

New Scout Equipment Buying Guide

(with appreciation to Troop 111 in Arlington, Virginia)

One of the first (and most important) questions every parent of a new Scout asks is: "What do I need to buy for my son?" Good question! Unfortunately, this critical topic is handled in only very general terms in your son's Scout Handbook and Field Guide. Every Scoutmaster has seen his share of beginner Scouts absolutely atrociously outfitted despite the expenditure of hundreds of dollars by well meaning parents - a financial disaster for the parents and a physical disaster for the Scout! It is not enough to know that your son needs a sleeping bag or a flashlight - the specifics are vital - and you also need to know what not to buy. Herein is a summary of my thoughts on how best to proceed in outfitting your Scout.

Lesson Number One: Your boy is going to lose things! Most items that are small, dark colored or (sadly, but true) extremely desirable to Scouts in other Troops tend to have unusually high mobility. Therefore, it is in your best interest to: A) Customize all gear with name tags or specific markings (yellow paint, etc.); B) Buy bright colored lower quality substitutes for younger Scouts (ages 10 through 13); C) Avoid camouflage or other dark gear that blends into the scenery; and D) Keep your patience.

Lesson Number Two: "Buy to Size." Don't subject your son to a "Bataan Death March;" although you'll be tempted to buy oversized equipment ("He'll grow into it"), don't do it! Overweight or oversized gear will run your boy right into the ground - and a few months later, you'll be yard selling everything off at 5 cents on the dollar because: "I really don't like Scouting very much."

Troop versus Personal Gear

What the Troop provides: Basically, all group oriented gear is bought, maintained, and replaced by the Troop. This includes tents and ground cloths, dining flies (tarps), cooking gear, wood cutting equipment (axes, saws, etc.), area lighting (Coleman® lanterns, etc.), rope, full sized First Aid kits, and for virtually all activities, all food (except for backpacking outings usually).

What the Scout provides: All personal gear; this includes (at a minimum), a duffel bag (eventually a backpack), a three season sleeping bag, a foam pad (full size for the sleeping bag) or self inflating air mattress (much more expensive), personal eating gear (bowl, fork and spoon, cup, canteen), a flashlight, proper clothing, proper footwear, rain gear, standard personal Scout gear (a decent knife, a compass, eventually a personal first aid and personal emergency kit) and items for maintaining personal cleanliness. Most of these items are addressed in somewhat more detail below. Other specific items, e.g., swimming trunks, helmets, etc., may be required for particular outings.

Understand immediately that proper outfitting of your son requires time, effort and (of course) money! There are a few short-cuts that are not short-changes, but they are limited! Taking the philosophical view, however, dollars spent now can lead to a lifetime of enjoyment and satisfaction - on a relative basis, camping gear (and Boy Scouting) can be a pretty good bargain.

Obviously, however, on the short time-scale, certain compromises between quality, expense and the simple reality of a rapidly expanding Scout must be made. Unless you have several interested boys in your family, it is difficult to justify purchasing costly equipment that will be outgrown in 18 months or less; on the other hand, you don't want your son to suffer in the great outdoors with defective junk!

Yes, you can do this without bankrupting yourself. My personal recommendation is to purchase the highest quality equipment that you can whose use is not dependent on the size of the scout - I still have some equipment that my parents acquired for me when I was 12 years old. These items include, e.g., a flashlight, knife, compass, foam pad, mini first aid kit, canteen and Scouting/outdoor books. I've missed a few items, but you get the idea. Keep Lesson One in mind.

