to B. We simply don't have the time to be building shelters every day. We're going to take a tarp. We're going to take a sleeping bag, or a hammock, or a tent. We're going to take those things with us so we've got a shelter ready to go, and we can erect it quickly at the end of the day. Hiking, canoeing, all those activities where the main aim is to cover some ground and make a journey, we're typically going to take a sleeping equipment with us.

Now, this video is the first in a series that I'm going to make about how to lighten your load, because that's really the question that people ask. They've seen my video about packing their kit, how to pack things relatively compactly. They've seen my article about what to take for a basic Bushcraft-style camp in the woods. But the question keeps coming up, "How do I lighten the load? Whenever I go to the woods, I've got a lot of stuff on my back. It weighs a lot, and I can't pack things in the same way as you do. I can't quite get them into my rucksack. And then my walk into the woods, even if it's a short distance, it's really burdensome with all the stuff that I've got."

So really, what I want to do in this series of videos is help you lighten your load while maintaining the functionality of your kit. And the place to start, really, over and above once you get beyond a day hike, the thing that you're always really

going to have with you, unless you decide to go out and build some shelters and sleep out in that way, is some sleeping kit. So we're going to look at that first.

Frankly, people are carrying often really big sleeping bags around with them. That's the first thing. A lot of military surplus bags and also synthetic bags are marketed by Bushcraft companies and outdoor camping companies. Synthetic bags are very good. They're easy to look after. They're warm, and they're relatively inexpensive. But they're relatively bulky compared to some other types. And the main type you're going to get is a down bag, and we're going to look at that shortly.

But also, people tend to take bags that are too warm for the season. So this is the bag that I take to the Arctic with me. When I'm doing winter trips in northern Scandinavia in the middle of winter where I might be bivvying [SP] out minus 35 degrees Celsius, this is the bag that I take. This weighs 2.7 kilos. But I see people turning up to courses with bags that size, ex-military bags and bags of that nature. That's too warm for a northern temperate environment from the spring to the autumn. It's almost too warm for northern temperate environments in the winter. So the first thing to think about is, "Are you overspecifying the bag that you're taking?" This, as I say, weighs nearly three kilograms. That's over six pounds.

Next thing is bivvy bags, again, ex-military. In here, is a Dutch army bivvy bag. Again, it's great for winter bivvying because it's sizeable. I can get a big warm bag, whether it's a synthetic bag like this one or a big fluffy down bag. I can get it in here without it being restricted, without air being squeezed out, and it's the air that keeps me warm. So a big bivvy bag for winter camping, serious winter camping, serious winter bivvying, is a good idea. It's also very durable. I can lay it down on a bed of spruce boughs. I'm not worried about it getting damaged. Also, the Dutch are a tall nation, so it's a big bag. So it's good for tall people as well, but it weighs over a kilogram. It's heavy. And again, do you need to be taking something like that out with you in the woods in the summer? I don't think you do.

This is the first tarp that I bought. It's an Australian hutchie. It's a high weave. It's quite thick. It's a high-weight fabric, very tough, very durable. But again, this weighs about a kilo. It's like a bag of sugar in my hand. And again, there's a lot of people carrying stuff like this. Very good piece of kit, very durable, lasts a lifetime, absolutely excellent, but it's heavy. And this is only a one-man tarp. If you're

concerned about weight, this is probably not your first choice. So here, we've got a 2.7-kilo sleeping bag. We've a 1-kilo bivvy bag, and we've got nearly a kilo here. You've got about five kilos of kit here, particularly once you include a sleeping mat. Five kilos, that's over ten pounds just for your sleeping kit. That's a lot of weight. And that's the area you really need to concentrate on when you're looking at reducing the weight of your multi-day camping pack to start off with, because that's where you'll make the most gains. And then, we can look at other areas where we can make some improvements as well.

So first off, take a bag that's suitable for the season. This is a three-season sleeping bag, so I use this from about early April through till the end of October in the UK. Unless I'm really high up in the mountains, the early on in the season, later on in the season, this is the bag that I might typically use. I like this for the woods. I run a lot of courses over the summer, and we don't travel huge distances on those courses. We might be walking for a few miles and from one bivvy site to another bivvy site, but I'm not walking 10, 15, 20 miles a day like I might be on a journey. I'm quite happy to have this synthetic bag. It weighs about 1.3 kilos, so it's 1.4 kilos lighter than that bag. I'm quite happy to have that with me. And also because I'm using it a lot, it's a synthetic bag, it's easy to clean. I can put that in my washing machine at home and dry it out at home. It doesn't need specialist cleaning like a down bag does.

But if I'm going to make a journey where weight is critical, that is too heavy and I'm going to look at some other options. And we'll cover that shortly. But people might be worried, particularly early in the season or late in the season, "What if I'm a bit cold at night? What if we have a frost, have a late frost in the spring or an early frost in the autumn? What if I have a really chilly unpleasant night?" And that is often what causes people to take bags that are too heavy for the season.

