



Article by Tray Murphy

These ideas about buying Boy Scout Camping gear were compiled using the resources and experiences of over a dozen parents, Scout leaders, and camping experts. It represents over 100 years of combined camping experience, and exhaustive research into the camping arts in an effort to help you, the parent of a Boy Scout, to resist the "Mommy, I've just got to have one too" syndrome and still provide your son with adequate, safe, and affordable camping gear. It is not the end-all be-all of gear purchasing, but is intended to be a guide that you can use to help avoid emptying the college fund while your son is still in the 6th or 7th grade.

Let's face it, just look through any equipment catalog, or visit a local camping equipment supplier, you will no doubt experience sticker shock in a way you never thought possible. The array of things that people buy for camping is bewildering, and even if your family camps together often, making the purchases necessary for a Scout to go out on his own can be difficult. Hopefully, these few paragraphs will help.

Our troop is an outdoor troop. We meet year-round, and unless road conditions or other unforeseeable circumstances occur, we go camping monthly. Most of a Scout's preparedness for both expected and unexpected happenings is in his head, but he needs the proper equipment to ensure his safety and comfort.

### **A Few General Notes**

- 1)** It is not necessary to start out with a complete set of gear. Scouts can share, borrow (check with older Scouts who have upgraded their gear to find good used equipment), or make their own as they learn what they need and like.
- 2)** There is always a tradeoff between cost and quality. Top of the line expedition equipment is not needed to "keep up with the other boys" in the troop. Famous brand names often cost much more than the equivalent gear purchased from a dealer who has his equipment made for him. Just because it says "North Face™" and costs \$250, does not mean that the gear is any better than "Slumberjack™" priced at \$125 (and I'm not picking on NF specifically, they make superb quality equipment). However, poorly made gear will not stand up to rugged use, and it can be uncomfortable, unusable, or even dangerous. Good equipment does not have to cost an arm and a leg, and hopefully, this list will help avoid a major financial crisis in your household.

**3)** Beware of "stylish" or "trendy" gear. Some things that are popular around school are very specialized, such as short ski jackets, etc. Camping gear needs to be versatile, and a pair of boots designed for mucking about in a ski chalet after a tough day on the slopes will be useless mucking about on a mountaintop in a hail storm.

**4)** A boy should learn how to use his gear before he gets out into the woods. For example, he should have a new pack adjusted properly, know how to pitch his tent, and light and cook on a backpacking stove (see the specific section on stoves for more info). The troop will help with this training wherever possible, but because of limited time, we can't learn everything about every conceivable brand of equipment that a boy can show up with. It is very discouraging for a boy to go camping with a new item and have it fail to work as he expected it to because no one took the time to help him learn how to use it before it became something he needed to live. This problem is compounded if none of the trip leaders have ever seen it either.

**5)** Remember, if you buy a decent piece of equipment and little Johnny decides that camping is just not for him and he drops out of Scouting, it can be sold for just about what you put into it. If down the road a few years, he needs to upgrade a pack, or stove, good used gear will be snapped up by parents in the position you're in now.

**6)** A list of local dealers and mail order outlets is attached. There are many more places to buy equipment, and no one dealer has all the lowest prices. Shop around. Compare. Also be aware that Official Boy Scout equipment, with the exception of uniforms, is not always a good value for the money. They must compromise between price, profits, safety, convenience, and usability. In many instances, other equipment is available that is a much better buy than what the Boy Scouts of America calls "Official". Some local suppliers offer Scout discounts upon presentation of a current BSA registration card. Ask about it, and if the clerk doesn't know, ask the manager.

**7)** Uniforms must be "Official Boy Scout" and are available at the retailers listed. A complete uniform is relatively expensive, at around \$75, it represents a major investment, but it is needed. A boy feels a part of the group, and the troop requires uniforms for meetings, traveling to and from camping trips, and some other functions. Consider buying it a little big to get maximum wear out of it, and check with parents of older Scout to see if they have old, outgrown uniforms parts for sale. The Troop maintains a "Uniform Exchange". Check with the Scoutmaster for more info. The only place to obtain an Official Boy Scout Uniform is the Scout Shop at the Scout Service Center or online at <http://www.scoutstuff.org> (but you can't try it on if you buy it online - and believe me, you want to have him try it on before you buy!).