For equipment that will be outgrown - pack, sleeping bag, rain gear, outdoor clothing, etc., you have three choices - bite the bullet and buy high quality, buy cheap (in most cases, a really bad idea) or buy used; I recommend the last option. Look in the "local neighborhood" type papers or while driving around on the weekends for multi-family garage sales - you can get incredible deals from yuppies that bought \$1000 worth of gear and went camping twice. Similarly, some parents sell off their gone-to-college childrens' "junk." I've found all sorts of Scout gear, especially gear suitable for small Scouts, at garage sales throughout Portland. Another good place to try are former Scouts - not the ones who stayed all the way to 18 and are going to keep virtually everything, but rather those who quit after age 12, 13 or 14; most parents are sympathetic to these type requests, and will not gouge you on prices (not a bad place to look for semi-used uniforms, either). Certain beginner gear (e.g., a small pack) may be available from the grown-up senior Scouts still in the Troop - ask! (You too will eventually be looking to sell off or give away your own grown-up Scout's beginning equipment!) Also remember that our Troop maintains a Uniform and Equipment exchange, which enables you to pick up some critical gear for very low prices, even free in some cases.

Part II of this Guide is a listing of many of the local camping outfitters in our area in this handout. General comments: When shopping, avoid places like "REI" unless the item you want simply cannot be found anywhere else (a rare occurrence), or unless they are having a big clearance sale. These places are for millionaires who want to look fetching in Virginia Hunt Country, not Scouts. With respect to all other locales noted on the list, remember Sy Sym's axiom about educated consumers - there can be

some amazing variances in the price of the same item between "Sunny's Surplus" vs. "Hudson Trail Outfitters" vs. "The Scout Shop." Camping gear sales are meaningful and numerous - unless you've got to have it now, never buy at full retail! (this is one of the reasons why I recommend staying away from The Scout Shop - they rarely have anything "on sale"). Don't forget the mail order catalogues for hard-to-find items; the best are Campmor and R.E.I.; ask around the Troop for copies. If you put yourself on their mailing lists, you'll get the latest versions by mail for at least 2 or 3 years.

Now let's get specific

Start out by reviewing the "Bare-Bones Camping List," and the similar lists in the Boy Scout Handbook (pp. 51-3) and Fieldbook (pp. 40-63). If the Troop is having a "shakedown" (where the older Scouts and Leaders check the younger Scouts' gear several days prior to a trip), it's a good idea to tag along, keeping eyes and ears open. Now let's walk through these deep, dark woods together:

The Backpack: You can generally hold off on this until your son actually wants to participate in backpacking events - usually a year or two down the line, although some boys want to jump in immediately. When you do go for it, get an external frame backpack that fits your son. Firmly resist buying oversize! Make sure it has a padded hipbelt, padded shoulder straps and support webbing across the back. Don't buy an internal frame "mountaineering" pack; they're hotter than blazes (cause they lay flat on your back) and the lack of an outside frame makes strapping on sleeping bags, foam pads and tents a royal pain in the behind. Yes, they feel very comfortable in the store and the salesperson will rhapsodize eloquently over how marvelous they are - Don't! If you're buying a used backpack (a much more sensible option), make sure that there are no cracks in the welds (the one thing that can't be repaired); if the pack-bag itself is really ratty, i.e., all the zippers torn out, etc. (a common reason why people dump the whole pack), you can usually easily mailorder purchase a replacement bag (at 1/3 the price of a new backpack) or have the zippers/rips repaired by a seamstress. The more side compartments on the bag, the better - they help your son keep things separated and organized.

The Sleeping Bag: Get a three season bag (rated to about 30 degrees F; weighing less than 4 pounds) and (if desired) a flannel liner; the latter can be easily custom made by anyone with a sewing machine. Get a synthetic (Hollofil II, etc.) bag as opposed to down; they are less expensive, nearly as warm, nearly as light, and - most importantly - are still reasonably insulating when wet (down is useless when wet!). The flannel liner is for very warm nights (use it alone on top of the sleeping bag) or very cold nights (inside) and is conveniently removed and washed (which extends the life of the bag). Most bags come with a waterproof nylon stuff bag; if not, purchase one - they're usually inexpensive.

The Foam Pad: Avoid a cheap (beach) air mattress!; they weigh far too much and are easily punctured. The latest (and greatest) idea are the new "Ridge Rest" (or equivalent) foam pads; they provide about a 15° F differential between the ground and the sleeping bag, plus they're very light. They come in two sizes (48 and 72 inches); they last forever, so you're better off buying the full 6 foot version unless you've got younger boys to eventually inherit the 4 foot version. There is also a new type air mattress called a Therm-a-Rest, which are self inflating and marvelously comfortable, but very expensive. If you get one of these, make sure your name is marked on it in large letters.

