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The summit of Chimborazo is the furthest point from the center of the Earth. Our planet bulges at the equator, making Mount Chimborazo even further out there than Everest. It has the distinction of being the closest point to the sun on the planet. Unfortunately, it's also the coldest place in Ecuador.

## **Climbing Chimborazo**

Paco, my guide, didn't care for the lightweight part of my mountain climbing adventure. He frowned at my sleeping bag, which packed up smaller than a football, and weighed a pound. My 13-ounce frame-less backpack didn't impress him either. It dropped below freezing in the hut, just as he said it would, but I stayed warm in my fluffy down bag, as I said I would. No problems so far.

Unfortunately, Paco didn't speak any English, and I had just started to learn Spanish a couple months before. Since our whole group consisted of him and me, we had some communication problems. For example, I thought that the \$11 fee for the "night" (a few hours) in the hut was included in the \$130 guide fee. He thought I was an mountain climber, which I only understood later, at about 19,000 feet.

I think he said he didn't like the papery rain suit I was using as an outer shell, and he frowned at the ski mask I had made out of the sleeve of an old thermal shirt. When he saw my insulating vest, a feathery piece of poly-batting with a hole cut in it for my head, I just pretended not to understand what he was saying.

I hadn't intended to climb Chimborazo with such lightweight gear, but I'd come to Ecuador on a courier flight, and could bring only carry-on luggage. With 12 pounds in my pack to begin with, by the time I put on all my clothes that night, the weight on my back was irrelevant. The weight of my body, however, wasn't irrelevant, even for a skinny guy like me. Paco had to coax me up that mountain.

## **Hiking On Glaciers**

The glaciers start near the hut, and hiking quickly became mountaineering. I put on crampons for the second time in my life (there was that sledding hill). They almost fit well. I tore my rain pants with the sharp spikes a few minutes later.

During one of my many breaks ("Demasiado" - too many, which I pretended not to understand), I noticed my tiny, cheap thermometer had bottomed out at 5 degrees Fahrenheit. I wasn't cold, but I was exhausted at times - the times when I moved. When I sat still I felt like I could run right up that hill.

We headed up the glaciers, hiking, climbing, jumping crevasses, until I quit at 20,000 feet. Of course I had quit at 19,000 feet, and at 18,000 feet. Quitting had become my routine. Lying had become Paco's, so he told me straight-faced that the summit was only fifty feet higher. I wanted to believe him, or the lack of oxygen had scrambled my brain. I started up the ice again.

## **The Summit**

We stumbled onto the summit at dawn. Well, okay, I stumbled. Paco, who seemed slow and tired down at the refuge, was energetic at 20,600 feet. Dirtbag Joe, a nineteen-year-old kid from California with ten bucks in his pocket, and borrowed equipment, and my noodles in his stomach, was waiting for us, smiling.



petoskey stones when the snow began. Backpacking in March has its risks.

I was in running shoes, and it would be below freezing that night. In northern Michigan, March is definitely still winter. My feet stayed warm while I hiked, but I hadn't planned on them getting wet. At least I had a pair of warm, dry socks for sleeping.

### **Ultralight Backpacking Equipment**

It was the first time I used my GoLite Breeze backpack, which weighed only 13 ounces. I was hiking with about nine pounds on my back, and that much only because I threw in some canned food. I was going light, but I knew the forests here and felt comfortable with my abilities.

My sleeping bag was a down-filled 17-ounce bag from Western Mountaineering. It was the first time I would use it below freezing. It would hit 25 degrees Fahrenheit that night, but fortunately it wasn't too windy.

At the edge of the forest, behind the dunes, I set up my small tarp. I piled pine needles and dead bracken ferns under it, finishing just as it became dark. This made a warm mattress, and I slept well, listening to the coyotes, and to the waves pushing ice around in the lake.

In the morning I was happy to see only a dusting of snow. My one-pound sleeping bag had been warmer than my three-pounder - and I thought that was light. I poured alcohol in the cut-off bottom of a Pepsi can (my 1/2-ounce backpacking stove) and made tea. After some crackers I was soon hiking in my mostly-dry shoes, along the Lake Michigan shoreline.

### **Ultralight Lessons Learned**

I ended my trip that afternoon, with a hike to the village of Empire, seven miles away. I was mostly satisfied. There were really only two problems: My tarp was too small, and the alcohol I brought was the wrong type.

After backpacking in Michigan for years, I know it well. I know where to find dead grass and bracken ferns, for example, to make a warm mattress in a few minutes. For lightweight backpacking, knowledge can be as valuable as expensive backpacking gear.

#### **Notes:**

The hiking trip described above was in the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore, which contains a 35-mile stretch of Lake Michigan shoreline. It is known for the dunes, of course, which are up to 400 feet high, but it also has many beautiful hiking trails. Most of them are for day hiking, but there are a couple places to backpack as well.

North and South Manitou Islands (both part of the park) have some of the best hiking and backpacking if you like solitude. The ferry from Leland visits the islands once daily. There are no permanent residents on either island any longer, and you can explore old houses and the ruins of communities where loggers and their families once lived.



might have once existed. We had the place to ourselves, with fresh blueberries a short walk from the tent.

Calm water on Monday let us cruise easily and explore the rocky coast. We stopped on many nameless islands, ate wild blueberries, and traveled twenty miles further south. It was hot, so we enjoyed Superior's icy water. We tipped ourselves over dozens of times, practicing "wet exits" and reboarding the kayaks. Neither of us could get the "Eskimo roll," and, in deep water, Ed never was able to climb back into his kayak without help. Fortunately, I could scramble back into mine.

Our second campsite, on a long cobblestone beach south of Cap Chaillon, we named "Beach Pea Camp." Up and down the beach we gathered wild beach peas to add to our noodle soup dinner. Someone had built a fire pit, with driftwood benches and even a driftwood table to work at. It was a prime site, and we still hadn't seen another soul.

We paddled twenty miles more on Tuesday, all through thick fog. We feasted on blueberries on Squaw Island, then rounded Cape Gargantua, to look for Devil's Warehouse Island. We found it by plotting a route on the map and paddling out into the fog.