**8)** Mark all of your son's gear!!! Use indelible ink on all clothes including underwear, socks and T-shirts. Engrave all metal items. It makes the stuff easier to keep up with ("That's my fork! No, it's not!"), and allows easy tracing of the owner after it is left behind on camping trips. Every effort is made to return found gear, but a boy that persists in leaving things behind will have his lost stuff presented at a Court of Honor. If you think something is lost, call the trip leader to see if he has it before you panic. Many times, lost items wind up in the troop shed. A search there could be very rewarding!

9) As you read the following paragraphs, keep in mind the things listed above. It is easy to spend huge amounts on camping equipment, or to go a little more carefully and still have good, serviceable gear that will serve for many years. Buying equipment is a very personalized thing; if you've been camping awhile and your son is used to and knows how to use the family equipment, then he may not need to purchase all of the items that follow. Not everything needs to be bought at once, remember number one above.

10) The asterisks (\*) after an item name can be used as a guideline as to how important a piece of equipment is to "successful" camping. The more stars, the more important the item is.

### Specific Item Considerations

#### **BACKPACK \*\*\*\*:**



**External frame-type**, with a padded, wrap-around hip belt. Another option is an internal frame backpack. They are designed for climbers and skiers typically, and have different utility that external frames don't. As with many things, there are tradeoffs which each design. Regardless of design, a pack needs to fit properly. The hip belt should allow the weight of the pack to be carried on the hips, not the shoulders, so the hip belt should not be too large. Also, look for a buckle on the belt that will not "pull-out". Fastex™ buckles are the best, but be sure one side is sewn on, and the other has a second "pull-out" protector. Adjustable size frames are also available.

The Camp Trails™ "Adjustable II" is a good choice (about \$60-70 from Campmor), but there are many others that are very good quality for less money. Some of the "Official" BSA packs are made by Camp Trails and are very nice. Your son will use his pack a lot, try not to skimp here. If you can find a used pack without a hip belt, belts are available separately to retrofit most packs for about \$20. Take the pack with you when you buy the belt, all frame widths are not the same. Also consider purchasing a small spare parts kit with a few extra pins and split rings, the cost: maybe \$3.

#### **SLEEPING BAG \*\*\*\*\*:**



There really is only one way to go on sleeping bag materials: **Synthetic** (Primaloft™, Hollofil II™, Quallofil™, or Polarguard™) fill, with a nylon shell and liner. Synthetics are necessary to keep warm if they get wet, and sleeping bags do that regularly. Nylon bags are also tough, and while somewhat heavier than down, they have excellent weight to warmth ratios.

Please don't buy a down bag, get it wet, it's useless, dry it wrong, it's ruined; they're also 3 to 7 times more expensive than synthetic. Sleeping bags come with a **temperature "rating"**, a somewhat arbitrary number that can be used to compare one bag to another as far as warmth goes, but doesn't

mean much in real life. If your son is warm in a 60° bedroom with a sheet on him, he'll be more comfortable in a bag with a higher temperature rating than a boy who sleeps with 5 blankets in the summer when the air conditioning is off. You can make a sleeping bag warmer by wrapping up in a sheet or blanket, but you can't make them cooler, so a Mount Everest-class bag (rated below zero) is not recommended, despite what some crazy Scoutmasters buy (one of mine is rated at -35°). A bag rated around 20° or so will be plenty adequate, don't go much warmer because the bag will be warm in the summer as it is (sleeping on the bag and putting a sheet over you is a good way to sleep in the summer). If the bag doesn't come with a stuff sack, buy one to go with it. Rolled bags come unrolled quite easily on the trail. Plan on placing a garbage bag inside the stuff sack before stuffing the bag in.

