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Five Life Skills for BackCountry Enjoyment

By Chuck Fitzgerald

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As outdoor enthusiasts spend more and more time in our backcountry, a handful of skills become more and more essential. All of these skills are easy to learn and add considerably to the overall enjoyment of spending time out-of-doors. The key word here is enjoyment. In order to enjoy ourselves, we must be comfortable with ourselves and our surroundings. This is especially true in the backcountry. So let's talk about life skills that, when mastered, will lead to heightened enjoyment as we find ourselves off the beaten path.

Understanding basic first-aid is paramount. This life skill is needed whether you enter the backcountry or not. If you haven't taken both a first-aid class and a CPR class lately, what are you waiting for? Accidents happen, be prepared. The American Red Cross offers both classes all the time.

Backcountry travel requires a basic understanding of how to navigate. Whether you prefer to use a map with a compass or with a GPS, learn how to find your way around. Getting lost is bad. Fear of getting lost can be worse. Classes for map reading, compass use and GPS use are readily available in most communities. Check local libraries, community colleges or orienteering clubs. On-line classes are readily available as well.

How are you at tying knots? This too is an easily acquired skill. Nothing is cooler than needing to use a rope and actually knowing how to use it. Whether you are tying off a tent stake or repelling over a cliff, being able to use the right knot at the right time is important. Learn how to tie a bowline, sheet bend, rolling hitch and timber hitch, to name a few. Many books and websites are available with pictures and instructions.

To start a fire, only two things are needed--heat and fuel. Whenever you visit the backcountry, always be sure to carry both heat and fuel. Heat is easiest to carry in the form of waterproof matches or a weather proof lighter. Fuel is tougher to carry although starter fuel such as lint and mineral oil shouldn't be too difficult to carry. Nature provides an abundance of fuel if you know what you're

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looking for. Whether rubbing sticks together (yuck) or using waterproof matches (yea), be sure you know how to start a fire before you start your journey. There are many ways to start a fire and you should find at least three of them that work for you. You can find lots on-line regarding this life skill.

The most enjoyable way to experience our backcountry is the "low impact" way. You've most likely heard the phrase "leave only footprints, take only pictures." If we take good care of our wilderness areas, not only will we be able to enjoy them our entire lives but our descendants will have the opportunity to enjoy them too. There are many organizations actively educating outdoor enthusiasts as to the best way to "low impact" recreate. Two very popular organizations are Tread Lightly! and Leave No Trace.

Knowing these five life skills will provide you with the confidence to fully enjoy your time in the backcountry. Once you've mastered these skills be sure to pass them on to your friends and family. Get Outdoors!

Chuck Fitzgerald is Owner and President of Phoenix, Arizona based BackCountry Toys, an online store providing backcountry specialty gear and educational information to outdoor enthusiasts. Visit

to receive the free newsletter "FreshAir" or call (800) 316-9055. Chuck

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5 Ways to Get the Most Out of Your BackCountry Gear

By Chuck Fitzgerald

Time out of doors is a precious commodity to the outdoor enthusiast – but are we getting the most out of this time. One way to ensure maximum backcountry enjoyment is to get the most possible value from the gear you acquire and use. Here are 5 ways to get the most out of your backcountry gear - and your backcountry experience.

– Purchase the best gear you can possibly afford. If you are going to spend a year planning your next excursion on the continental divide, spend three months getting into great shape, take three weeks vacation when it's time for the hike, purchase an airline ticket, and so on - then why are you using the cheapest backpack you can find? A good backpack will make all the difference in the world. This applies to all of your backcountry gear. Whether its your GPS unit, sleeping bag, rain gear or dual-fuel portable stove, be sure to carry good equipment in order to get the most value for your money. Don't buy cheap!

– Learn how to use all of your gear correctly and practice using it. When you are completely lost, it's not the time to learn how to navigate with a compass and map. When you and your firewood are wet, it's not the time to learn how to start a fire with the flare you've been carrying for 5 years in your pack. Take time to learn all of the features of your gear. You might be surprised to learn just how useful your GPS really is when you understand how to use the backtrack feature. You'll be mighty thankful when

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you learn the proper weight distribution for your backpack. Take time to learn - practice around your home before you venture into the backcountry.

– Keep your gear with you and use it as much as possible. Your backcountry gear isn't just for the backcountry. It has unlimited uses in everyday life. Never go on a road trip without your pack. You'll almost always find an opportunity to use your binoculars or GPS unit. If you don't have your gear with you, you'll need it - never fails.

– Take great care of your gear. Hopefully you've learned this from your parents and not necessarily from experience. Your gear will only take good care of you if you take good care of it. Conversely, your gear will let you down if you don't take good care of it. That's a bad situation to be in. Inspect everything before you embark on your adventure. Clean and properly store all of your gear upon your return. Have you check your gear's straps, fuel, waterproofing, batteries and overall condition lately? Taking good care of your gear is an important part of enjoying your backcountry trip.

– When you're done with it, donate it - and some of your time – to a local scout troop. They are always looking for assistance from outdoor enthusiasts. You'll feel great getting this last piece of benefit out of your old trusty gear!

Optimize your time in the backcountry. The easiest way ensure maximum outdoor enjoyment is to get the most possible value from your gear. Let these 5 ways guide you in getting the most out of your backcountry gear - and your backcountry experience. Use this information and you'll Get It Right The First Time.

Get Outdoors!

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