

More Thoughts on Ultralight Gear

Steven (and Mary) Robinson



“The greatest comfort one can indulge in is a light pack”.

After trying this ultralight stuff for a few years now, we thought it was time for some further feedback:

1. We are never, ever going back to ‘normal’ gear. Having used the light gear in all conditions from Tassie winter blizzard to central Australian heat, we can see no good argument for going back. We have been just as safe, warm, dry and comfortable. Really light packs don’t last as long, but are improving, and are much cheaper, so the ‘running costs’ are similar, as everything else seems to last well. For a weekend walk, it is almost like carrying a day pack, with a total weight around the 6kg mark including food, fuel etc. Why suffer? – we are all getting older!

2. We made a mistake in recommending that one should lighten shelter, sleeping gear and backpack all together as a first priority if wanting to get gear weight down. A really light pack is not designed for heavy loads. We would now say keep your present pack, and get its **contents** (everything except food, water and fuel) down to under 4kg. Only then consider getting an ultralight pack.

3. When we started, we made a two-person double-skin tent weighing 1.3kg including pegs. This has kept out the weather very well, but we now hardly ever use it. As an experiment we tried a tarp and bug-net set-up, and now use it by preference. It is much more flexible, roomy and pleasant, and keeps out the weather just as well. It is so much nicer to live under if sitting out bad weather, with tons of room, as well as being ½ kg lighter than the tent, and not requiring poles in most areas. We took our tent on our recent Western Arthurs traverse, and wished we had taken the tarp instead, especially when sitting out rain (just as well Duncan had his!). The down-side of a tarp is that you have to know how to pitch it for different weather conditions – not so good for beginners.

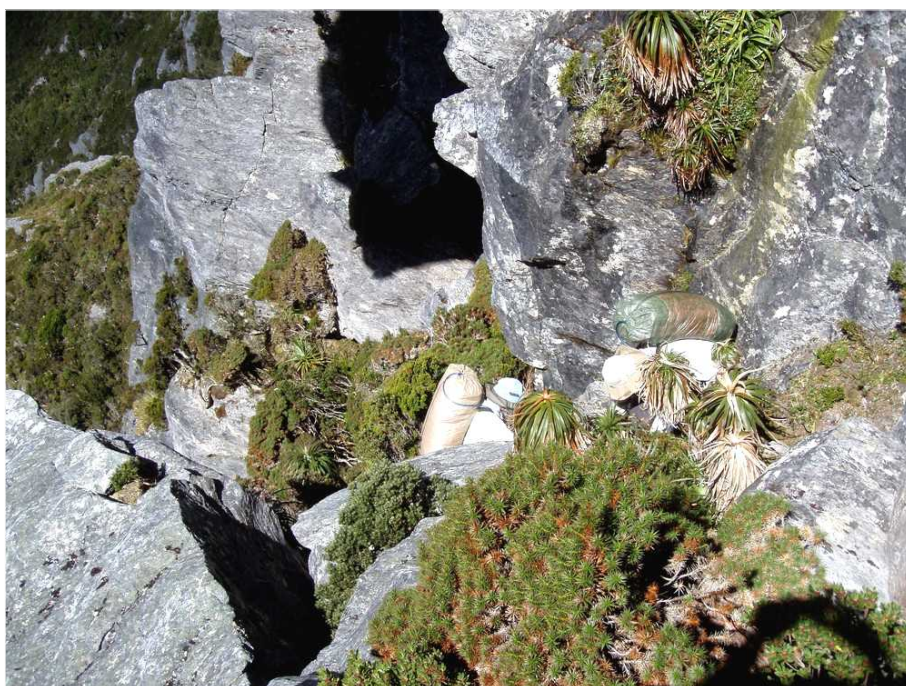
4. New materials and designs are being developed all the time. One new material is ‘Cuben Fiber’ – incredibly light and strong, but expensive. A ‘bomb-proof’ low-pyramid shelter that is becoming



Tarp vs. tent – Mary prefers the tarp.

very popular with walkers in the Scottish highlands (read gales/rain/sleet/snow/boggy conditions) is the *Mountain Laurel Designs ‘Trailstar’*, which seems never to shift in any wind. We haven’t tried it, but it looks attractive if you worry about a tarp in exposed windy conditions (340g or 480g depending on material). There are tons of other excellent products out there – just explore the internet.

5. We still prefer sleeping quilts over bags, but have moved from synthetic fill back to down, as the synthetic is too bulky. We made a new quilt for Mary with 900 loft down and one of the new lighter cloths – well under 700g for a quilt that is toasty warm to several degrees below freezing – cost about \$200. Lots of companies now sell quilts and bags well below 900g – search the internet. www.ZPacks.com advertise a -7 deg. quilt/bag at 485g (have not tried).



Two Zero packs enjoying a descent in the Western Arthurs.

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6. We are now using *ZPacks.com* backpacks (the largest 'Zero' model plus waistbelt) made from Cuben Fiber. Mary has the version made with heavier material, which is standing up to our conditions well. I have the lighter cloth, which is suffering a little from pack hauling and squeezing through gaps and scrub in the Arthurs. We would recommend the heavier material. These packs coped fine with 9 days food and fuel, and gear to cope with the worst of Tassie weather (starting weight 13.3kg), and we both find them very comfortable. About 200g in the heavy material.

7. We have bought new breathable Cuben Fiber raincoats (130g), but have not used them enough to really evaluate them. Our *Integral Designs* coat is no longer made.

We would again recommend following the ultralight path to anyone who ever feels that their pack is or has been uncomfortably heavy, especially if like us you are of slight build. Your muscles and joints will love you for it, and your brain will love the feeling of walking without concern for what is on your back. The best way to appreciate the Coasts and Mountains!



A trifle damp, but no problem.

For more information and updated links, refer to www.cmw.asn.au/articles/Ultralight.shtml.

(NB Ultralight is generally defined as a total pack weight excluding consumables (food, fuel, water) of under 4.5kg, or under 5kg for snow camping . . . but no need to be duty bound to slavishly keep to this).