Just before we lost sight of the land behind us, the one-hundred-thirty-foot cliffs of the island appeared through the mist in front of us. After a brief shoreline cruise, a view of the caves and cliffs, and a quick hello to the first people we had seen, we headed back into the fog. We were happy to have such calm water.

Above us, a peregrine falcon swooped down and snagged a seagull in mid-flight. Another falcon dove into the action, trying to steal the gull away. All three birds tumbled through the air for a moment, until the first falcon tore loose from the other and carried his prize to a rocky point on a small island. He was tearing apart his feathered lunch as we passed by.

By evening we were back at Beach Pea Camp. The fog was passing by in waves, and it was hot. Very hot. I swam out from the beach and floated over boulders the size of cars, perfectly visible far below me. For thirty minutes I let the cold water suck the heat out of me as Ed set up camp. After more noodle soup with beach peas, we slept well, not knowing what we would face the next day.

## **The Waves**

Ed seems to like danger a bit more than me, so he was enjoying the waves on Wednesday. I have to admit that they were kind of fun, until we came around Cap Chaillon. We suddenly had much larger "rollers" coming at us, and we could see thousands of whitecaps in the distance. It got worse as we went further, until even Ed wasn't having fun. We managed to turn around without capsizing, and we went back to a small sheltered cove.

It started to rain, so we set up a small plastic tarp and played euchre under it. We waited, but not so patiently. Every twenty minutes or so one of us would climb up the rocks near the shore, to look to the north. I now think that the waves were actually getting bigger the whole time, but five hours of waiting altered our perception. It looked calmer, we were sure.

With wet suits on and spray skirts tightened, we headed out into the waves. And the wind. We yelled back and forth through the spray at first, always deciding to go just a little further, to see if it got better. By the time we

realized our mistake, it was too late to turn back. We were into heavy whitecaps, and we almost certainly would have capsized if we turned our sides to the waves and wind.

Landing really wasn't an option either. For a mile or two here, the cliffs drop a hundred feet straight down into the lake. In fact, it occurred to me that if we did capsize, we might have to swim to the cliff face and sit shivering on a ledge for a day or to until it calmed down. Getting back into the kayak in those waves certainly seemed unlikely for either of us.

Then I wondered if we could even make it to those cliffs in icy eight-foot waves. We just couldn't afford to capsize today, not even once. We almost did, though, as we tried to head straight into the waves for stability, while they came at us from several directions. Then the wind seemed to pick up even more.

Ed later told me that at one point he saw a rock at the base of the cliffs. He saw it again twenty minutes later, in the same position relative to us. We were barely making any progress. I was cold, my arms were wearing out, and my paddling was getting sloppy due to exhaustion.

When we spilled onto a beach of rounded bowling-ball-sized rocks hours later, I was at my limit. There had never been an option to rest for even ten seconds in all that time. I climbed mountains in running shoes, and collected returnable pop cans on the roadside to make a buck (call me cheap and daring), but as I told Ed when it was over, I wouldn't paddle those two miles again for ten thousand dollars.

### **Berry Camp**

"Berry Camp," was my favorite campsite. With the thrills and chills behind us, we settled in on a high bank above our landing site near Grindstone Point. The driftwood was piled up to the top of the twenty-foot high rocky bank by previous storms. Soon we had a fireplace made of rocks and unlimited firewood.

Once our strength had returned, we feasted. We grazed up and down the shore eating wild blueberries, raspberries, currants, gooseberries, bunchberries, bearberries, service berries, and rose hips. Ed took a photo of me holding a large moose antler to my head. We sat by the warmth of the fire and watched a magnificent sunset. As we fell asleep, we debated how close to death we may have been.

### **Going Home**

Thursday we had another deceptively easy start, and soon found the waves to be larger and larger as we passed Grindstone Point. They were scary, but not as large as the day before. A young woman zipped by us in a small kayak, enjoying the waves. It reminded us that much of the danger out here was from our own lack of skill and experience.

We went far from shore, crossing Old Woman Bay. Ed was right - the waves weren't as choppy out further. On the other side, we stopped and waited for calmer water. From the rocky hills high above the water, we watched whitecaps to the north, and we relaxed. We spent an hour in one of the best blueberry patches of the trip.

The sun was out, and the scenery was magnificent, but in the end, I refused to risk the rough water to the north. We had made so few mile Wednesday and today, that we might not even have enough time to get back on



"Oh yes," the old woman at the visitor's center told us, "there are people climbing Mount Shasta all the time." John pointed out the glaciers on the map she had given us. "Oh yes, well, did you bring crampons and ice axes?"

John looked at me, and I could only say, "I've heard of these things."

We did have some gear: backpacks, sleeping bags, and a tent. John had good hiking boots, but mine were more like high-top shoes. Neither of us had ever used crampons or an ice axe before, so we went the few blocks across town to see what the guy at the climbing store had to say.

"Have you done any climbing before?" he asked us.

"A little," I answered, remembering the buildings we used to climb on as teenagers, and the rocks we had recently scrambled up in Oregon. I figured we were ready for Mount Shasta.

"Well, you can't put crampons on those boots," he said to John, "and you sure can't put them on those," he told me, shaking his head at my shoes. Crampons apparently need rigid boots. This was our mountaineering lesson of the day. We could rent the crampons, but only if we rented real mountaineering boots also. "And you'll need ice axes, of course," he added. I felt a pain in my wallet.

### **Backpacking On Mount Shasta (Too Poor For Climbing)**

A speeding ticket in North Dakota had strained the budget, and Mount Shasta was already a detour from the route and the budget. We decided we would just hike up the mountain and do a little backpacking. Still, I had to ask, "Do people climb Shasta without gear?" The store owner realized that the sale was lost.

"It's been done," he answered impatiently.

"It's been done," I reminded John as we drove up the road to Mount Shasta. He didn't argue, which I took as a good sign. I watched the Pine trees go by, and absentmindedly poked a finger through a hole in my shoe.

"Old Ski Bowl Trail Head," John said. I looked over at the sign. "7,900 feet." We were at the trail head, along with forty other cars, and it was still early enough to hit the trail.

