All About Sleeping Bags
Tom Huggler

Previous Page
Email This Page
Print This Page

What you need to know about choosing and using a sleeping bag.

Unlike home furnaces, which can be measured in BTUs of heat, there is no industry standard for sleeping bags. Most companies use an arbitrary rating system, which is keyed to the number of pounds of insulation in their products. The information is valuable, therefore, only in understanding that company's product line.

Typically, however, a 1- to 2-pound lightweight bag is rated to 40 degrees Fahrenheit; a medium-weight (2 1/2 to 3 pounds of fill) to 25 or 30 degrees; a heavyweight (4 pounds) to zero or 10 degrees; and an expedition-weight (5 or 6 pounds) to well below zero. To be sure you get a sleeping bag warm enough for you, discount the manufacturer's rating system by at least 10 degrees. In other words, you might reasonably expect a 20-degree bag to keep you warm at 30 degrees and above.

It isn't that the companies are lying. Individual metabolism, what you have eaten or drunk, what you wear to bed, and tent type and location are other factors that determine warmth and comfort.

The sleeper warms the bag; the bag does not warm the sleeper.

Keep in mind, too, that the sleeper warms the bag; the bag does not warm the sleeper. The bag's purpose is to slow the loss of body heat through convection (movement and escape of air within the bag) and conduction (transfer from your body to the ground). Another truth: When blood circulation slows during sleep, heat rises to the body torso, and extremities -- head, feet and hands -- cool. That is also why the old trapper and lumberjack maxim of wearing a woolen cap to bed is still a sensible idea when sleeping outdoors in cold weather. Socks and gloves may help, too.

DOWN OR SYNTHETIC?

Goose down offers more insulation for its weight and bulk than do synthetic fibers such as Hollofil, PrimaLoft, and PolarGuard HV. Thus, a 3-pound down model may be equivalent to a 5- or 6-pound synthetic. Natural down is wonderful, but it is considerably more expensive and may not even be needed. Further, when down becomes wet, it loses its loft, which is a material's ability to fluff up and hold heat. The amount of loft in a sleeping bag, regardless of fill type, can vary from two to nine inches. Tip: Shaking out the bag and allowing it to air out each morning helps restore loft.

Manmade materials have come a long way since the Kapok-filled bags of my Scouting youth. Today's factory insulations are lighter and warmer than ever, and many are durable enough to withstand repeated washings. Although not waterproof, a few are water-resistant. Those featuring continuous-filament fibers tend to loft very well.

Product availability is strong these days with some 50 companies making sleeping bags. Standard size is 33 inches wide and 75 inches long, but models are now available for pint-sized kid campers to big sportsmen who stand 6 feet, 8 inches tall. Many of these bags are reasonably priced, too.

USE CONSIDERATIONS

But how much do you want to spend for a good night's rest? Sleeping bags run the price gamut from $25 slumber party lightweights to $600 for a goose down polar-weight model. Hollofil II and Quallofil insulations are less expensive than some of the newer synfills such as Micro-loft and Lite Loft. As you ponder the options, keep in mind, too, that how a sleeping bag is constructed is as important as the material inside.

To illustrate: A mummy-shaped bag with sculpted head protector and drawstring will be much

More expensive models with hoods and a conforming shapes are better for cold mountain camping.

warmer (and usually more expensive) than a rectangular-cut bag. Rectangular-cut bags, with or without insulation, are usually fine for summer camping in the flatlands. But when overnighting outdoors in cool or cold weather, buy a bag with plenty of insulation.

My personal preference when car camping is a generous-cut rectangular bag containing 6 pounds or more of insulation. Such bags are heavy and bulky, but I like the freedom of movement and the wonderful feel of weight -- they remind me of a New England comforter over my body.

Lighter mummy or modified-mummy bags are the choice of backpackers heading for high country. They warm more quickly because they trap air better. But they are also confining, so much so that some campers report mild attacks of claustrophobia.

When manufacturers make sleeping bags, they must sew through the insulation to hold it in place between inner and outer liners. Otherwise, the insulation will shift and ball up. The stitching process, however, pinches the insulation along the seam and results in less loft. Summer-weight bags usually include a single layer of insulation, quilted to the inner and outer liners. Better-quality bags feature more insulation, which has to be layered--usually in an innovative shingle or overlapping quilt design -- to avoid pinch points. Down bags typically are constructed with slant baffles for this same reason.

Other signs of construction quality are full-length left-and right-hand No. 7 or No. 8 zippers that self-heal, insulated draft tubes over the zippers to keep cold air out, and roomy, insulated foot warmers. Zippered utility pockets on the outside are handy for holding change, eyeglasses and other small items.

Previous Page | Email This Page | Print This Page