A Pillow: Not really necessary! Buy the small cloth stuff bag (commercially available, or make your own) for your son to fill with clothing or a jacket. If you insist on an inflatable pillow, still get a small cloth stuff bag that it will fit into; otherwise, it just slides away (plastic on plastic!). Most camping stores now sell a "backpacker's pillow," which you may prefer - again, not cheap. If you have small, lightweight pillows lying around the house, they'll also do (however, note that they'll get dirty.)

Eating gear: Everyone can more than get by with a medium size bowl and cup - both in durable plastic (lightweight and much easier to clean). Likewise, avoid the classic "knife, fork and spoon" kit; instead, get the heavy duty Lexan® polycarbonate utensils (fork and spoon only!) - lightweight and virtually indestructible. All of these can and should be marked with indelible pens - mixed up gear is a perpetual headache at campouts. Use fingernail polish or scratch initials; indelible pens work fine for virtually all plastic, but will need occasional renewal.

A Canteen: Get a translucent plastic 1 quart canteen or nalgene type water bottle (easy to see how full, whether it's got a flavored drink in it, and also whether or not he picked up any interesting items (leaves, etc.) when filling it at the last waterhole!). Avoid metal canteens (too heavy, react with some acidic drink mixes) and opaque plastic models.

Flashlights, etc.: Don't buy the 5 "D" cell police head-buster special - it weighs a ton and the boys don't need them. Get a 2 "C" or 2 "D" cell flashlight in a bright color (yellow is best.) Also avoid the very popular "Mag-Lites®;" they are surprisingly heavy and quite expensive (Warning!, your boy will doubtless want one!). Watch out, good flashlights are prime rip-off candidates; in addition, the all black ones are very easily lost. If you end up with a dark colored model, use bright fluorescent yellow or orange spraypaint to customize it and make it easy to spot; remember to mark your name/Troop 133 on the body.

A common additional light are the small wide-beam lights (about the size of a cigarette package) which are excellent for use inside a tent at night. These are sold at Camping stores and (oddly enough) at most auto-parts stores.

Clothing: Seemingly trivial but actually the toughest subject to address! Most beginning Scouts carry: A) Far too much, and B) the wrong type of clothing. Briefly, synthetics and wool clothing are much better than 100 % cotton fabrics; hot weather clothing should be light colored to reflect sunlight, cold weather should be dark; avoid pullovers - use button down shirts instead, they can be unbuttoned for cooling; in cooler weather, dressing in layers is far more versatile than using heavy duty one piece clothing (the latter has only two options: Broil or Freeze!). Blue jeans and blue jean jackets (or any other heavy weight cotton clothes) are extremely poorly suited to outdoor use; cotton is actually a negative insulator when wet - meaning you're better off wearing nothing at all rather than wet cotton. The previously mentioned "Bare-Bones Camping List" is a summary of what a Scout should bring on a typical weekend campout.

All clothing should be packed into nylon stuff sacks to keep them dry; bring one extra empty stuff sack to separate used from new through the weekend.

Final Note: Winter camping is a whole new ballgame and is addressed separately when we have a winter outing for all Scouts.

Footwear: - Not at all critical until your son begins to attend backpacking events. Once he does, however, this is your highest recurring expense. Your son will grow out of his boots long before he wears them out!; however, you really can't compromise on footwear on the trail. Cheap, shoddy boots cause rapid blister formation and utter hiking misery - a surefire recipe for a horrible backpacking experience! Likewise, you cannot buy used boots unless they were only worn once or twice - footwear that's been broken in on someone else's feet are far worse for you to break in versus a brand new pair of boots.