Well, you'll know from my previous videos, that I always take a little bag that has a hat or a balaclava in there, some warm gloves, little wooly gloves, and a thermal base layer, typically a merino-wool base layer. And I take that any time of the year, because you can have a cold day. Even a rainy day in the summer can be quite chilly, particularly if you're not moving a lot, if you're relatively static, depending on what you're doing. Taking a cotton shirt off is great in warm weather, but as soon as it gets a bit cold and damp, it's not great. Having a thermal layer to put on

underneath is a sensible thing to have. You can use that while you're sleeping as well. So if you're worried about having a cold night, that's something you probably have with you anyway. You can use it in your sleeping bag. So you don't need to carry the extra weight. You've already got that, so make use of it. That's now got two purposes rather than just one. You can use it during the night, as well as during the day.

Also, I can't think of a time of year, particularly in Northern Europe or Britain, where you wouldn't be carrying a hat at any time of the year. Again, cold damp days, early in the morning, late at night, sitting around the campfire in the evenings can be a bit chilly. A lightweight woolly hat, beanie hat is really, really sensible to have. I've always got something like this with me. Again, you can wear it in your sleeping bag, keep you warm.

And also, socks. Now, if you're worried about getting cold, you've got socks with you anyway. Socks, hat, top, that's going to more than add a whole season to the rating of your sleeping bag if you put those on. You've got those with you. You don't need to take the big, bulky bag.

Another thing a lot of people like to take is a silk liner for the sleeping bag. That helps keep your sleeping bag clean, because dirty sleeping bags don't work as well. They don't function as well. All the insulation starts to get matted. The air then isn't as trapped as well. That means that it's not as warm, because it's the air that keeps you warm. So the insulation needs to support and have in it lots of air. And as soon as all the insulation starts getting matted and not having air in it, it's not going to work as well. Also, a dirty sleeping bag is not a very pleasant place to be. That's much easier to clean than a sleeping bag. So whether you're using a down bag or a synthetic bag, that can be a good thing to have. Also, it adds some warmth to your sleeping bag. So it adds a little bit of warmth to your bag, and it helps keep you clean. So for not a lot of extra weight, that's something, again, that's going to add warmth to your bag and also help keep it clean and in good nick. It'll make it last longer.

So we're already reducing the weight just by thinking about how we can stay warm at night, rather than just taking a huge bag just in case. And that's a big leap to take to start off with. And then we've got tarp and bivvy bag. Those were both quite

heavy. They're very heavy duty. They're very tough. But do we really need them to be that heavy and that tough? Probably not. Even if you go to a British-army bivvy bag, which I've got in here, they're 800 grams. So you're saving a bit of weight. And that's a sizeable bag as well. Even if you're a big person, you've got plenty of room in a British-army bivvy bag. I put that in a stuff sack myself just to keep it contained. So that starts to save you a bit of weight. And that along with my sleeping mat - and we'll look at tarps in a second - I'm starting to lose a bit of weight there.

Here's another Australian hutchie, same design as this one, but it's a lighter-weight material. It's about half the weight of this one. You can see it's a lot smaller as well. So we're reducing bulk, less bulky sleeping bag, less bulky bivvy bag, less bulky tarp. That's still a one-person tarp, but it's a lighter-weight material, still very tough, still very durable. These are the ones that we use in our courses. They get used a lot by a lot of people, some of whom are not particularly experienced with using tarps or really necessarily experienced with looking after equipment. Things get abused a little bit sometimes, or they just get used a lot. These are very durable, and they last a long time. So very good investment, but still, they weigh about half a kilo or a little bit more. With the rope on, they're still quite heavy.

What you can look at, maybe, is a silicon-nylon tarp. Now, these are a lot lighter. This is actually bigger than this tarp or the other one. You could get two people under this. It's a push. This is from Mountain Equipment Co-op. I bought it in Canada. Silicon-nylon scout tarp. And some geese cooing over there. Very good. Very good. A lot lighter, that weighs about 400 grams, so bigger area, lighter weight than the one-man tarp. That's what I often put in my daypack as well. Even if I'm out with a friend, we want to stop for lunch and it's raining, we can throw this up quickly, have a shelter that we can both sit under. We can even have a fire under it. Check out the article on my blog, "The Value of a Tarp in Your Day Bag." That's the tarp that's in the article with the fire underneath it.

What I haven't really talked about so far is sleeping mats. Now, this is a Therm-a-Rest. This is a trail-light Therm-a-Rest. It's quite thick. It's quite a comfy one. This is my luxury Therm-a-Rest, if you like. It's still only a three-quarter-length mat, though. I don't use full-length Therm-a-Rest because it's just extra weight. And it's extra bulk that, frankly, I don't need. I'm six-foot-one, over 180 centimeters. I'm

quite tall, but I can still get away with a three-quarter-length sleeping mat. I put clothing down for my pillow, so I don't have my mat under my head. I just put on a waterproof and then a fleece. That's my pillow. And then under my feet, I'm quite happy if below my knees to my feet, that's not on the mat. They don't need the padding. And if it's really cold, first line of defense is putting a pair of socks on. Second line of defense is I can put a rucksack underneath, if I'm really cold, I'm losing heat to the ground. I don't need that full-length bag.