### **Mount Shasta Poop Bags**

We read the sign and looked at the registration forms. We had a decision to make. There was a \$10 fee if we were going to be hiking or climbing above "Horse Camp," at 8,400 feet. John pointed to a bin full of paper bags. Each had a handful of cat litter in it, and then a plastic bag to put it in. These were for carrying our excrement off the mountain, a requirement above 10,000 feet.

That clinched it. We put \$10 each in the envelope and dropped it in the slot. We couldn't pass up the opportunity to poop in a bag in the mountains. I took two for myself, in case of good luck.

An easy trail leads to Horse Camp, where there is a hut and a natural spring. We filled our water bottles. The day-hikers looked up at the mountain through their cameras, while inside the hut the climbers cooked noodles and discussed weather reports. They looked at my shoes and smiled at each other when I mentioned that we might be climbing Mount Shasta in the morning.

We left the hut and started hiking up the trail, which was finally getting steeper and rockier. The trees ended at about 8,500 feet, leaving only grasses, flowers, and other tundra plants.

### **Wind And Rain At Helen Lake**

There is no lake. For that matter, there is no trail, which gets lost somewhere in the rocks just before the steep climb up to the "lake." Helen lake is a more-or-less level area of snow and ice. At the edge, overlooking Horse Camp far below, there are dusty clearings in the rocks where the climbers camp. We found an empty spot and set up camp. The wind was howling. We were at 10,440 feet.

About the time it started to rain, I realized that it might have been a bad idea to talk John into bringing only a tarp, instead of the tent. The edges of the tarp pulled loose in the wind again and again, until we gave up and left one side pinned down by heavy rocks, while we wrapped the other side around us. Dust blew in and covered us, despite the tight wrap and rain. Perhaps I was enjoying the adventure more than John, who was very quiet. In any case, I talked until he fell asleep.

### **Climbing Mount Shasta**

"Apparently they start climbing very early," John grumbled. It was dark, but there were lights and noise from the other tents around us. I crawled out from under the tarp and stood up. I saw lights on the mountain a thousand feet higher. It was 5:30 a.m.

Hmm...climbers start early. With that new insight, we packed up our day-packs, hid our big backpacks in some rocks, and stepped onto the ice. Helen Lake was a mile of ups and downs, through sun-dished ice. Then we reached the loose rock at the base of a steep slope, in Avalanche Gully. We started climbing. An hour later, we quit.

"I can't do it," John gasped. "Can't get enough air." We were at about 11,000 feet, and we of course knew that there was less oxygen up high, but this was the first time either of us had actually been this high hiking or climbing. I had driven higher in Colorado, but apparently that wasn't a strenuous enough activity to notice the thinner air. I noticed it here. We both did. We sat down and rested for a minute.

"Are you sure you want to quit?" I asked. He was, but I wasn't. It was light now, and John didn't see any problem hiking the four hours down to the car alone. I would go on to the summit, and then come back down to the road by evening. I had to continue climbing. Mount Shasta was my first mountain, and I hadn't even used the poop bag yet.

### **Altitude Sickness**

The "Red Bank" is a long red line of broken cliffs above avalanche gully. I scrambled, climbed, slipped on ice,

and eventually found a way up and over. Then there were long steep slopes covered in loose rocks, with a few bamboo sticks marking the way up. This is where my route converged with that of the other climbers, who had gone up the snow-slope route with their crampons and ice axes.

After much climbing, I finally made it to the top, which was called Misery hill, because it isn't actually the top. It just seems like it should be. There was still a mile of snow to cross, and then more rocky terrain. The snow field had three-foot-high peaks covering it, like a huge lemon-meringue pie.

I rested a moment, and realized I'd been hearing a new sound. Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! It was the inside of my head, which had never been so loud before. Hmm...interesting. I got used to the noise and pain after an hour or so.

Then I got used to the smell of sulfur. Mount Shasta, it turns out, really is a volcano. When John Muir climbed it more than a hundred years earlier, he had to huddle next to the hot sulfur gas vents to survive a night near the peak. He was alternately freezing and burning.

**The Summit Of Mount Shasta**

"So this is the top?" I mumbled lamely to the guy who had just told me the John Muir story. Unfortunately, clouds, and smoke from forest fires, obscured the view in every direction. Nonetheless, it felt good to be so high, and when I looked down to the east, I saw my first glacier, a few hundred feet below.

"You can write your name in the register over there," the guy told me, pointing to something in the rocks. There are guest books on top of mountains? Another lesson for the day. I signed in, wrote some comment, and started down the mountain.

Sun cups, or whatever they call those depressions in the snow, fill with water in the warm afternoon sun - another discovery. I'd climb out of one ten-foot-wide bowl and slide into the water in the bottom of the next. This was the pattern until I reached the ankle-twisting mile of rocks piled up below Helen Lake. Climbing down, I realized, is more difficult than climbing up, or at least more dangerous. In any case, I was eventually on the easy trail.

My headache disappeared, I reached the road, and found John waiting. By evening we were driving towards Michigan. Mount Shasta was hidden in the clouds and smoke behind us. Oh, and yes, I had used the poop bag. Somewhere around 11,500 feet, I believe. I remembered this as I was looking through my pack. I told John to pull over at the nearest garbage can.



**Coyotes In The Dark**

I had been alone for months. I was only eighteen or nineteen then, at the tail end of a period of self-testing and





Going down the Manistee River (Michigan) on a pile of logs.

All I carried was a small backpack, a hatchet, a saw, scraps of rope, food, water, a hat, a garbage bag bivy sack, and odds and ends. Maybe fifteen pounds total.

It was to be a biking, hiking, and river rafting adventure. It was late May, so I could stay warm in my homemade bivy sack, without a sleeping bag. I might wear my hat, and pile up some leaves to sleep on. If the mosquitoes were bad, I would use my head net, which, I had learned, would also trap warm air around my head, keeping me warmer. I had matches and a lighter, in case I needed a fire in an emergency.

