

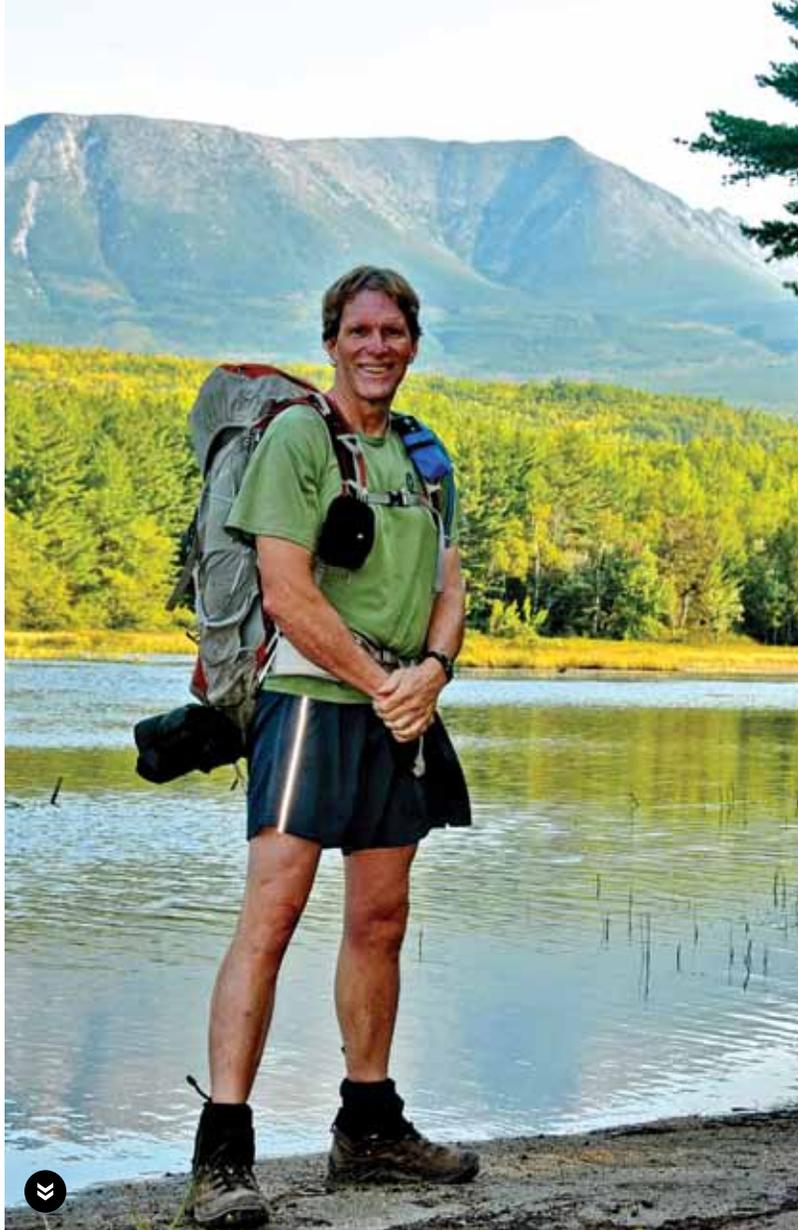


The Swing of It

Hammock camping is dramatically expanding along the A.T. and raising both questions and concerns among Trail land managers, club members, and backpackers. Are hammocks really that comfortable and viable as a long-term Trail shelter? Do hammocks pose a threat or a benefit with respect to minimizing camping impacts? Should we be concerned about damage to trees in frequently-visited sites? Do hammock users create or resolve problems at over-crowded shelters and camping areas along the A.T.? »

BY JEFFREY L. MARION

The author in Baxter State Park last spring, during the final section of his 43-year section-hike of the Trail.



BACKPACKING

PHOTO BY H. DEAN CLARK

the A.T. has certainly changed since 1955 when Grandma Gatewood completed the Trail wearing sneakers and carrying a homemade denim sack slung over her shoulder. The Trail has seen tremendous growth in use and substantial changes in the types of gear used. The heavy, external-frame packs that I carried in high school have given way to the lightweight, interior frame packs that I carry today. While Grandma Gatewood used a plastic shower curtain as a shelter, I've used double and single-walled tents, a tarp, a bivy sack, and a hammock.

