

# Light-Pack Bushwalking

By Russell Willis

**No one need carry more than 10 kg on any of our Kakadu or Kimberley walks of up to 7 days between food drops. Anything beyond that is an extra.** For less than seven days, the weight drops as food and water make up half the total.

Even though you often need more gear in southern Australia, you do not need to more than 8-10 kg on weekend or three day walks.

The following information is based on a number of magazine articles plus the practical experience of Frank and Micky Whitehouse, John Murray, Marie Agrums, Robin Baillie and Arthur Weston..

## What do you need?

**Pack** Most bushwalkers are so conditioned to large framed packs that they don't realise that weights of 10-12 kg can easily and **comfortably** be carried in a foam stiffened simple backpack such as the GoLite "Gust" or "Breeze" which weigh 5-600g. For maximum comfort, these packs need to be carefully packed. They are not suitable for carrying heavy loads. Kathmandu introduced a pack called the "Hamilton" weighing 850g last year. It seems to have now gone off the market, but there may be other similar ones now available. It was not quite as large as the "Gust" but John who has used both the "Gust" and the "Hamilton" finds it is easier to pack as well as being more comfortable overall and more like a traditional pack. I haven't tried the "Hamilton" but I have used the "Gust" – the light load allowed me to walk much further in a given time than I would have walked with my normal pack. Kathmandu shops are in most major cities in Australia and New Zealand. See [www.kathmandu.co.nz](http://www.kathmandu.co.nz) for the closest one. If you want to try a GoLite pack, you may need to order it from the US. See [www.golite.com](http://www.golite.com).

**Shelter** **Up North.** The tent you use down south may not have the ventilation you need to be comfortable in tropical conditions. During the dry season you do not need more than a mosquito net and ground sheet. The tent that Frank and Micky use weighs just under 1.5 kg. The GoLite "Nest" which John and Marie sometimes use weighs less than 600 g (no poles, but you can hold it up with a stick). Our lightest two person mossie dome weighs less than 2 kg (without fly). A plain mossie net weighs less than 500 g. This is not as easy to put up as a mossie dome but if you want to carry as little as possible, you'll have to do a little extra work.

Arthur's Wilderness Equipment tropical inner (mosquito net and floor) for two weighs 690 g, w cords but w/o pegs or poles (the campsite provides them or substitutes for them). Overhead cord is 25 g or less, ground sheet (to protect the tent floor and keep it clean) is 100 g or less, and a plastic emergency fly is 240 g.

**Down South.** Some of the GoLite gear is suitable for use in colder, wetter climates, for example, two people might share a GoLite "Cave 2" + a "Nest 2: which hangs underneath. Total weight 1150g. See [www.golite.com](http://www.golite.com) for more information. If bugs are not a problem, the Black Diamond "Betamid" (available from Paddy Pallin among others) fits two people and weighs only 1 kg or 1.5 kg with an optional floor. The Macpac "Microlight" and Mountain Designs "Pass" are good in more severe weather. Both weigh about 2 kg and can hold two moderate sized people. Lighter and larger but hard to find in Australia is the Kelty "Dart 2". It weighs only 1.3 kg and, although I haven't used it myself, the dimensions given indicate that it would probably be more comfortable for two people than either the "Microlight" or the "Pass".

**How light can you go?** John and Marie have modified an early version of a pyramid tent like the "Betamid". By hanging it from a light rope hung between two trees or long outside sticks, they can save the weight of the pole while making the shelter more stable in high winds. John says, "It is an extremely weather proof and spacious shelter for two. Marie and I have even used them in the snow. Our latest canopy weighs 850g. Marie made a clip up 100g mossie net which can be added by simply sitting up in bed. All gear fits comfortably inside. It is spacious enough to allow stove cooking if needed." As good as this is in southern conditions where you can use pegs, John also says that it is not very good in the rocky and sandy conditions such as we often encounter up north.

**Sleeping bag** Down probably still has the lightest weight to warmth ratio but some of the latest synthetics are getting close. I'll restrict most of my comments to down, but remember, they lose almost all their warmth if you get them wet.

Our lightest down bags weigh about 1.2 kg. With careful searching you should be able to find good bags weighing 900 g or less. One way to save weight is to use a top only bags like the Macpac "Pinnacle" which weighs about 900 g. (You use these by sliding a sleeping mat into a sleeve on the bottom.) The greatest warmth for weight (at least on paper) that I've found is the GoLite "Featherlight". It contains 350g down yet weighs only 570g. The Macpac "Firefly" weighs only 450g. Although it is designed to be used to enhance the warmth of other bags, Robin finds that it is warm enough for her in the northern dry season or southern summer. If two people are travelling together, they can often share a single bag by opening it out and using it as a blanket. Down probably still has the lightest weight to warmth ratio but some of the latest synthetics are getting close. Arthur uses a Trailmaster nylon/polyester cheapie as a 650 g blanket for two.