Thirty miles of pedaling had brought me from my home in Traverse City, Michigan, down the back roads to the Baxter Bridge, on the Manistee River. It was almost 10 a.m. I pushed the bicycle into the woods, and rolled it along, lifting it over logs, until I was a mile upstream. Looking around at the trees, I knew this was the place to start the river rafting part of the trip.

### **Sometimes Adventure Involves A Lot Of Work**

The first tree was the biggest, and I almost couldn't drag the ten-foot sections to the river after cutting them. They were perfect, however. Dead, dry-rotted Poplar was always good, because it was like Styrofoam inside. It cut easy, and floated well. White Cedar was the best quality, but it was more difficult to find, and to cut.

Once I had hauled enough logs to the river, I got into the water and pulled the first two pieces in after me. I tied them together, then tied two long thin poles to them perpendicularly near either end. The other logs were guided, one by one, under these two rails, and tied in place. By early afternoon I was finished. With the last piece of rope, I tied the raft to shore. I found and cut a good rafting pole to guide me. I was ready.

### **Tom Sawyer Day**

My first river rafting adventure had involved four of us. I advertised it to my friends as an adventure-disaster, sure to get them wet and cold. Three took the bait. Apart from snacks and water, we took only a hatchet, a small saw, and whatever scraps of rope we could find. It all fit into a small backpack.

We parked near the river and hiked a trail upstream until we were a few miles from the car. The plan was to build a raft, using only dead trees and our scraps of rope. We would then get on it and go rafting back to the car.

It was dubbed "Tom Sawyer Day," and became a much anticipated event among an ever-changing group of participants. Since it was, in equal parts, fun and dangerous, we didn't usually bring beer. Even sober, it was enough of a challenge to keep a thousand-pound pile of logs, with four people on it, from going where it wanted to go. Where it wanted to go inevitably involved pain and cold water, but with each trip I managed to learn a little. Sometimes we even stayed dry.

### **Sometimes Adventure Involves Math**

The first trip, Roland and I were cutting and hauling logs to the river, while Cathy and Leslie cooked hotdogs over a fire. We began to do geometry on a piece of birch bark, trying to figure out how many logs were needed, allowing for the dishonesty of the women's stated weights.

"Dead dry cedar weighs 37 pounds per cubic foot," I told Roland, "leaving a lifting capacity of about 27 pounds, given that water is 64 pounds per cubic foot." The girls were laughing at me. "The volume of a cylindrical object is pi times the radius squared, times the length, right?" Roland agreed.

We counted out the logs, carefully estimating the carrying capacity of each one. We began to build the raft. When finished, we had a floating pile of old rotten logs and two frightened women.

### **Sometimes Adventure Involves Getting Wet**

Leslie and Cathy sat on a stump in the middle of the raft. Roland and I stood with our poles, ready to fend off the banks of the river and the overhanging trees. We did this successfully for at least fifteen minutes. Then, when a low, horizontal tree refused to move, Roland pushed us all off in order to regain his balance. We quickly gave up trying to find the bottom of the river, and swam after the raft. Sputtering and cursing at Roland, the three of us climbed back on.

This first rafting trip was in late April, when the water is still like ice. The sun warmed us, but our feet were almost always in the water. It was bad enough that the raft didn't float very high off the water, but then it began to change shape before our eyes and under our feet.

"It's a square. No wait! It's a parallelogram. Now it's a square again." The girls decided that there was too much geometry in river rafting, so a few minutes later we let the raft drift close to the shore, where they stepped off into the shallow water.

The water, however, wasn't as shallow as we thought. Once they had popped up to the surface and crawled up the sandy bank of the river, we waved goodbye. The trail took them to and from the river on their way to the car.

The next time we saw them, Leslie was hiking in her wet bra and panties. This part of the story was crucial to recruiting other young men in the future. The trail went into the forest again, and the girls didn't see us for thirty minutes.

### **Sometimes Adventure Involves Running**

Cathy and Leslie saw the raft first, floating quietly down the river by itself. Soon after, they saw Roland and I, running along the opposite side, trying to catch up. We waved, but didn't have time to explain.

There had been a tree that stuck out from the bank, just a couple feet off the water. We couldn't avoid it, despite our excellent rafting skills, so we thought we could jump over it as the raft passed underneath. It seemed like a reasonable plan at the time. It didn't seem so reasonable when Roland was pushing my face into the sticks in the tree while climbing over me to get to shore.

The raft went on, not noticing our absence. We ran through swamp and woods, pretending this was part of the plan when the girls saw us. The raft came near the riverbank just as we caught up to it. We leapt for it, and we were back in control. More or less.

"How do we get off?" Roland asked, when we were near the car. It was decided that we just needed to get close to shore and then jump. We tried this. Roland was still hanging from a tree when I started up the big hill to the car. Tom Sawyer Days went a little smoother after this first one.

### **Sometimes Adventure Involves Being Pointed At**

After pedaling thirty miles and hauling logs for hours, I was tired, but satisfied. It was the best raft yet, and I was soon rafting down the river, under Baxter Bridge, and into the Manistee National Forest. I noticed immediately that these rafts float better with only one person on them. My bicycle stood proudly in the center of the raft, tied in place, with the backpack on the handlebars.

There was just one small group of houses to pass before a long uninhabited stretch. The first to see me yelled hello, and pointed me out to his wife. The second didn't know what to say. The Manistee is not a well-traveled river, especially not by bicyclists. A few minutes later I was past the houses. Around the next bend, a whitetail deer saw me and backed off through the cattails.

I floated for hours. Apparently my previous river rafting experience was paying off, because I managed to miss the trees, rocks, riverbanks, and to stay dry. I was even able to sit down and soak up the sun for a minute or two at a time. The latter was always interrupted, of course, by the necessity to jump up and use the pole to avoid something.

Early in the evening, I stopped, disassembled the raft, and began pushing my bicycle through the woods. A mile later I was lost. A mile after that I found a trail, and got on the bike. Somewhere down the trail it became a two-track, and I met two guys leaning against their truck.



but there are no lines drawn in the mountains.

"Be careful," the ranger had told me at least three times before dropping me off. He didn't think I should be hiking alone. Hikers didn't use this trail often, and there probably wouldn't be anyone else on it. If I got lost, there was nothing but mountains far into Montana.

