

Boy Scout Camping – Being Prepared

Troop 107 Taylors, SC

Philosophy

There is a tradeoff between “Be Prepared” and overkill that scouts and parents need to manage. One of the things we try to emphasize in our troop is to focus on essentials, and to take only what you will really need. The most important part of being prepared is not having 3 different kinds of multi-tools, but rather the skills and knowledge to handle any situation inside one’s head! This document is intended to help parents understand the basic equipment needs of a first-year Boy Scout but is no substitute for the learning that goes with camping experience and the advancement from Scout to Tenderfoot to First Class.

Basic Equipment

The most essential gear that a boy will need relates to sleeping and eating. A good sleeping bag is critical for year-round camping. Here in Upstate South Carolina, we typically have at least 2 campouts per year when the weather gets close to freezing. A lightweight, mummy-style sleeping bag rated to about 20 degrees works well year-round. Don’t get a down bag – they’re too expensive for boys and will have problems if they get wet, and the boys somehow frequently manage to get water in their tents. You want a bag with synthetic fill – Polarguard, Hollofill, or Quallofil are all good. There are lots of good sources for these; many places offer discounts for scouts.

Boys grow fast, it is ok to get a bag that is a little too long for them right now! A sleeping pad is welcome but not essential. You have four choices in this area – 1) nothing, 2) a bulky blanket, 3) a closed cell foam pads, and 4) a self inflating air pad. Air mattresses are ok for the Dads but they are too heavy and complicated for the boys. Cots are acceptable but only when 1) they are used in the boys on tent (they can damage the tent floor), 2) only after the boys achieves Star Ranking, and 3) only at camporees. The \$20 green cots with aluminum frames work great.

For eating gear, boys really love those fancy mess kits that have all kinds of parts. Unfortunately, these are not really very practical, and they never come home with all the parts they started out with. A scout can get by just fine with a Sierra cup (available at Academy or Wal-Mart – get the larger size) and a lexan spoon. The ideal setup is to drill a hole in the spoon and attach it to the handle of the cup with a string. The cup can do double duty for both eating and drinking, or they can take along a separate plastic mug if they prefer. This really is all they need, they can eat anything from pancakes to beef stew with it.

He’ll also need a water bottle (he should never come on a scout outing without 120 oz of water(roughly 3 liters). There are lots of canteens and the like (the older scouts prefer the 1 liter Nalgene bottles) but really, a 1

liter Coke or Pepsi bottle will work just as well, and nobody will be very upset if it gets lost. Bottled water bottles from the store are good also. Scouts will also need a flashlight of some kind – at least 3 night a year, we usually end up setting up camp in the dark. It needs to be small and reliable. LED flashlights and headlamps are the only practical choice – battery life is excellent and the bulbs never burn out. And they are not much more expensive than conventional lights – you’ll save the money in batteries in no time. The 2 AA cell Mag Lites with the LED conversion kit are excellent – without the conversion we no longer recommend them.

Clothing

Scouts generally don’t need much special in the way of clothing that they won’t have for school and other activities. The exception might be rain gear and winter clothes as other activities don’t usually involve being outdoors in bad weather all day.

First thing to remember is that boys will get dirty! Don’t send along nice white trousers and shirts unless you plan to discard them after the trip! Dirt-colored (browns, greens, blacks) clothes are best. Assume that feet will get wet and send along extra socks and ideally an extra pair of shoes – an old worn out pair is fine for a spare pair, just patch them up with duct tape. We tell the boys hiking boots first, tennis shoes second. Any kind of athletic type shoes will be fine for almost anything we do. He doesn’t need fancy hiking boots (at least, not for the first year or two), but to save us problems with sprained ankles please send them in some type of boot. Scout rules prohibit open toed shoes, so no sandals please! He should bring plenty of dry socks, no matter what time of year it is.

Clothes should be packed in 1 or 2 gallon freezer grade Ziploc bags. Pack each day’s clothes in a separate bag (t-shirt, socks, underwear, shorts, etc.). If you put all the socks in one bag, the t-shirts in another the first thing they do is dump them all out, defeating the purpose of the bags (that purpose being to keep their clean clothes clean and dry and if not organized at least findable).

Scouts should never leave home without some sort of rain gear – even if it is just one of those cheap disposable ponchos from Wal-Mart. While we watch the weather carefully and try to not put ourselves out in the woods during bad weather. Sometimes it just happens. A vinyl poncho is a very practical piece of scout raingear and doesn’t cost much. If you want to move upscale to a rain jacket, the waterproof nylon jackets are a problem in that they don’t vent sweat very well. You’ll want to look for a waterproof / breathable fabric, like Gore-Tex. These are generally pretty expensive, which is why I’d recommend a plain poncho for a growing boy.