**Word of warning.** Most of the Warmlight bags from the US include a vapour barrier. Great if the temperatures are well below freezing but you'll probably wind up soaked in your own sweat in most Australian conditions.

**Silk liner** A silk liner for your sleeping bag adds warmth and keeps the bag clean. It weighs only 150-200g. Cotton is much heavier.

**Sleeping mat** Although a few die hards keep weight to an absolute minimum by sleeping on the ground, most people find a sleeping mat makes them much more comfortable. By using your light pack under your legs, you can easily be comfortable with a ¾ length mat. 800 g will get you a ¾ length Thermarest, a full length ultralight Thermarest or a lightweight airbed. A ¾ length ultra light thermarest should weigh only about 600 g. Some mats weigh even less.

Arthur uses a full length, "extremely comfortable" Stephenson Warmlite Down Air Mat (DAM). Together with carry bag and pump, it weighs 800 g. John, however, feels that the "DAM" is not a good choice for "thorny northern or central Australia".

**Torch** LED head torches are expensive but they weigh next to nothing and the batteries last a long time. You get all the light you need while carrying less than 100 g. One very light one is the Black Diamond Ion LED which weighs 30 g, with battery good for 15 hours and head band. The ultimate lightweight is the Princeton Tec "Pulsar" which weighs only 6g.

**Eating Utensils** Plastic weighs less than metal. A fork is an option. You do need a spoon and knife. If you want to keep weight to an absolute minimum and don't mind a little inconvenience, you can use a bowls as a cup (or a cup as a bowl). You should be able to get this down to 100-150 g. Frank and Micky manage with 125 g between them. Arthur gets by with 45 g by "using a 500 g yoghurt tub, or something similar, which weighs 15 g. My durable plastic cup also weighs 15 g, and picnic spoon, fork and knife each weighs 5 g."

**Water Bottle** You can find a decent water bottle that weighs no more than 100 g. (I use old plastic drink bottles. A 1.5 litre bottle weighed 62 g. Two smaller bottles still come in at about 100 g.) Fill it (or them) and you'll be carrying 1.1 kg, one kg of which will disappear as you drink it. Bring a wine bladder (50g) as a spare container.

**Toiletries** Toothbrush, toothpaste, sun screen, insect repellent, toilet paper, personal first aid and medication, hair brush or comb. What else do you need? Practical experience has shown that one of the tiny tubes of toothpaste you are often given in aeroplanes can last two people for up to 7 days. (Can't find a tiny tube? Put a little in a film cannister.) 50 g sun screen can last two people for up to ten days. (Put the sun screen in something like a film cannister.)

**Spare Clothes** This list does not include the clothes you'll be wearing most of the time. You don't need much. 600 grams or less should do it.

**Up North.** All of our Kakadu and Kimberley walks take place in tropical or subtropical conditions. Although it can get chilly enough for you to want something warm in the evening, the days will be warm. You can almost always wash something out in a creek at lunch time and have it dry enough to put back on before you move on.

On northern trips, we recommend that you carry:

- Lightweight thermal top (100 g) for cool evenings and mornings.  
Add thermal pants (an extra 100 g) if you are sensitive to cold. (It's unlikely to be cold enough to need heavy thermals.)
- Lightweight sarong (200 g) for use as a towel and for wearing while waiting for your walking clothes to dry if you wash them in hot weather. If it's unlikely to be warm enough to wear a sarong, leave it behind and bring slightly warmer thermals. A sarong is, however, potentially dangerous around a campfire. Alternatives include a small pack towel (advantages: smaller and lighter; disadvantages: may get stiff when they dry, you can't wear them) or Chux cloths. The latter are highly absorbent and dry almost instantly.
- Spare underwear and socks. (150 g).  
(An article in the December 2002 issue of *Backpacker* magazine recommends leaving your underwear at home. "You'll be cooler, drier and less stinky. Feeling modest? Buy shorts with built-in mesh briefs.")
- A clean t-shirt (150 g) or something similar for wearing at camp.

**Nothing else is necessary.** Keep your change(s) of clothes in the vehicle, not on your back during the walks. The clothes you don't wear to bed can be used as a pillow at night.

**Down south.** You might want a bit of extra warmth in cold weather. On winter walks in Victoria, Robin uses an angora wool cardigan and a nylon windcheater which together weigh less and take up less room than a polar fleece she used to use. If it's cold enough for something like a cardigan, you won't need the sarong. An "Icebreaker" woolen thermal top weighs about 250g. Several people have told me that it is warmer, more comfortable and less smelly than the standard polypropylene.