I promised to check in at the ranger station when I was done in a few days. He was right about the lack of hikers. I didn't see anyone else during the seven-mile hike to the Yellowstone River.

At four-thirty I figured the bear had left. He must be gone, I thought, but I still didn't move. No sound. He must be gone. I surprised myself by falling back asleep.

### **Lost In The Snow**

I woke up with nylon in my face. I pushed against it, and it was heavy. Snow!?! They told me I didn't have to worry about snow in mid-May. They were wrong. I crawled through the front flaps of the collapsing tent and looked around. Six inches of snow covered everything, and it was still coming down. I sighed and looked at my watch. It was eight-thirty. At least the bear was gone. I hoped.

I put the tent away wet, and wondered if I would be able to dry it before using it again. The snow stuck to my tennis shoes and soaked them as I packed. It was falling in big wet chunks, soon to become a blizzard of smaller flakes as the temperature dropped and the wind picked up. My hike was over. Hopefully I could make it back to the road by nightfall.

The trail took me away from the river, up a long slope, towards a pine forest. I followed the shallow depression in the snow, which I assumed was the trail. I moved quickly, to stay warm, and because I knew it would be a long day. The wind gusted strongly, and I turned up the collar of my jacket.

Stopping halfway up the slope, I looked back. Through the snow, across the small field, I saw the two pine trees where I had slept. The movement of the river couldn't be seen from here. It lay like a black ribbon across the white landscape, appearing and disappearing as the wind gusted and the snow swirled in front of me. It seemed very familiar suddenly, and then I had it - that feeling.

It radiated out from my chest, into my arms and legs. I've never known what to call it, this sensation. It comes when I am alone in a beautiful place. I feel it often in storms, in mountains, and when I am in danger too. It isn't good or bad, but it is addictive. I let it fade away.

In the woods I followed the trail more easily, because there were occasional trail markers still visible on the trees. The wind was howling and shaking loose the snow which had piled up on the branches all morning. The snow slid off unpredictably, and the branches jumped skyward the moment they dropped their heavy load. A small avalanche off one of these branches caught me in the face, and another sent snow down my back.

An hour later the trail opened up into rolling, scrubby hills. An hour into the hills I was lost. The trail, if I was anywhere near it, lay hidden under the snow. The snow in the air hid any landmarks. I laughed and sat down. Now what do I do? I ate some granola and put on my wet cotton gloves. I knew I would get out okay. I always

get out okay.

I picked a direction and moved quickly to stay warm. My head was covered with snow. My jeans were soaked, and frozen stiff up to my knees. The snow stung my face when the wind gusted. I was warm still, even a little hot when I walked fast, but the melting snow was reaching through my clothes to my skin. I would be cold in minutes if I stopped again.

After hours of dragging my my feet through the deepening snow, I wanted to stop. Nothing looked familiar, and I was tired. I crossed hills I hadn't seen before, and at one point found myself going in a circle. Which way was the sun? I didn't have any idea. Tangled briars, hidden in the snow, caught my feet. They were easy to avoid yesterday, when I could see them.

I tripped. I slid and rolled down a steep hill, and my pack fell off. Everything was wet, and I laughed. Then the tears welled up in my eyes. Frustration. I wasn't hurt, but I was soaked and tired, and I just wanted to get out of there. If I could find a trail, any trail, to follow anywhere...

I stood and picked up my things. Granola had spilled from my pack. I scooped it up with the snow and ate the cold mixture.

I backtracked, made some guesses: kept moving. The briars tripped me repeatedly. I went through some trees, and they had saved enough snow to dump on me several times.

A loud grunt made me jump, and I thought of the bear. It was a bull elk. I moved past it cautiously, following the edge of a swamp until I saw a tall crooked pine tree.

I knew that tree! It was near the trail head, right next to the road. I ran towards it, and reached it as a car passed by. I stumbled onto the road and watched the car driving away. Then it stopped, and backed up. I quickly wiped the tears from my eyes, and I recognized the driver. It was the same ranger who had dropped me off at this very spot. Yesterday.

"Boy, are you lucky," he called out, rolling down his window as he spoke. He sounded almost angry. "This road is closed. Too many trees down. I'm the only one you'll see along here today."

"Hi." I didn't know what else to say.

"Well jump in."

"Thanks for stopping," I said, brushing the snow off myself and getting into the car. I wondered if maybe he had driven by a couple times looking for me, or if it was just lucky timing.

"You'll have to ride around with me for a couple hours before we head back to the station," he told me.

"No problem. Thanks again."



In the Smoky Mountains, hiking can be hard on the ankles, and it rains a lot. So my days hiking a stretch of the Appalachian Trail would be another good test for my ultralight backpacking gear. I had on New Balance Running Shoes (14 ounces each), a GoLite Breeze Backpack (14 ounces), and would be sleeping in a Western Mountaineering Highlite Sleeping Bag (17 ounces!), under a lightweight tarp (16 ounces with stings). My pack weight was around eleven pounds total, with all food and water.

A friend from Asheville took me up to Newfound Gap, in the middle of The Great Smoky Mountains National Park, where we took in the view with a hundred other tourists. Then he hiked with me for the first mile or two, before heading back. I found a good tree-branch on the ground and made it into a walking stick. I figured it might help my knees when I was hiking the steep downhill stretches. It was cloudy, and getting cooler, but I hadn't heard anything about bad weather.

### **Hiking In Snow**

I think I was in Tennessee when it began to snow. The Appalachian Trail here in the Park weaves back and forth across the border of North Carolina and Tennessee. In any case, I was somewhere near Clingman's Dome, above 6000 feet. It was getting dark and the flakes were getting larger. I had tarp-camped in snow before - one time, but I hadn't expected to in early May, in the Smoky Mountains. I had come south from Michigan looking for warmer weather, after all.

I set up the tarp quickly (and illegally, I was later told) on a hidden hillside, with a shoe on a stick holding up the weight of the snow gathering on the nylon roof above. I woke up occasionally to see how far I had slid down the hill and to shake the snow off the tarp.