Cold weather is more of a challenge, because what works for school doesn’t work as well for scouts. First of all, cotton clothes like blue jeans are a bad idea in cold weather. Cotton is comfortable when it’s hot, is durable, but when it gets wet, it is difficult to dry and it loses any

insulating properties. This holds for cotton sweatshirts also. Nylon pants are better – nylon or polyester wind pants (perhaps with a light fleece lining) are great winter camping pants. Polyester fleece is an excellent outdoor insulator because it is lightweight, very warm, and insulates even when wet (and it dries very quickly). A fleece jacket with a nylon windbreaker over it offers a surprising amount of warmth, and won't get in the way of activities like climbing and hiking. Plus, if it warms up, he can remove one of the layers and still have some warmth. With a single heavy coat, this isn't possible. If your son gets cold easily, consider sending along some long underwear. Again, cotton is generally a bad idea. The polyester material that is fluffy on the inside like a sweatshirt works best. For our part of the country, you don't need the serious expedition weight stuff unless your child tends to get really cold. He'll need some winter socks too – more than one pair. Wool and/or polyester, not cotton. It really helps in staying warm to put on clean dry socks at bedtime. And don't forget a warm hat! A simple knit pullover hat works great. Lastly, remember that the inexpensive Wal-Mart fleece garments insulate just as well as the fancy, expensive kind! With some care and comparison shopping your son can be well equipped for winter camping without a lot of expense. And don't be afraid to shop at the Goodwill store or the Caring Place. An old work jacket can be a great investment and you won't be worried about it getting ruined.

Packs and Packing

Scouts will need a way to carry water, a lunch, their scout book and maybe a few other items on hikes or to events. The same day pack that they use for school books will work fine. No need for a fancy backpack, and by all means, don't go out and buy a real overnight type backpack until he really needs it, and then, discuss it with the Scoutmaster or other experienced adult leaders before you buy. First of all, it's a big expense, and secondly, very few backpacks are sufficiently adjustable to grow with a boy for more than a season! You don't want to buy one only to have it outgrown before it actually gets used. A cheap duffle bag or something along that line will work fine for packing his gear for most weekend campouts.

Other Stuff

Scouts will need a compass. Don't spend a lot, but don't spend too little either. The one you want looks something like the picture above. Notice that it has a clear base plate, and the needle floats in liquid. Make sure the scale can be read down to about 2 degrees (the Silva "Starter" model only goes to 5 degrees and is not accurate enough). Don't get the kind with fold-up sights or mirrors. There are several good brands, the best known are Silva, Suunto, and Brunton. A decent one shouldn't be much more than \$10.



He should also bring at least a minimal personal first aid kit to deal with basic scratches and the like. The troop has a large first-aid kit for more serious injuries.

Knives and Multi-Tools

Boys really want to carry knives, it is a genetic thing. And, there are legitimate reasons to do so. There are rules and safety requirements though. A boy scout may not carry a knife without a permit called a “Totin’ Chip” – he must not only have earned the permit, but he must have it with him if he has a knife in his possession. Boys don’t need a big knife, a small pocket knife will do – a Swiss army knife is good for example. While knives are actually fairly safe to use, the issue is in carrying them, a folding pocket knife is the safest. Multi-tools are good, but tend to be expensive, and somehow manage to get lost way too often. The same rules apply with respect to the knife blade – nothing too long. We don’t allow personal hatchets, except one every two years when we teach Wilderness Survival Merit Badge. Hatchets are needed then to make shelters.

Personal Hygiene, or Lack Thereof

Few boys can be talked into taking a bath on a weekend campout, but we still expect some personal hygiene to be practiced. In any case, they should bring along a small kit with toothbrush and toothpaste, some soap (small hotel bar in a Ziploc works well), and perhaps some deodorant. A small towel is useful. You can get “pack towels” which look like a piece of felt but which are surprisingly absorbent and which take up very little space. A synthetic car wash chamois is made of the same stuff, tends to cost a lot less, and will work just as well.

What Not To Bring

Boys should not bring clothing or other items featuring products not consistent with scouting values. For example, no beer, drug or cigarette related t-shirts and caps. Also, we don’t also none Boy Scout caps. If you son has a favorite cap sew a boy patch on and I tend to be ok with it. We don’t allow electronic stuff like Gameboys, CD players, radios, etc. on campouts – although we do usually permit them for use during car rides longer than an hour. Generally anything that detracts from the outdoor experience is best left at home. A deck of ordinary playing cards or a small travel chess set work well if there is a need to pass the time quietly in camp. A good book is best of all.

General Advice

Don’t feel like you need to get everything at once. Prioritize based on type of outings and season, and before long you’ll have everything needed. Planning ahead toward birthdays and Christmas can also provide a reasonable way to get a scout fully equipped. Mark everything with your son’s name and troop number. Lots of items look similar, and things do

get lost. If his name isn't on it, the odds are poor that it will get back to him!

Resources and References

Local Providers:

Wal-Mart

Sports Authority

Appalachian Outfitters

Half Moon Outfitters

Mast General Store

Sunrift Adventures

In NC and GA

Bass Pro Shops

Mail Order:

Alps Mountaineering www.alpsmountaineering.com and
www.scoutdirect.com

Coleman www.coleman.com

Campmor www.campmor.com