So-called "waterproof" stuff sacks seldom are. If the bag is larger than 12 or 14 inches in diameter when stuffed, consider a compression stuff sack to cut the bulk of the bag. Accessory, or sleeping bag straps can be purchased to attach the bag to the bottom of the pack frame. They are convenient, but tying the bag on securely works well, too. Bungee cords tend not to hold too well, the constant motion bounces things out from under them. A good bag will run between \$35 - \$125.

## **CANTEEN \*\*:**



A **Nalgene™** bottle is an excellent choice, and fits into a pack pocket. Another good choice is one that clips onto the belt. The best would be one that does both. A one and one-half quart seamless aluminum canteen works well but is not as durable. A plastic soda bottle works well, as do surplus military canteens. About \$5-15.

## **MESS KITS\*\*\*\*:**

Official BSA and surplus military mess kits are not too hot. They have a shallow plate, no bowl, nor any pots or pans. A better alternative would be a "microwave" or aluminum plate, a one to one and one half quart pot with lid for heating Water and cooking.



The advantage to this size is that a stove and utensils will often fit inside it; it also holds enough water for individual cleanup. You can assemble these out of kitchen extras or buy good ready made mess kits for \$10-35. A plastic "hot" cup is convenient for measuring, pouring, and drinking. It should be unbreakable. Metal cups burn lips and fingers, and cause food and drinks to cool faster. Before buying a mess kit, see "STOVES", below.

### **UTENSILS\*\*\*\*:**

"Vitt-I Kits": A knife, fork and spoon that fit together. Or, old flatware from home. \$3-6 covers it (but it's free if you scrounge through the silverware drawer). Plastic sporks, utensil sets have gotten to be more durable, but keep price and functionality in mind.



### **RAIN GEAR\*\*\*:**



A **coated nylon poncho**, long enough to cover a boy and his pack are available for \$10-25. A less expensive vinyl one will do, but will tear and wear out much more quickly. Watch out for "super-fabrics" such as Gore-Tex™, or Ultrex™. They are certainly great items to own, but they are expensive, and hard to take care of. When a boy is older, they may be more suitable.

## FLASHLIGHT\*\*:



Somewhat **water-resistant, compact, lightweight**. A 5 "D" cell light is plenty bright, but requires an ox to carry it. They are o.k. for car camping and summer camp. All that many people use is a 2 "AA" cell Mini-Mag™ or equivalent. These cost \$14 or more, but are frequently on sale for less. Headlights, such as those made by by Petzl™, Princeton Tek™, REI™, UKELite™, and others leave the hands free at night.

## KNIFE\*:



**SHEATH KNIVES ARE NOT ALLOWED!** Some older boys and leaders carry them in their pack as cooking utensils, but Scouts are not permitted to have them. A **small Swiss army style knife** (Victorinox™ or Wenger™) is totally adequate for scouting purposes. A small folding knife such as the "Scout-Lite" by Buck™ is also very nice. Invest a few dollars in good sharpening stone soon after he gets the knife. A dull knife is dangerous. In any case, ask to see his Tote-N-Chip card before he gets a knife. This is the Scout's certification that he has passed a simple course in knife and ax handling. The troop teaches it any time it's needed.

## HATCHET, AX, BOWSAW:



Generally not something each boy needs to buy. A bow saw is the most useful of the three, an ax only useful for splitting what the bow saw cuts, and a hatchet, well, for driving in tent pegs, only a hammer will beat it. The troop has a  $\frac{3}{4}$  single bit axe and a splitting maul for use, a hatchet is not recommended troop or personal gear.

## COMPASS\*\*\*:

Needed for advancement and some hiking trips, a compass is a common Scout tool. The easiest to use are the **official Scout compasses**. They have clear plastic, rectangular bases, with a direction of travel arrow. The compass sits at one end of the base. Some unofficial models add scales or rulers, small magnifying glasses, sighting glasses or mirrors, and other niceties to the base. A basic Scout compass is around \$10. More elaborate versions cost more. Avoid military style lensatic compasses, or more complex transit compasses, they are either not suitable, or too hard to use. Suunto™, and Silva™ are two common brand names.