In the morning I was within a foot or two where I started, and had somehow managed to stay dry. A blanket of snow seven inches deep covered everything. I packed up quickly, and was soon hiking up the trail to the top of Clingman's Dome. There is an incredible tower there, with a spiral ramp going to the top. I was the only one there to enjoy the view. I could see twelve feet in every direction.

Fortunately, by noon I was below the snow, in the cold rain. It was so wet everywhere, that when I reached one of the Appalachian Trail shelters, I couldn't get a fire going in the fireplace - for the first time in my life. I ate my soggy noodles cold. Fortunately, my Frogg Toggs rain wear kept me dry during the hours of hiking in snow and rain. I was happy for that. My feet were even dry for a while, before the rain returned that evening.

### **Hiking Through The Seasons**

After hiking the Appalachian Trail for half a day, and explaining to the through-hikers that I wasn't just on a day hike ("Is that a day-pack?"), I headed lower. I discovered that the trees above a certain elevation in the Smoky Mountains don't get their leaves by early May. Lower down the leaves open up by the middle of April. So as the trail went up and down, I passed from leafy forests to winter landscapes repeatedly. It made it seem like more time was passing than the few hours it took me to reach a good springtime campsite.

By now, after a conversation with a couple backpackers in the shelter, I knew that I was hiking illegally, or at least I was camping illegally. It was too late to go get a permit, so I went off the trail far enough to be out of sight when I set up my tarp. The rain returned, and I realized that one of the benefits of a tarp is the space to

move around during long stays. Another is the view. Birds and squirrels made regular visits.

**Long-Distance Hiking**

In the morning, I realized that although I was warm, dry, and impressed with the equipment, I had had enough of the Smoky Mountains - hiking in them in the rain, in any case. I don't like rainy woods, and you don't get to see the views in the heavily-wooded Smokies, like you do in the Rockies. Twenty miles later I was on a highway, and in another 19 miles I found a bus to take me back to my friends in Asheville.

I had never hiked 39 miles in a day before. I don't think I could have in hiking boots. I had stayed warm and dry through snow and rain. My Smoky Mountains hiking experience proved to me the value and safety of ultralight backpacking techniques and equipment. It was also fun to tell the other hikers that, no, I wasn't day hiking.

**Notes:**

In the Smoky Mountains National Park, the hiking is free (forever, according to the law). Camping, however, does require a permit, and you must camp in one of the shelters, or next to one, if it is full.

There are hiking opportunities throughout the area, and some of trails are particularly beautiful and unusual. The trail head up from Bryson City, for example (where I came out of the mountains), begins as a long highway tunnel that never became part of the highway. You need a flashlight (it is that long and dark) to walk from the parking area to where the tunnel ends in the woods.



**Mount Whitney By Moonlight**

My California hiking trip reminded me of the song "It Never Rains In California." I was in the southern Sierras, and I didn't see one cloud in five days. This is common in September, they tell me.

I went there on a Greyhound bus, from my home in Michigan. A long layover meant spending a night in a cheap Carson City, Nevada motel, mostly paid for by the \$20 I won playing roulette at the nearest casino.

Later that night my luck changed, and I fell in a bathtub for the first time in my life. I thought the trip was over. All of my weight had come down on my shin, which tried to wrap around the edge of the tub. My leg was not broken, I finally decided, but there was a large and painful bump on it.

The following day, the bus headed down the east side of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, on Highway 395. Greyhound Bus Lines has eliminated this route, by the way, but it is still a beautiful drive. The snowy mountains towering above, are especially impressive when seen from the dusty Owens Valley.

I arrived in the town of Independence later than I had planned. Still, I was in California to go hiking, so I put out

my thumb and caught a ride to the trail head by early evening. I hiked a few hours, and sometime after dark I laid out my sleeping bag.

I tried to sleep, and then changed my mind. It was too beautiful to quit for the day. I cut down my suspended food bag, and the line ran through my fingers, burning and opening a cut in one. The scar remains to this day. A bit of profanity, a bandage, and I was hiking again.

### **Hiking By Moonlight**

Desert had become oak forest, then pine forest, and then bushes. The bushes moved in the darkness, like there was a bear in them. I never did figure out that one. Whatever it was didn't seem too afraid of me, though.

Then there was only tundra. I arrived at 12,000-foot Shepherd Pass by moonlight, which may have been the most beautiful way to arrive in any case. I was on the border of Kings Canyon National Park and Sequoia National Park. Gray peaks rose up around me, and I had a little lake all to myself.

I had a lake to myself every night. Who said California is crowded? I was hiking without seeing a soul for most of each day. I explored isolated hanging valleys, with lakes all over at different levels. I swam in ice water and laid in the sun. I slept early and got up every night or early morning to hike by moonlight. I ate wild currants and watched the trout scatter as I walked alongside small lakes.

I followed Kern Canyon south, and I never saw a cloud. In fact, I just slept under the stars every night. The fourth morning I woke up at four to a beautiful moon, and I began hiking by it's light. I reached the summit of Mount Whitney, the highest point in the continental U.S., just before dawn. Sitting and watching the sunrise, my feet dangled over a thousand-foot precipice.

From the top I could look fifty miles in any direction, and see nothing but mountains. Then the crowds finally came. In the register, I noticed that almost 200 people made it to the top on some days. I headed down by the "standard" route, but despite the traffic on the Whitney Portal Trail, there was still a lake of my own to camp at that night.

### **Keeping It Light**

On my last day, as I was hiking down towards the Whitney Portal trail head, I met a man limping along in great pain. He had been left behind by his friends after blowing out his knee. I made a walking stick for him. Later I realized how much weight many of these backpackers were carrying. Enough to cause a knee to go out on that steep trail.

I had been thinking about reducing my own pack weight at the time, and thought the 33 pounds on my back was light. That seems like heavy backpacking now. I even had a separate day-pack that weighed a pound, just for going to the summit. I was using hiking boots too, and had a few blisters to show for them. The next time I went backpacking it would be with running shoes and half the weight.