Just remind me about how much that weighs. That weighs - I've got a few details here - about 550 grams. So that's not a bad weight. It's very comfy. And again, a lot of the time if I'm not moving around too much, that's my combination. That and that, and maybe a tarp like this. Yup, so 1.3 kilos for this, 550 for that, so that's about 1.8. Eight hundred for this, that's about 2,700 in total. Add that on. That's just over three kilos, so about seven pounds in my rough arithmetic. I'll put the exact weight on the screen on the video when I edit the video, so you've got all that info there.

So that's my typical summer working on courses. It's durable. It's relatively lighter. It's a lot lighter than that. I've saved several kilos over that already. And it's not that expensive. I can wash it easily. And that all works well, but what if I want to go really lightweight? If I'm covering distance, I really want to get my pack weight down. I really want to get my pack size down as well, if I can. But weight is the critical thing. Well, there's a few things we can do that might really surprise you.

Okay, the first one, sleeping bag. This is a lightweight sleeping bag. This is a down bag by Mountain Equipment. It's the Xero 200. It is a summer bag, if you like. The comfort is six degrees, and the limit is two. Now, I'm filming this in April or late April, early May. And I've been using this in April, and it's been almost frosty some nights. I've been warm enough in this. I've not been in the tent, which always adds a few degrees of warmth. I've been out under a tarp in nearly frosty conditions, and this has been warm enough for me. Some nights, I've worn a thermal, just in case, but to be honest with you, I haven't really needed it. It's a good bag, and it weighs 635 grams. That's half the weight of that bag there. So I've saved 600-and-odd grams just by using this, and it's a really nice warm bag. Yes, it's more expensive. Yes, you need to be more careful looking after it. The materials are a little bit more fragile. And, yes, you need to send it off to a

specialist cleaner rather than putting it through your washing machine. Never put a down bag through your washing machine. You will ruin it. But you're saving a lot of weight with that. And it comes in a nice little stuff sack, as well.

Next up, bivvy bag. This is something I've got recently, and I'm really impressed with. A friend of mine was using one of these. I saw it. I thought, "I'm going to try one of those out." I was a little dubious about the breathability. It doesn't look like it should be really breathable. It breathes absolutely fine. This is a Snugpak Special Forces Bivvi Bag, and this weighs 440 grams. And not only is it small - that's the MOD bag, that's the Snugpak bag - it's also about half the weight. So sleeping bag and bivvy bag, just over a kilo, not even 1,100 grams yet. So a couple of pounds for those two. That's my main sleeping kit sorted.

What about sleeping mats? Well, I could use that one, but if you go really lightweight, this is the Therm-a-Rest ProLite short. This is one of the lightest-weight mats you can get, pretty similar ground coverage to that one, a bit thinner but perfectly comfortable. This is my lightweight backpacking mat that I use for all my lightweight trips. I use it for my canoeing trips, as well. This weighs 320 grams for that.

And finally, I've got a few planes going over today. I've been camping all week down in the South of England, and we get planes coming over on the approach to Gatwick Airport, which is about 40 miles away. Those people who want to build a second runway at Gatwick, this is the effect you're having on the countryside in the South of England. Not great. Not great. It puts the tourists off.

Tarp. This, believe it or not, is a tarp. This is also a silicon-nylon tarp, the same material as this. This is by Integral Designs, and it's the same size. It's the same coverage as one of these. This weighs around a kilo. This weighs 220 grams. It is about a fifth of the weight of this for the same coverage. So that is the lightweight setup, 600 grams sleeping bag, sleeping mat, 320. This is the heaviest of the little things, once you get past the sleeping bag. This is 440. And this is 220. Total weight, just over 1,600 grams. That's three pounds, nine ounces for the whole lot, for the whole sleep system that's very protective. It performs as well as my standard base-camp setup but is less than half the weight. This weighs a little more

than that sleeping bag on its own. It's 300 grams more. So it's really quite something.

Yes, it's going to cost you a bit more, but that is a huge weight saving on this. This was over 5 kilograms, getting on for 12 pounds. This weighs less than 4 pounds, 1.6 kilos. And it's incredible weight saving. So every single bit, you save a few hundred grams here, a few hundred grams there, a few hundred grams there. Before you know it, you've made a massive saving. It's also a hell of a lot less bulky. So that is my lightweight tarp-and-bivvy setup that you put it on top on what you might have with you in a daypack for a day hike. You don't even really notice it. It's like a liter and a half extra water and the water bottles that contain them. It's very little indeed. That is going to allow you to sleep out.

So that's my recommendation. And think about whether you're overspecifying to start off with, and go for the specification which suits the seasons. And then if you really want to go to town, choose some well-chosen lightweight kit that is a great investment, and once you put it on your back, you're going to go much, much further. You're going to save your ankles. You're going to save your back and have a much more comfortable time while you're out.

As I say, this is the first of a series of videos that's going to help you lighten the load and go further and be more comfortable in the outdoors while still undertaking those Bushcraft-camping-style trips. We're not asking you to do anything different here. We're just saying, "Lighten the load. Make your time comfortable." So I hope you find that useful. I hope that serves you well, and I look forward to seeing you in the next video. Thanks for watching.