I began section-hiking the A.T. in 1972 in ninth grade and summited Katahdin last fall after 43 years and 24 section-hikes. I've been using a hammock for the last dozen years. Hammocks offer some unique advantages over tents, with one main challenge, which I'll explain. Also, as a scientist who studies camping impacts in the National Parks and along the A.T., I've assisted in developing sustainable camping management and Leave No Trace practices. While hammock camping impacts have not yet been formally investigated, I have been observing the im-

pacts from my hammock camping and experimenting with low-impact practices. I would like to describe the many advantages that hammocks offer campers, allay some of the concerns I've heard, and include some comprehensive low-impact hammock use practices that will truly allow you to "Leave No Trace" of your visits.

MY JOURNEY TO HAMMOCK CAMPING

My first exposure to a hammock occurred on a canoe trip on Kentucky's Green River around 1970. I was on a Boy Scout outing with my dad and we set up a tarp pulled over our canoe on an island. Several of the older boys were permitted to set up their army surplus jungle hammocks on a separate, smaller island about 60 feet away. That night it rained hard and the river rose steadily. My dad and I were forced to get up and move our canoe and tarp to higher ground around 1 a.m., but with water again lapping at our feet by 4 a.m. we were forced to sleep inside the canoe with our tarp draped overhead. Aluminum canoe ribs and a wet sleeping bag allowed little sleep. At daybreak, I peered across the river to discover that the small island was underwater, with four hammocks suspended less than a foot above the floodwaters. The older boys had been forced to move their ropes further up the trees during the night, and tie off their canoes, but they had remained warm, dry, and comfortable. I've been fascinated by hammocks ever since.

ADVANTAGES & DISADVANTAGES OF HAMMOCK CAMPING

+

In 2003, I began using an ultralight backpacking hammock, which is uniquely designed for camping. For me, camping hammocks provide numerous advantages over the other forms of shelter. My hammock weighs 2.4 pounds, lighter than many one-person tents, and has integrated zipper-accessed bug netting. A separate silicone-treated nylon rainfly can be attached to the hammock lines, to the trees, or removed. My hammock came with a pair of wide webbing straps to protect tree bark.

For me, a chief advantage of hammocks over tents is that I always stay dry — top and bottom. On one of my A.T. section-hikes through Pennsylvania, the remnants of a hurricane passed over me one night. Warned of its approach, I had picked out a younger grove of trees to camp in, with no dead trees or limbs nearby. The wind rocked me to sleep with earplugs to dampen the noise. A predicted rainfall of four inches fell that night, with the ground pooling water beneath my hammock, but not a drop reached me. Even better, you never have condensation problems with a hammock. Any raindrops on the fly in the morning can be quickly removed by shaking it — and you never have to pack heavy, wet fabrics with rain-splashed dirt or clinging mud. And there are quite a few other advantages:

- Sleeping in a hammock is comfortable. By orienting your body at a slight diagonal to the hammock's hang, you sleep ergonomically flat, which easily accommodates both side and back sleepers.
- By floating above the ground you avoid sloping terrain, rocks, roots, or muddy soil that inevitably trouble ground sleepers.
- In the summertime, it's airy and cool and you save the weight and bulk of a sleeping pad.
- You can see the stars on clear nights and the hammock makes a great chair or couch for reading and studying maps for the next day's hike.
- My hammock has an overhead internal ridgeline with a mesh bag for storing small items. I use the ridgeline to hang my bathroom bag, headlamp, damp socks, and a bottle of water.
- You can enter and exit a hammock easily during a rainstorm, and even eat a meal and pack up under the rainfly.
- I use "snakeskin" hammock covers that slide over the hammock from each end for transport and storage — it takes just a few minutes to set up and take down.



PHOTOS BY JEFF MARION



From top: Girls with a co-ed Venture Crew of high school students — led by Jeff Marion — learn the correct way to hang a hammock during a backpacking trip past McAfee Knob in Virginia; Venture Crew youth enjoy their hammocks after successfully setting up.

—

So what's not to like? My chief complaint is that sleeping suspended in the air maximizes convective heat loss — you sleep cold in a hammock. Fortunately, there are several solutions to this problem. I initially tried sleeping pads in the hammock but it's hard to position and keep yourself on them throughout the night. When you wake up cold you instantly know what parts of your body are off the pad. A more successful option was my purchase of a sleeping bag that replaces all bottom insulation with a sleeve that you slide a mummy-shaped sleeping pad into. On sub-30-degree nights and in treeless areas I set up my hammock on the ground with suspension ropes tied to trees or trekking poles to elevate the canopy and netting. Your hammock becomes a tent and you sleep warmer on the ground. Another option for cold-weather hammocking is to use an insulated underquilt suspended beneath the hammock. For those interested in trying out hammock camping I suggest searching the internet to investigate the many different types and brands of hammock and methods for suspending them.