## TENT\*:

You can wait a LOOONNNGGG time before buying a tent, since the troop provides tentage for new Scouts that they can continue to use throughout their Scouting career. Tents are a MAJOR investment. **Lightweight** (less than 6-7 pounds for a two-man mountain tent) such as pup, dome, or mountain styles are relatively inexpensive and easy to set up. Nylon tents require a rain fly to keep them dry in the rain, try to spend a little more initially and get a tent with a matching fly. No matter

what anyone tells you, buy 1 or 2 tubes of seam sealer (K-Kote™) and treat every seam on the tent before it goes out of the house! Sewing puts tiny holes in the tent material that will let in water. The newest tents state that all seams are "factory taped" or "factory sealed". Double check to be sure the taping got down into the corners, and ALL seams are sealed, not just those in the floor.



A **ground cloth** of either 4 or 6 mil polyethylene sheeting is also good to have. It should be the same shape as the bottom of the tent, and one to two inches larger on each side. In dry weather, it goes between the tent and the ground to prevent condensation from soaking the bottom of the tent (the extra around the edges is turned under). In wet weather, it can go inside the tent on the floor and gear and people go on top of it. The extra is pushed up the sides to help keep water off of everything. A lot of money can be spent on a tent, \$75-250 is not unusual, but a boy should tent with someone else anyway, to cut weight each has to carry (half a tent is less than a whole), and to reduce the amount of gear we carry overall. Besides, it's more fun to tent with a friend than alone. Also, Scout rules state that adults sleep with other adults and the Scouts tent together, so if you buy a tent for one, the other might not get to use it much!



## FOOTWEAR\*\*\*\*:

This troop has a lot of "carry it in" camping trips, ranging from a short hike from the car to a site a hundred yards in the woods, to full blown 7 to 10 mile days on backpacking trips. **The footwear a boy brings along can make or break a camping trip.** Cold, wet, sore feet will dampen enthusiasm faster than almost anything. A growing boy does not need a \$130 pair of mountaineering boots, but his feet do need good sturdy protection. Fit is very important. Yes, you can buy them a little bit large, but be sure the difference

can be made up with extra socks until he grows into them. A rubbing boot gives only one thing reliably: **BLISTERS!** Take the socks he will be wearing under the boots with you when you buy them. (See the paragraph on socks below). Lightweight, nylon and suede Hi-Tec™ boots are very good, and not on the high end of the price scale. High-top leather basketball shoes or decent quality running shoes are good until a boy hits the 135 pound weight class. The heavier he gets, the more he'll be carrying, therefore heavier-duty footwear will be needed. Leather workboots, or mid-weight hiking boots are good at this stage. By this time, however, a boy will probably know what he needs, shoes or boots.

All-suede "hiking" boots styled after the heavy, full grain leather mountain hiking boots are usually more style than function. They are heavy and lack even the most basic construction techniques used in real boots. Both Hi-Tec™ and Nike™ make nice hiking boots for a reasonable sum of money, \$35-65 (consider that the next time he wants Air-Jordans). The top of the line rings in at over \$150! Although new construction techniques have allowed Gore-Tex™ to be implemented into boots, thus rendering them NEARLY waterproof, it is still nigh onto impossible to completely weatherproof a boot.

So, for comfort reasons, two pairs of socks should be worn. This applies whether he is in shoes of some sort or boots. The inner sock can be nylon, polypropylene, Thermax™, or silk. Cotton tube socks are o.k. only in mild, dry weather because once they get wet, they stay wet, and do a fine job of conducting heat away from the toes. The outer socks should be wool or polypropylene/wool blends. Wool insulates when wet, and provides padding and a surface for the inner sock and foot to rub against, helping to avoid blisters. Official Scout socks seem to work all right for outers in mild weather. A boy will need one extra pair of socks (1 or 2 pair of outer, 2 or 3 pair of inner) for a two to three day trip. This assumes reasonably good weather. If there is a chance of cold or wet weather, send more socks. Better he have too many, than get one or two sets wet hiking, and not have anything dry to change into at camp.