Look for reasonable quality leather or "High Tech Hiking" (not "Walking") boots that come up to about mid-ankle (for support); the soles should have a fairly aggressive tread design for proper purchase on wet, sloppy trails (Vibram® lugs or similar, also see below). The instep should have good arch support - bad boots are usually flat. Buy oversize! - your son will be wearing a thick pair of socks while wearing the boots (bring along a very thick pair of socks when going out to buy your son's boots!) Careful, most boots are standard width, if your son has a wide foot (see below), you may have to special order or look elsewhere.

Finally, don't pitch those old worn out sneakers (unless he's outgrown them)! This is what the guys wear around the campsite itself. Keep a pair in the pack in a plastic bag (otherwise, he'll be using his brand new Air-Jordans' in 6 inches of mud!).

Rain Gear: Although everybody hates them, the standard issue poncho is still about as reasonable as you can get. Full rain suits are a no-no; any activity and your boy is just as wet - from condensation and sweat - because they do not breathe. Some of the newest technology raingear (e.g., Gore-Tex) is breathable, but A) costs an unbelievable fortune; and B) doesn't hold up all that well under pack-straps or in heavy brush - Don't bother (and don't let Grandparents buy it either).

For backpacking, most backpacks are moderately rain resistant; rainproof pack covers are available or can be fashioned at need from heavy duty garbage bags. A good combination includes a windproof, water resistant jacket, a pack cover, a lightweight poncho, and a waterproof hat with a brim - this is versatile enough to handle up to very heavy driving rains (which we probably wouldn't hike in anyway). Some guys also take along lightweight nylon "wind" trousers for additional protection of legs in heavy rain.

Optional personal Scout gear

A Knife: For young Scouts, buy a reasonable quality folding lock-blade knife with about a three inch blade. The lock-blade prevents closing on fingers - probably the most common cause of cuts on new Scouts. Avoid the myriad "el-cheapo" Boy Scout and Swiss Army imitations - which don't hold an edge, break with serious use and rust at the first hint of rain. If your son's first knife survives his Scout career, apply to the Bishop for miracle certification; i.e., don't go overboard - it's quite probably not going to make it past the first summer. As mentioned above, bright colors and marking the name/Troop number on the body will greatly assist knife longevity.

Personally, I recommend a real knife for older Scouts, e.g., a folding Buck or its equivalent. A good knife can have the owner's name put on the handle by an engraver - this is a nice way to customize. This is an item that can last a lifetime (I've still got mine from age 15). Don't buy one for your younger boy, who hasn't yet gotten over the thrill of throwing knives at trees or into the ground; call a mature 15 a good cutoff. Definitely avoid fixed blade sheath knives (illegal at official B.S.A. functions) and all the various military blades (especially the double edged "commando" varieties). In addition, note that all boys go through at least one love affair with a humongous Bowie Knife or its equivalent; don't bother buying any of these - they're totally useless. The knife should have a blade length of no more than 4 inches max. Finally, don't buy your son his own personal hatchet, axe or saw - these are provided by the Troop (and aren't used all that often anyway).

A Compass: A standard compass is all that's necessary - no need for the gold plated model with 200 functions. A green or black colored military compass won't last even one campout. Definitely mark it with your son's name - most compasses look mighty similar! (Use a magic marker on the case, then cover it with a piece of Scotch tape.)

Personal Cleanliness: This includes a small roll of toilet paper in a plastic bag (wet toilet paper isn't very useful!), washcloth, small towel, soap (in a small plastic container; some guys bring a squeeze tube of liquid soap - much more convenient!), and toothbrush. It's much more sensible to purchase separate items and keep them in the pack; if the Scout uses his everyday home materials, he'll forget them in the pre-campout rush. Note: Realistically, all he'll use on a weekend campout is the toothbrush.

Other optional or "seasonal" personal stuff no one ever remembers: Insect repellent, suntan lotion, sunglasses, small sewing kit (with extra buttons), shoelaces and Scout book (for new Scouts working on advancement).