**Rain Wear** **Up North.** If you are walking up north, leave your rain gear at home. It won't rain in the dry season. (We've had July rain only twice in the last 30 years.) In the wet season, the rain is warm and you'd sweat enough so you'd get soaked anyway. You might get a little chilly if you sit in the rain during lunch, but all you need is something like the 50g "emergency poncho" I often carry during the wet season (costs about \$4).

**Down South.** If you are planning to walk in constant rain, then you may need heavy gear which is outside the scope of these notes. But, if you simply need to be prepared in case of rain, then you might want to carry a raincoat of some sort. If rain is only a slight possibility, you might want to go with something like my 50g poncho. If it is more likely, you might want something more substantial. GoLite offers two lightweight raincoats that weigh 315g and 475g. REI offers a Sierra Designs raincoat that weighs 340g. There should be similar light jackets available in Australia.

**Note.** Waterproof-breathable coats will let water in if the rain is long enough and heavy enough. They won't let sweat out fast enough unless the temperature is reasonably cool. Even then you might have to take off an extra layer to keep your sweat production down.

**Billy** If you can have a campfire (as is almost always the case throughout the Top End and Kimberley), all you'll need is a billy and something to pull it off the fire. (A stick you pick up at your campsite is the lightest option, but a small set of billy lifters or a glove should weigh no more than 50g.) My 1.5 litre aluminium billy holds enough for 2-3 people and weighs only 150g. My 2.5 litre aluminium billy weighs 220 g and easily holds enough to feed 4. Titanium weighs even less, but it is very expensive and, I believe, doesn't conduct heat as well so it is more prone to getting hot spots.

- Stove** There are many good walks where you need a stove if you are going to have a hot meal or hot drink. If you are carrying a stove and fuel for one person, you are carrying too much. Share with someone else and you cut the weight almost in half. One stove can easily serve 4-6 people so you can cut the weight still further. With a bit of practice, you should be able to work out how much fuel you need so you can cut your weight to an absolute minimum.
- The ever popular Trangia burns metho. It is the safest, but it is the least fuel efficient. It is also relatively heavy, the small cookset weighs about 1 kg without fuel.
  - Shellite stoves give the most heat per unit of fuel. They are, however, relatively heavy. The lightest I've seen weighs about 340 g. Most weigh 450-500g. MSR is the best known brand, but there are others. A full MSR 650 mL fuel bottle weighs about 600g. Stove and fuel weighs more than needed for one or two people but for three or more sharing, the weight per person drops and it becomes worth considering.
  - Gas cannister stoves are the lightest. The MSR "Superfly" weighs only 135g. The MSR "Pocket Rocket" is lighter still at 80g. A small fuel canister weighs only 230g. share it between two and you are down to 155g per person for a weekend.
- Fire bans** If you are walking during a complete fire ban, leave the stove and billy at home. Carry something fresh instead.
- Food** Each person is different, but you can keep weights down by using dried spreads like hummous rather than things like peanut butter or jam. If you have access to a dehydrator, you might want to try making your own dried spreads. Robin makes them up at home, carries them dry, adds a bit of water at morning tea and they are ready to use at lunchtime. Her favourites include
- Roasted tomatoes with oregano + slices of black olives
  - Canned creamed corn with bacon flavoured soy chips
  - Mashed red kidney beans, lemon juice, garlic & fat-free mayonnaise
  - Roasted capsicum, onion and celery
  - Beetroot puree with garlic and cream cheese
  - Canned baked beans in ham sauce
  - Tuna and ginger
  - Curried tuna
- A moderate eater should be able to get the weight of breakfasts, lunches and snacks down to 250-300g per day. Our three-course evening meals weigh about 350g per person. Yours should weigh no more than that – they can easily weigh less.

## Optional Extras

You may want to carry a few lightweight extras to make yourself a little more comfortable.

- Camp sandals** Some people find that the extra weight is well worth while so they can protect their feet without having to wear their boots/shoes. If you keep your eyes open when you visit K-Mart, Big W and similar stores, you should be able to find reasonable sandals (not thongs) that weigh from 100 to 400 g. (Crocs or similar are as light as you can go.)
- Day pack** Can make the day walks easier. One home made one comes in at only 30 g. Most will weigh a bit more.
- Camera** Some cameras weigh next to nothing; 250 g to 500 g can get you a decent camera.
- Book** For lazy days. 200 to 300 g. Don't forget, in a group, you can almost always trade during a trip.
- Pillow** Many people find that a bundle of clothes isn't enough and that a lightweight pillow makes the difference between a good night's sleep and an uncomfortable one. I use a 125g Korjo inflatable back pillow that I got at Big W. If you can't find one, try their website, [www.Korjo.com](http://www.Korjo.com). They are Australian, based in Melbourne. Lighter still are the U-shaped neck pillows you can find in most chemists. I have one which weighs 70g. If you don't like the inflatables, there are a number of small crushable foam pillows on the market. I have an old one which weighs 280g.