I was on the road in the morning, due to more moonlight hiking. Soon the snow and giant pine cones were gone, replaced by the desert town of Lone Pine, California. It was time for a hot shower and a pizza.



headache. Maybe running up to camp at 12,000 feet was a bit too much elevation gain for the first day. Now I was above the trees, lost in the rolling tundra, unable to pick out the trail under several inches of snow. But it was beautiful.

### **Rain And Raspberries**

I stumbled down into the trees, and then back up to the tundra, where I finally found myself on the map. The sun even came out, and everywhere there were white mountain tops rising up out of the green valleys. Mountain goats played on the cliffs, jumping from narrow ledge to narrower ledge, without falling. It was a beautiful day for an hour or two. Then the rain returned, as it did every single night of the trip.

The next day I ate wild raspberries for half of my daily calories. Having become fascinated with going as light as possible, I calculated how many calories-per-hour I could eat in berries, so I could carry less food next time. It was 500, by the way, at least in those berry patches.

The morning of the fourth day, I was up and hiking before dawn. I was in the Chicago Basin, working my way up to Mount Eolus (14,083 feet). I climbed up past waterfalls, and finally past the trees, into the alpine tundra. Mountain goats watched me curiously from just a few yards away. Tundra then became loose rocks, as I headed up to the saddle between the north and south peaks of Eolus. I ran up to the easier north peak, then returned along the ridge to head for the high point.

One of the things I love about backpacking in Colorado, is hiking up above 14,000 feet without the necessity of climbing gear. "Walk-ups" they are referred to, but they sometimes require a bit more than hiking. The "catwalk" on the way to the top of Eolus, for example, is easy hiking, if it is easy for you to walk a two-to-three feet wide edge, with a drop to your death on either side of you. I made it, in any case.

I also made it up Sunlight Peak (14,059 feet) later. That one requires a leap across a thousand foot drop to get to the summit rock, which is tilted at an uncomfortable angle. The peak registry is generously chained to a rock lower down, but since that is not really the peak, I made the leap.

The key is to do it quickly, before you have too much time to think about it. The only person I saw all day, a woman who didn't make the leap, took a picture of me hunched over on the very top. I honestly couldn't stand up completely, due to the exposure.

We were both chased off by a thunderstorm, and didn't get to go up nearby Windom Peak. I wish I could remember this generous woman's name. I do remember the meal she made for me once we reached her tent. It was the first freeze-dried meal I had ever eaten, and it was delicious.

I hiked a few more miles that afternoon, and camped near a large waterfall. The next day, I found my way to the train tracks of the Silverton-Durango train (there were no roads out there). Soon others gathered by the footbridge over the Animas River, waiting for the train. Someone flagged down the train (otherwise it won't stop) and soon I was in Silverton to resupply. I still had three more days of hiking in the rain.

### **Hiking With Lightning**



## Aliens On The Tundra

My wife Ana and I drove ten minutes out of town, and found the dirt road that goes up to Storm Lake. We had been up to the lake a month before, shortly after moving to Anaconda, Montana. The road was pretty hard on the car, but we couldn't resist returning. This time we were bringing backpacks, so we could hike up to the tundra and stay the night.

When we arrived at the lake, there were a couple other cars, but nobody in sight. The lake was sparkling in the sun, and the mountains of the Anaconda-Pintler range rose up all around it. It was quiet, and cooler here in the pine trees at 8,000 feet. We put on our packs and started down the trail around the west side of the lake. Twenty minutes later we were past the lake, and the trail steepened.

An hour of zig-zagging up the mountainside, and we finally met another hiker. We stopped to talk briefly, and noticed the handgun on his belt. This seems to be common in Montana. We have seen guns on the hiking trails and in the bars, and the bank tellers don't even blink when customers walk in wearing guns (they probably have their own). We didn't think to ask the hiker why he had one.

We didn't find out until later that there are grizzlies in the area here at times. It is something that some "experts," deny, but the locals have seen with their own eyes. At least we had our Freon horn to blast if we met a bear, but then maybe that would just make him angry.

### Tundra Flowers

The trees end just before Storm Lake Pass, and the flowers become small, but colorful and tougher than their delicate appearance suggests. White, yellow and reds. Ana waited among the blossoms patiently while I ran the five-minutes-that-became-twenty up to the peak of Mount Tiny, not quite 10,000- feet high. I suppose it is small compared to some of the surrounding mountains, but it still seems almost rude to give a beautiful mountain a name like that.

Later, up past Goat Meadow, Ana waited again while I scrambled up the rocks to the top of Kurt Peak (also a foot or two below 10,000 feet). I couldn't find the route back down on the north side where I came up, so I went back up part-way, then down the west side and back north to the grassy slope where Ana was waiting.

Months later we realized how foolish it was to leave Ana alone. Montana has some dangerous animals. About two months later, two teenage boys were attacked by a mountain lion on the hillside within a few hundred yards of our house in Anaconda. The fourteen-year-old fired his gun to scare it off.

When I read the story in the paper, it occurred to me that both boys were probably larger than my gun-less wife. Fortunately, we didn't meet any bears or cougars on this hiking trip. Ana, however, had other things to worry about.







island, but I would still have to get back somehow.

I was eighteen at the time, living alone in a cabin on Wilsey Bay, in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. I was ready for an adventure, having waited patiently through the winter, regularly sitting by the wood stove and looking at maps. The county plat-book showed that Round Island was all state land. This meant it was uninhabited, a perfect destination.

It was only about ten miles away, but Lake Michigan can be unpredictable, so I was careful in my preparations. I even put a few tools in the rowboat, just in case. The sun was shining, and the water was fairly calm the morning I left.

I rowed past Stan Parcher's place, and then past Wicklund's. These were the only other residents on the bay this time of the year. Once I was past the point, and into the next bay, the shoreline was all part of the Hiawatha National Forest. I was alone.

I stayed a mile or more offshore, to cut a more direct line across to Chippewa Point. The west wind picked up, and I took out my orange tarp, rigging it as a sail. It pulled me along faster than I could have rowed, but I still rowed to correct my course.

Just a couple weeks earlier, I had used the same tarp as a sail on pieces of pack ice. During the spring breakup, I piloted large sections of ice across the bay for fun, standing on them and holding up my orange sail with the help of a large pole. I always heated the cabin up well before going out, in case I took a dunk in the cold water.