## Backpacking Stoves \*\*(if you buy one) \*\*\*(If he makes one):



Charcoal stoves are recommended for young, new Scouts. They can be made from 3 pound coffee cans. The only time they can't be used is in an area that prohibits fires. The troop can show a boy how to make one. In areas where fires are prohibited, a boy can use a Sterno™ or Heat-Tab™ stove. These are inexpensive, easy to use, and good for a variety of cooking. They are not adequate in extreme conditions (much below freezing, or in high winds or heavy rains). They don't generate enough heat to overcome these problems. Boys should use these **simple**

**stoves and watch and learn from older boys** before purchasing a gas or liquid fuel stove.

Butane (good except in below freezing temps) are fairly safe and relatively easy to use. Many butane or propane stoves are flimsy however, so to get a good one, pay a little more (a really good one will cost almost as much as a liquid fuel model). A liquid fuel stove is the cadillac. If you decide to buy one, watch for safety features (such as detached fuel tanks like the MSR Whisperlite™), ease of use (such as the Optimus 8R), and ability to be used at high altitudes, and in cold temperatures.

The Whisperlite is highly recommended (about \$45-55). The Svea™ 123R is also a good choice. It's a good idea (for the 123R it's necessary) to purchase a cookkit to go with the stove (another \$35-45) because this adds an uncounted amount of safety and convenience to the stove's use. It allows the stove to be nested for carrying, and one kit will generally feed two to three people which is the usual size of cooking groups on backpacking trips.

BSA's recommended stove, the Coleman™ Peak 1, is not the best choice. It is o.k., but has some safety limitations (as far as I am concerned, any stove that regularly throws up a 2 foot flame is a safety concern). A boy must be absolutely sure of his stove's operating instructions and safety rules before using it. Please make sure he practices with it under an adult's supervision at home until he is proficient to safely operate the stove in all kinds of conditions, including, but not limited to: cold weather, wind, rain, and uneven terrain. Use it with the cookkit he'll be using in the woods to cook food.

Some boys have chosen not to eat or to eat cold food because they were unsure of how to use them when they went camping. 2 or 3 leaders cannot help 20 boys light 20 different stoves and fix their own meals, too. We cannot be experts on all types of stoves, although the ones mentioned above are used regularly by various members of the troop. We'll certainly help if they're having too much difficulty or trying to blow themselves up, but nothing prevents problems better than thorough lessons on stove use at home. If you're unsure or don't feel confident to help him, ask one of the leaders, we'll make time to help him learn before he gets into trouble. The troop also requires a Scout to be "certified" on any stove he uses by demonstrating his ability to set it up, light it, cook on it, refuel it safely, and put it away. He must also show that he knows what to do in an emergency involving the stove he is using. A Scout must have this certification before he is allowed to use any stoves on trips.

## **VENDOR'S LIST**

This is not an exhaustive list, just a compilation of dealers that I know people have dealt with successfully.



### **OFFICIAL SCOUT ITEMS:**

Uniforms, patches, and limited camping gear is available at your local Council Service Center's Scout Shop, or <http://www.scoutstuff.org>

**MAIL ORDER OUTLETS:**

Campmor, P.O. Box 999, Paramus, NJ 07653 <http://www.campmor.com> (highly recommended: good service and prices, fast delivery, wide selection)

Sierra Trading Post, 5025 Campstool Rd., Cheyenne, WY 82007-1898  
<http://www.sierratradingpost.com> (lots of closeout deals on equipment, clothing, accessories - excellent prices, fast service)

Gander Mountain, P.O. Box 248, Wilmot, WI 53192 <http://www.gandermountain.com>

Cabela's, 812 - 13th Ave., Sidney, NE 69160 <http://www.cabelas.com>