## A lightweight win you might not have thought about

If you are carrying a light pack, you don't need heavy hiking boots unless you have particularly weak ankles. Research shows that every pound on your feet feels like 6.4 pounds in your pack. Switch to low-cut hikers or trail runners, and you'll save the equivalent of 10 to 15 pounds (about 4.5 to 7 kg). The key is not to swap until you've lightened your load – and considered the potential hazards of your terrain. But in the end, there's no better place to save weight and no other change that will make backpacking feel so much easier.” (*Dec 2002 issue of Backpacker magazine*) Arthur wears New Balance 805 All Terrain running shoes, that weigh about 950 g. I have often worn Dunlop KT26 running shoes which weigh about 700 g on trips where I have carried a moderate sized pack.

**Websites of interest** overseas sites will ship to Australia The internet gives you a good way to research lightweight gear before you visit the bushwalking shops. Some lightweight gear may not yet be available in Australia. It can, however, often be ordered from overseas with minimal hassles. The following are some of the sites I used to research this paper.

[www.warmlite.com](http://www.warmlite.com) American site. Relatively easy to use. Lightweight gear. Been around a long time. Source of Arthur's DAM sleeping mat.

[www.golite.com](http://www.golite.com) American site. Will ship to Australia. We've tried some of their gear and liked it. Easy to use site.

[www.rei.com](http://www.rei.com) American site. Largest retailer in the US. (Co-op) Own gear plus many others. Easy to use.

[www.mec.ca](http://www.mec.ca) Canadian site. Largest retailer in Canada. (Co-op). Own gear plus many others. Easy to use.

[www.paddypallin.com.au](http://www.paddypallin.com.au) Australian site. Paddy Pallin stores. Own gear plus others. good site. Easy to use.

[www.mountaindesigns.com](http://www.mountaindesigns.com) Australian site. Own gear. Easy to use.

[www.snowgum.com.au](http://www.snowgum.com.au) Australian site. Own gear plus others. Relatively easy to use.

[www.kathmandu.co.nz](http://www.kathmandu.co.nz) New Zealand & Australia. Own gear. Relatively hard to find gear without constantly going back and starting over. Site under development and no where near complete as of February 2003.

[www.macpac.co.nz](http://www.macpac.co.nz) New Zealand. Own gear often sold in Australia. Site is reasonably easy to use if you know exactly what you are looking for. It is, however, difficult to browse. [www.korjo.com](http://www.korjo.com) Australia. Own travel gear. Good pillows. Look at product range, then personal comfort. Site easy to use. Can order direct.

[www.backpacker.com](http://www.backpacker.com) American site. *Backpacker* magazine. Good gear reviews. Links to one of the most useful sites of all ...

**[www.gearfinder.com](http://www.gearfinder.com)** American site, from *Backpacker* magazine. Choose your criteria and get comparisons of dozens of different tents, sleeping bags, stoves or whatever.

**[www.peaktopeak.net/ultralight.html](http://www.peaktopeak.net/ultralight.html)** Another American site. This one has links to many other sites including private ones where people describe what they've done to minimise their pack weights on long trips.

**[www.bushwalkingholidays.com.au](http://www.bushwalkingholidays.com.au)** Our own website. It contains lots of information about the areas where we walk and bushwalking in the tropics as well as information about the trips we offer.

## Could this be you?

I'll finish with a couple of quotes from John Murray about why lightweight bushwalking can be so beneficial and about why so many experienced bushwalkers are reluctant to try it.

“Most walks done by us city dwellers tend to be weekend walks, often hard and long. This is all the more reason to go light as walkers tend not to exercise and are not particularly fit after weeks in the office.”

“I believe that most bushwalkers are reluctant to go lightweight mainly because they do not wish to spend money on a second rucksack (although they may also own a chunky daypack). They are quick to tell you how their trusty, ten year old pack has been everywhere with them and has become a faithful friend steeped in nostalgia.

Bushwalkers are generally very cautious with their spending on gear. One of everything usually does and is expected to last a long time. Those coming into the scene in the last 10-15 years see all their gear as a one-off purchase for life. They feel totally secure with the heavy gear they have used for many years so why take a risk and change.”

**Why change?** Comfort and enjoyment! By going light,

- you’ll still be enjoying the bush long after your contemporaries have given up because they can’t carry heavy packs.
- you won’t feel anywhere near as tired at the end of the day so you’ll be able to enjoy your walks more.
- you’ll be able to walk further in a given time and get to places you couldn’t reach before.

**We can help.**

If you are planning to do one of our trips, we have a **limited** amount of lightweight gear available for hire. This gives you the chance to try before you buy. If you want to try it out, please let us know as soon as you book so we can hold it for you.

**Thank you.**

Finally, I would like to thank Micky, Frank, Arthur, Robin, John and Marie for their help in preparing this document. Without their assistance, it would not have been possible.