

# Hill Skills: Wild camping by Jon Garside

**You'll never forget your first night of wild camping. Tucked up in your sleeping bag high in the mountains, this is really getting away from it all. However, our uplands are fragile ecosystems, so there are a few important considerations to bear in mind before pitching your tent below a star filled sky.**

## Choosing a tent

First, some good news: if you're camping in a valley campsite there's no need to spend huge amounts of money on the latest flash mountain tent. Try the camping experience out with a



cheap one first. But if you're planning on heading up high then you'll need something sturdier, otherwise your romantic dream of watching the sun set could turn into a soggy dash down to the nearest B&B. When out shopping consider the colour: a green tent will blend into its surroundings and reduce visual pollution.

## Where to head

Camping 'wild', snow-holing and bivying are very different undertakings from staying at an established campsite. Wild camping is not permitted by right on Open Access land in England and Wales without express permission of the landowner, but it is permitted in Scotland on the proviso that you follow the Scottish Outdoor Access Code (SOAC). With no facilities at hand you need to think carefully about your impact – both physical and visual. Many of our mountainous areas are in the possession of owners who tolerate responsible wild camping, but it's important to be aware of the rights you do, and do not, have.

Don't always head for the most obvious sites: they can suffer from overuse. If a site looks well-used then try to find an alternative and let it recover. When choosing a location, remember that it's not just humans that are attracted to water. Your lakeside spot might be a great place to spend the night, but it's also a natural habitat for some pretty specialised flora and fauna. If you're likely to disturb them, choose another spot. Pollution can also be a real concern; many

of our upland stream and lakes also provide drinking water for the valleys.

You'll flatten the ground wherever you pitch your tent. Keep disturbance to a minimum: your tent should only be pitched between evening and morning, static wild camps are not a good idea. It may also seem like a nice idea to move rocks around to make a wall or kitchen area, but such domestication removes the wild nature of the area. You'll also disrupt any small insects and plants that call this high place home.

## Keeping warm and dry

Be ruthless when planning what to take. Identify what you won't need and leave it all behind. When packing, the knack is to minimise the weight of each individual item, so that together there is an appreciable saving. For wild camping I'd commonly take a one-man tent, a three-quarter-length lightweight self-inflating mat, a summer-weight down sleeping bag, a Jetboil stove plus small canister, a plastic mug and spoon, some boil-in-the-bag rice and some dehydrated or boil-in-the-foil food.

My boots and waterproofs are watertight, so I don't bother with spare clothing and my tent keeps me dry in the rain, so there's no need for an additional bivi bag. I don't use rucksack liners, but pack my sleeping bag in a dry-bag; I'm not bothered if items such as my stove get wet. You can of course take even less than this, and bed down in the open under a foil blanket, nibbling dried fruit for tea. I guess it all depends upon the type of 'memorable experience' you want to have. Finally, think about what you're

## Expert Q&A



Our wild camping expert is Phill Thomas. Phill has been an IFMGA Mountain Guide for 29 years and he has extensive experience of guiding and personal mountaineering around the world. He is presently Development Officer for both Mountain Leader Training Wales and the Mountain Leader Training Association.

### **Q. Can I drink the water in the UK hills?**

**A.** Yes, it is possible in some places and some people still do. However with the increased use of the hills I'm now reluctant to do so. There is an increased likelihood of catching something nasty like Giardia Lamblia. This cyst-borne disease is common in North America and is now found in Britain. I caught it at Everest Base Camp and suffered badly. For a day walk I carry as much tap water as I need. For camping trips I always boil water for a couple of minutes prior to using it for cooking,

drinking or teeth cleaning. There are other purification systems and filters that you can use to the same effect.

### **Q. I'd like to impress someone, what's the easiest way to learn about stars?**

**A.** I love to sleep out under the stars, although this is more problematic in Britain than most places. Other than being shown the constellations by a knowledgeable friend the best way is to get a good book (such as The Nature Companion's 'Practical Skywatching') showing the night

sky at different times of the year and take it with you. The constellations appear in different positions in the sky depending on the time of year. They are not all visible throughout the year.

### **Q. I'm taking my kids wild camping – any tips?**

**A.** Well, firstly choose a good weather spell. Second, get a big rucksack as you'll probably be carrying most of the gear. And thirdly, if it's a first camp don't be too ambitious: don't aim to camp too far from the road and make it just one night.



Leave no trace when you're wild camping - not even food scraps.  
Photo: Leslie Ashe.

carrying all your kit in. Whatever size your rucksack, you'll fill it and larger sacks are heavier, especially when incorporating adjustable back systems. For a three-day trip, I'd take a simple 45-litre sack, weighing about ten kilos when full. Finally, and most importantly, check the weather and pack accordingly. A cold and wet forecast could see you taking extra food and another dry-bag containing spare thermals etc.

### Leave no trace

We all know not to leave litter in the mountains, but waste food is equally bad. It attracts scavenging birds such as seagulls, as those who have climbed Tryfan know only too

well. Gulls are very aggressive birds: they will predate on smaller animals such as the eggs or chicks of ground nesting birds. So take all your waste out, including those stray bits of pasta that fall out of the pot. Open fires are unacceptable in the high mountains. Not only is there no fuel, but fires can scorch the earth a long way down, especially on peat that has a very high organic content.

Inevitably you're going to need the loo, so it's important to dispose of the results properly. One outdoor centre in the UK has adopted the American idea of sealable tubs to take all your waste with you. Many books on this delicate subject are also American and they suggest

burying the stuff in a hole, six to eight inches deep, at least 100-feet from the nearest water source. With our wetter climate, there's always the risk of polluting a watercourse, so where there's sufficient topsoil digging a hole is not a bad idea. Alternatively use a penknife to cut out a sod of turf, which can then be replaced. Ideally, break up the offending material to provide a greater surface area for efficient breakdown. And remember – either use leaves or burn that loo paper, carefully! ■

Jon Garside is the BMC / MLTE Training Officer. He has wild camped more nights than he can remember.



## FURTHER INFORMATION

### The Green Guide to the Uplands

Look out for the new Green Guide to the Uplands booklet, produced by the BMC. It contains all you need to know about minimising your impact, including wild camping.

[www.thebmc.co.uk/access](http://www.thebmc.co.uk/access)

### Hillwalking

Hillwalking is the official handbook of the Walking Group Leader and Mountain Leader scheme and it's packed full of advice to help you make the most of your time in Britain's hills and mountains. Available from The BMC shop priced £14 (Members).

[www.thebmc.co.uk/shop](http://www.thebmc.co.uk/shop)

### BMC Safety and Skills information

Check the BMC website for more essential Hill Skills articles.

[www.thebmc.co.uk/safety](http://www.thebmc.co.uk/safety)