After a few miles I reached Chippewa Point, which is as close as the mainland comes to Round Island. From there, it would be a few miles of open water. The Island is near the mouth of Big Bay De Noc. The wind had turned more to the south now, so the tarp wasn't helping. I took it down and began to row.

### **The Crossing**

A mile out, the waves started to grow larger, coming at the side of the boat, from the south. I had never been more than a half-mile offshore before this trip. With more experience, I might have thought to head more directly into the waves, to the southwest. Then I could eventually cut back north and ride downwind to the island. Instead, I continued rowing straight for it.

Soon the waves were high above me on both sides. I watched as various landmarks appeared and disappeared. I rose to the top of a wave, and then slid sideways into the next valley. I quickly tightened my life jacket, but I knew that the water was too cold to survive for long. I had to keep from capsizing.

Then it happened. I was finally within a mile or so of the island when a large wave caught the oar paddle just as I went back for a stroke. The oar snapped in half at the oarlock. It was useless now. I threw it in the bottom of the boat and slipped the spare into the oarlock.

The spare was one I made from a piece of plywood and a cedar pole, in preparation for this trip. It was weaker than the original, though, so I had to be careful. I was going to be in real trouble if it broke. It isn't practical to paddle a wide row boat with one paddle, like a canoe. I would probably be blown directly down the length of

Big Bay De Noc, and still be in the waves at nightfall.

## **The Island**

I don't recall how long it took to get to the island. I do remember how good it felt to finally arrive there. The sun was still high enough to warm my skin. After sitting there on the rocks for a few minutes, I immediately got out the tools and went to work. Soon I had two spare oars, made out of cedar trees and driftwood. Then I found a good campsite.

Once I felt ready for the night, it was time to do some exploring. Round Island is about forty acres, and mostly wooded. The north end, where I landed, is more or less a pile of limestone rocks. Since it is only a little more than a mile around the island, I decided to walk once around the whole thing.

On one of my few forays into the interior, I found the remains of an old log cabin. It had been a long time since the walls had even stood upright. Probably it was a hunting cabin at one time. It is doubtful that anyone ever lived on the island for more than a few weeks at a time. I wondered how many years it would be before anyone noticed, if I built a cabin like that in the interior of the island.

Towards the southern end of the island, I was watching my step on the loose rocks when a six-foot shadow swept past me. I looked up and saw a blue heron. It looked like a prehistoric bird, as it soared on its huge wings. A dinosaur would have made the scene complete.

There were more. A large colony of these fish-eating birds were nested in the tall trees near the south end of the island. The nests were built forty or fifty feet off the ground, and some were the size of a bathtub. A few circled nervously as I passed by. I held out my arms and realized that their wingspans were longer than my arm span. Then the noise started.

The herons weren't the only birds here. As I came around the southern end of the island, seagulls filled the air. It was like a scene from the movie "The Birds," especially when they started to dive at me. There were tens of thousands, and they were guarding the nests full of eggs that I began to see on the ground all around me. I passed by quickly.

The wind didn't bring a storm, so I slept in the open that night, next to the fire in the stove I had built of rocks. Stones poked at me, and mosquitoes came out as the air calmed, but I managed to sleep a little. As I slept, I had dreams of pterodactyls swooping down out of the sky at me.

In the morning I left a fire going in the rock stove, and headed to the seagull colony. The gulls greeted me with their usual cries and maneuvers. Avoiding the bombs they dropped, I collected several eggs. I took just one from a nest, and only if it had three.

The fire was almost out when I returned to the campsite, but the flat rock on top was good and hot. I cracked the eggs and cooked them on this. They are larger than chicken eggs, but otherwise similar. The whites don't seem to ever harden completely, but they filled me up in any case.

I had a decision to make. I still hadn't properly explored the interior, but the lake was dead calm. Not even a

ripple. Recalling yesterday's adventure, I decided that it was best to take advantage of the calm water. If I waited, I could be trapped here for days by a strong south wind. It was time to head back.

### **The Crossing - Part Two**

Less than a few hundred yards into the crossing, the wind started up again. This time it was blowing straight back towards the island. I could have turned around, but having made my decision, I was determined to head home. In any case, I reasoned, going straight into the wind and waves was safer than traveling broadside to them. Also, the waves weren't as big as the day before. Yet.

They were bigger soon. The wind was howling, and I was on a roller coaster ride. Up the face of a wave, then down the backside, fighting the wind the whole way. A mile into the crossing, I was exhausted. I had been counting my strokes, just for something to keep my mind busy. Two thousand strokes into the crossing, it was time to take a break.

The wind pushed me back so fast, that in thirty seconds I probably had lost fifteen minutes of progress. I felt the loss like a punch to the gut. I reached for the oars and started the count where I had left off. There would be no breaks.

I did try taking another break an hour later. Again, after just a few seconds I couldn't stand to see all my work disappear as the wind pushed the rowboat back towards the island. Frustrated almost to the point of tears, I put my aching arms and back to work again. I wouldn't stop until I hit shore.

### **The Long Slog**

When I finally reached the shore at Chippewa Point, I was still six miles from home. My arms would no longer cooperate, so rowing along the shoreline was out of the question. I laid on the beach in the sun for a while. It was time for a break.

A short walk away I found the ruins of an old cabin. I poked around that for a while, looking for any treasures. I found only garbage. I noticed that there was still a lot of snow in the woods. It reminded me how cold the water would be.

Still, I didn't have a choice. One more attempt to row proved that my arms were worthless for the rest of the day. I would have to walk the six miles in the water, pulling the boat behind me. My shoes protected my feet from the rocks, and if I didn't go deeper than my knees, the water didn't seem so cold.

Mile after mile I slogged along the shoreline, with the rope over one shoulder, and then the other, to even out the damage to my skin. I think I remember promising myself never to do this again, but these kinds of promises are meant to be forgotten. You don't get the story without the trip.

I was almost home when Stan Parcher saw me. He hobbled down to the beach as I was walking by in the shallow, pulling the boat.