Things not to pack: Radios, Walkmans, electronic games, extra food (especially drinks or fresh fruits - they weigh a ton!), anything in glass, any aerosol type sprays (deodorants, insect repellent, etc.), gambling materials, excessive money or very valuable watches, jewelry, or 'heirloom' knives.

Things not to wear: Any military garb, any clothing with imprinted socially unacceptable logos or messages.

Things not to pack in: Footlockers, Duffel bags without handles, suitcases or (except for summer camp) boxes.

Packing: For "car-camping" (about 1/2 of our events), packing in a medium sized duffel bag is perfectly adequate. It's preferable to use the type that zip down the sides, allowing easy access to everything without having to empty the entire bag out the end. Use the bare-bones equipment list and check items off while packing!

If your son insists on a backpack for going on every event, fine - but keep in mind some of the following "advanced" concepts: [Note: A lot applies to normal packing as well.]

Packing the Backpack: Packing is an art in itself. Although an experienced backpacker's setup may look haphazard, it most certainly is not! You should probably assist your son in his first few tries (until he gets the hang of it). General comments: Try to keep the same items in the same place each time you pack; this way it's obvious when something's missing. Keep heavier items higher and closer to the back; this way the weight of the pack is more centered above your son's center of gravity (which makes the pack much easier to carry). Along similar lines, try to match the weight side-to-side in the pack. Use mesh or large, clear plastic bags as organizers; this way, it's obvious what's inside with a glance. The canteen, toilet paper, rain gear, flashlight, insect repellent, suntan lotion, sunglasses and any trail snacks should be placed in the outside pockets for quick, easy access. Most backpackers tie their sleeping bags on the lower frame and their foam pads on the top. Leave some room in the very top of the bag for Troop gear - this will be severely limited for newer and smaller Scouts, but we like everyone to share the weight around.

Upon his return home, have him unpack immediately; don't let those wet sneakers, candy bar wrappers and funky clothes ferment for a week or two! Empty and wash the canteen; rewash all cookware and utensils. After everything's been accounted for and cleaned, put it all in one spot (the same spot every time) for the next campout. [Don't, however, pack it all up in a "ready-to-go" mode - let things air out and stay fresh and dry.] If something's missing, don't panic - ask around the Troop (especially his last tentmates) for a recall. Usually, someone's recovered it and is looking for the rightful owner.

Finally, remember that the Troop is your best resource for everything concerned with camping; there's equipment, advice and information galore just a phone call away. There's only one kind of stupid question - the one that never gets answered - because it was never asked! You don't have to rush out and buy the nonessentials immediately; the other guys can carry a beginner Scout for awhile. Keep the weights and sizes down to your son's size, and he'll be fine! And remember, as your son gets more experience camping, he will find out what kinds of things he likes/needs/wants. Start with the basics, and go from there.

Places to purchase Scout Camping/Outdoor Gear:

Second Hand Stores (some new stuff too)

- Value Village – 18625 SE McLoughlin Blvd, Milwaukie Phone 503-653-7333
- Andy & Bax – 324 SE Grand Ave, Portland Phone: 503-234-7538
- Next Adventure – 426 SE Grand Ave, Portland Phone: 503-233-0706
- Sgt Gators Post Exchange – 19855 SE Sunnyside Rd, Boring (Damascus) Phone: 503-658-4903

Retail:

- GI Joes Milwaukie – 15600 SE McLoughlin Blvd, Milwaukie Phone: 503-653-5616
- GI Joes Clackamas – 9600 SE 82nd Ave Phone: 503-943-6180
- Sportsmans Warehouse – 9401 SE 82nd Ave, Portland Phone: 503-777-8700
- REI (can be expensive, but excellent quality) – 7410 SW Bridgeport Rd (exit 290 off I-5), Tigard Phone: 503-624-8600
- Scout Shop (for BSA stuff-uniforms, etc-expensive) – 2145 SW Naito Pkwy, Portland Phone: 503-243-5022

Online:

- Scout Direct (Alps Mountaineering for Scouts -45% off retail!) – www.scoutdirect.com
- Campmor – www.campmor.com