»



HAMMOCK BASICS

KEEP SUSPENSION LINES
LOOSE — A WEIGHTED HANG
ANGLE OF 30 DEGREES IS BEST

ATTACH WEBBING TO TREES ABOUT SIX FEET
ABOVE THE GROUND, ADJUSTING THEM UP OR
DOWN IN SLOPING TERRAIN SO THAT A LINE
STRETCHED BETWEEN THEM IS NEARLY LEVEL



AVOID TRAMPLING VEGETATION

A RAINFLY PROVIDES SHELTER FROM THE ELEMENTS

USE ONLY WEBBING
“TREE-SAVER” STRAPS
(a minimum of 1" or wider)

CHOOSE TREES 6" IN
DIAMETER OR LARGER,
WITH DURABLE, HARD
BARK WITH LITTLE TO
NO LICHEN OR MOSS
COVER — 12 TO 15 FEET
APART *(never attach to, or
near, dead trees or overhanging
dead limbs, or set up inside A.T.
shelters)*



SNAKESKIN COVERS
SLIDE OVER THE
HAMMOCK FOR EASY
SET-UP AND STORAGE

PHOTOS BY JEFF MARION

HAMMOCK CAMPING LEAVE NO TRACE PRACTICES

The use of hammocks on the A.T. has clearly grown substantially in recent years. I view this as a positive trend from the perspective of minimizing camping impacts, though even more impact can be avoided if hammock users learn and apply some simple low-impact practices. As author of the Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics book, *Leave No Trace in the Outdoors*, I've been experimenting for years with alternative low-impact hammock camping practices. I've concluded that the single most important item of gear in my pack that helps me "leave no trace" on my A.T. visits is my hammock.

Hammocks allow you to avoid many of the impacts and constraints associated with camping on the ground. First, hammocks allow camping across a much wider range of locations, including those with sloping and uneven terrain. Flat terrain is often limited to stream and lake shorelines in the mountains, locations that are more sensitive to camping impacts and vulnerable to campsite expansion and proliferation. Second, unlike tent, tarp, and bivy users, there is no need to remove rocks, woody debris, plants or organic materials from the site, or to alter surface water flows by ditching. Finally, sleeping on the ground involves crushing underlying vegetation and compacting soils, impacts that are avoided by hammock camping.

It's nearly always possible to find hammock camping spots where you can avoid trampling vegetation. Along the A.T. these are generally on existing campsites or in dense forests over leaf litter with little to no herbs or mosses underfoot. You'll need two trees (6 inches in diameter or larger) about 12 to 15

feet apart with no obstructing saplings or shrubs. Never attach to, or near, dead trees or overhanging dead limbs, or set up inside A.T. shelters (which are not designed for side loads). Trees with durable, hard bark and little to no lichen or moss cover are best.

Use only webbing "tree-saver" straps (a minimum of one inch — but wider is better) to suspend your hammock as these increase surface area and reduce the harmful forces ap-

plied to trees. Ropes and narrow webbing cut into tree bark, leaving ugly indentations that may also harm the outer cambium layer that produces all the new cells in the trunk. It's critical to leave your hammock

A hiker relaxes in his hammock on the A.T. in Georgia. Photo courtesy Eagles Nest Outfitters



PRISTINE SITE / BEST PRACTICES

- Consider stopping at a shelter or campsite with a nearby water source to cook and eat your dinner. Then fill up with water and hike at least 15 minutes down the Trail before searching for a place to camp.
- As you hike, look for an area with dense tree cover and few shrubs, saplings, herbs, mosses, or lichen. Walk off-Trail more than 200 feet to find a spot with no prior evidence of camping, preferably in sloping or uneven terrain that hikers are unlikely to see, find, or reuse.
- If you need to cook dinner then also look for an adjacent area with exposed rock for a durable kitchen site away from your hammock. If you must cook on leaf litter then move flammable leaves away from your stove and return them after you're done.
- Never build a campfire when pristine site camping. When moving about, avoid stepping on plants and don't shift branches or logs.
- Scatter branches and leaves on any disturbed areas before departing; someone walking past this spot after you depart should see no evidence of your camping.

suspension lines a bit loose — a weighted hang angle of 30 degrees is best. Pulling the lines tight dramatically increases shear force on your hammock and suspension lines and damaging pressures on trees. I generally attach the webbing to trees at about five to six feet above the ground, adjusting them up or down in sloping terrain so that a line stretched between them is nearly level.

Whenever possible, camp within the barren core portions of well-used campsites; always select the least desirable tenting spots, such as rocky areas or uneven, sloping terrain. I've heard A.T. hikers complain about hammock campers setting up over the "best tent spots." If there is no space, or the trees are poorly positioned, find and use another campsite. Don't set up in adjacent offsite areas as this could expand the campsite. Campsite proliferation and expansion are two significant forms of camping impact that hammock campers should always strive to avoid. Prevent late-night visits by bears and other animals by not cooking near your hammock. Store your food, trash, and "smellables" by hanging them in a tree or placing them in a bear canister or food storage locker.

Hammocks also greatly facilitate what I call dispersed "pristine site" camping, also known as stealth camping. This does *not* mean illegal camping; apply this form of camping *only* when legal and you are willing to apply low impact practices. The prime objective of this form of camping is to *select only pristine spots that will not be reused by others and to leave them in pristine condition*. This is the form of camping that I have been experimenting with on my section hikes for the last dozen years.





As hammock camping becomes more popular on the A.T., it's a trend that could help reduce crowding and resource impact at our shelters and existing campsites. However, it could also result in the creation of new campsites, the expansion of existing sites, or cause conflicts with other campers. Education will be key in determining the actual outcomes and A.T. Leave No Trace practices could be updated to include guidance for low-impact hammock camping and strengthen our communications with hammock users. ⬆

Dr. Jeff Marion is a scientist with the U.S. Geological Survey stationed at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia. He served on the ATC Stewardship Council (2005 - 2011) as chair of the Trail and Camping Management Committee. He was a founding member of the Leave No Trace Board of Directors and chaired the committee that developed and refined Leave No Trace practices from 1997 to 2005.



The ENO ATC DoubleNest hammock was created in order to help users enjoy the A.T. — 10 percent of sales are donated to the ATC. Available at the Ultimate A.T. Store: atctrailstore.org



Q/A

WITH ENO GM LANE NAKAJI

AS THE G.M. OF EAGLES NEST OUTFITTERS (ENO) — HOW OFTEN DO YOU GET A CHANCE TO HAMMOCK IN THE OUTDOORS WHILE HIKING, CAMPING, ETC.? Unfortunately, with a growing company like ENO, I am unable to get out as much as I'd like to. I strive to go hiking/backpacking at least one night a month during the spring, summer, and fall.

HOW MUCH HIKING AND HAMMOCK CAMPING HAVE YOU DONE ON THE A.T.? I have hiked and hammocked primarily in Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. Time off is often a limiting factor so my wife and I usually stay closer to home. Fortunately for us, the closest A.T. trailhead is only 35 minutes away.

IN YOUR OPINION, WHAT ARE SOME OF THE BENEFITS OF HAMMOCKING (AS OPPOSED TO TENT, SHELTER, OR OPEN-AIR SLEEPING BAG CAMPING)? Benefits of hammocking include a deeper, more restorative sleep. I find myself sleeping fewer hours while hammocking and waking up more refreshed when compared to

sleeping on the ground. I enjoy the ease of my hammock system as well as the number of potential campsites compared to tent camping. Hammock camping is very low impact and once mastered, it's easier to leave no trace of ever being there.

WHAT DREW YOU TO BECOME INVOLVED WITH CORPORATE SUPPORT OF THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL CONSERVANCY (ATC)? ENO consists of many like-minded individuals who

enjoy and respect the outdoors. We take pride in helping others discover and enjoy all that nature has to offer. I was fortunate enough to thru-hike the A.T. and wanted to give back to this community. For many of our users, our products act as a catalyst, a gateway to adventure and a connection to the natural world. In many ways, the Appalachian Trail acts as this same catalyst. [Its] accessibility to so many Americans is a blessing. But with this comes challenges of funding, overuse, and management. The ENO ATC DoubleNest hammock was created in order to help users enjoy the A.T., as well as raise awareness and support of this treasured national trail.

HOW DO ENO'S CONTRIBUTIONS BENEFIT THE ATC/A.T. AND WHAT PLANS DO YOU HAVE TO CONTINUE THAT PARTNERSHIP IN THE FUTURE? ENO's contributions help raise awareness and support of the A.T. Many of our retailers have been great supporters of this program and help to garner support and awareness of not just the ATC but the Pacific Crest Trail Association and Continental Divide Trail Association, too.

WHAT IS THE STORY BEHIND THE ENO ATC DOUBLENEST HAMMOCK? Coming from an outdoor retail background, I always felt that as a brand, the ATC had unlimited potential. It just made sense to form a partnership between two organizations that shared the same passions: getting people outside and protecting our resources. ⬆

Eagles Nest Outfitters has been a generous Corporate Partner of the ATC for six years and counting.