

Through the Wringer

Hiking family tests camping gear that is both family- and budget-friendly

Wearing fully loaded packs, it had taken us three hours to reach Mount Walker's summit by way of the trail. It took just a few minutes of summit investigation for our ten-year-old son to find the parking lot.

"What? You mean we could have driven up here?" he asked, with at least modest irritation in his voice. He was stopped short when our nine-year-old shot back, "Hey, we are gear testing, not car testing."

After a good laugh and a little ribbing, we made our way to the south summit lookout to enjoy lunch in the all-too-rare sunshine. From our perch on the eastern fringe of the Olympic Peninsula, the views into the Olympics, down onto Hood Canal, and across Puget Sound to the Cascades were simply breathtaking. It was a great spot to sit and listen as the boys assessed how their backpacks had worked for them on the hike up.

For three (cold! wet!) months, Marika and I have put our six kids and a whole lot of gear through the paces. We've hit the trails, visited local state parks and camped out in our back yard all in the name of testing family-friendly backpacks, tents, sleeping bags and pads.

Our mission: To find and test hiking gear that the average household with kids could afford. With this in mind, high dollar items were out, but quality was not. We wanted to find durable gear that could be used by kids as they grew, shared between families, or passed down from older kids to younger kids from season to season.

We hope that you find our test results useful as you build your own gear closet.



Our hearty testing crew, the Scroggins-Forsell family, taking a break on the Tubal Cain Mine Trail this past summer

Read more test results online at wta.org.

The Kelty Salida 4 was a trooper.



The Big Guy: Tents

Our wants: Two- and four-person tents with components that can be distributed between multiple packs and footprints that will easily fit into smaller backcountry campsites

Tents tested: Eureka Scenic Pass 2XT, Eureka Apex 2XT, Kelty Salida 4

The size and layout of these Eureka tents are similar. The key difference is that the **Apex 2XT** has two vestibules and the **Scenic Pass 2XT** has one. The vestibules on both tents are rather small and require you to enter from the right side while entrance into the tents is on the left. This configuration works well for keeping out driving rain, but is cumbersome for loading and entering and exiting the tent. Because of this configuration, the vestibule is extremely limited in what you can place in it. The Apex 2T vestibules proved more useful, as you could keep gear

The Deuter Fox 30 earned high marks for flexibility.



Each pack tested had its perks. Here's one pack in action on the Mount Walker Trail.



As seen through the tent screen, this tester looks pleased with her sleeping bag/sleeping pad combination.

dry in one vestibule, and enter and exit the tent through the other.

During one driving rainstorm, the Scenic Pass 2XT began to leak. Its rain cover only extends halfway down the two ends of the tent, so the rain saturated the lower portion of one side and wind drove water up and into the screen portion of the tent under the rain fly.

The Eureka Scenic Pass 2XT and Apex 2XD tents came with fewer stakes than needed to set up the tents as directed, requiring us to add additional stakes before hitting the trails.

Although we were specifically looking to share the responsibility of carrying the tent, it was reassuring to know that both Eureka tents were light enough as a whole for our ten-year-old boy and thirteen-year-old girl to carry if necessary.

The Kelty Salida 4 turned out to be our workhorse tent. Getting inside was easy. The single vestibule holds two large backpacks, and there is interior floor space for some limited gear storage. Though listed as a four-person tent, it slept two adults and three children comfortably. The Salida 4's rain fly extends nearly to the ground on all sides, providing excellent shelter from driving rain and wind.

If you're looking for a family tent, especially if you have young children, the Kelty Salida 4 is a perfect blend of size, weight and ease of access. A family of four to five could live comfortably for several days on the trail without feeling like you are sleeping on top of each other. For a stand-alone children's or teenager's tent, the Eureka Apex 2XT works well in all but the stormiest conditions. Access is cumbersome, even for children, but, let's face it, they are flexible and will only notice the inconvenience if it is brought to their attention.

Just as Important: Backpacks

Our wants: Internal frame backpacks with the ability to fit multiple body styles and grow with a child through their teenage years or be passed down to younger children

Backpacks tested: Kelty Courser, Deuter Fox 30, High Peak Luna 45+10

Although it has the smallest capacity, the **Deuter Fox 30** was by far the most flexible. For small children and teenagers on day hikes and simple overnight trips, this is an excellent pack. Not only did this backpack fit our nine- and ten-year-old boys and thirteen-year-old girl, it also adjusted enough to fit six- and seven-year-old girls. The torso length adjustment can be made in seconds, allowing us to switch the backpack from one kid to another midhike. Flexibility at its finest! With ample tiedowns and compression straps and the roomy side compartments, you can easily store and stash your rain gear and snacks. This is a great pack for kids or teenagers who are carrying some common gear like tents and cooking equipment, and it should be more than adequate to last into early adulthood.

If you're looking for a hefty overnight or multiday trekking pack for your tween and teenager, the **High Peak Luna 45+10** is your pack. Our ten- and thirteen-year-old kids were able to carry all of the gear required to be self-sufficient on an overnight hike using this pack. The torso length adjustment allowed this pack to fit the frame of children ranging from ages nine to thirteen—or even Marika and me. The hip belt was not able to adjust small enough for our nine-year-old boy or six-year-old girl. While the Luna 45+10 may not be flexible enough to fit small children, it can be used by adults as a large day pack or small overnight pack. The built-in rain cover is easy to deploy without taking the backpack off. This nice feature should be made mandatory on all packs sold in Western Washington!

The well-built **Kelty Courser** is a typical top-loader, with adequate compression straps and tiedown points. It's suitable for teenagers and adults, but the lack of torso length adjustment means this pack will not be able to adapt with children in their early- to mid-teen years when they are growing the fastest. We could adjust the pack to fit kids ages ten to thirteen, but even then it shifted and didn't feel secure to the kids.

Critical for Warmth: Sleeping Bags

Our wants: *Lightweight and durable sleeping bags that can either grow with a child or be passed down to the younger kids from season to season, to eliminate the need to purchase new sleeping bags each year*

Sleeping bags tested: *Kelty Big Dipper 30 and Little Tree 20, REI Kindercone +30, Deuter Starlight EXP, High Peak Summit 20 Jr. and Summit 0 Jr.*

The **Kelty Big Dipper 30** and **Little Tree 20** earned mixed reviews during our testing process. These sleeping bags are the bulkiest of those we tested, taking up a chunk of space in our packs. They have an integrated compression storage sack, which is a novel concept, but its implementation leaves much to be desired. The compression sack is little more than a cinch bag that is hard to load the sleeping bag into, and its design leaves one side of the bag open to the elements. But we liked the Kelty sleeping bags when we got to camp because they are roomy and durable. The expandable foot section in the Big Dipper 30 will allow you to shorten the bag to keep small kids warmer at night and open it up as they grow taller.

The **REI Kindercone +30** proved to be a solid performer. Our kids appreciated the easily accessible head lamp storage pocket and the liner in the head of the bag where you can stash a small pillow or clothes for better head support during the night. The only common complaint was that the interior lining was coarse and could become irritating on exposed skin overnight.

The **High Peak Summit Jr.** bags were the only sleeping bags to come with compression bags, a handy inclusion that should be taken into account when making purchasing decisions. We tested both the Summit 0 Jr. and Summit 20 Jr., and found the 20-degree bag to offer enough warmth for Washington's cool spring weather. Unless you're camping in winter, at high elevation, or near the snow line, you probably don't need the warmer but heavier zero-degree version.

The **Deuter Starlight EXP** was the most expensive bag we tested, and it was by far the best of the group. This bag is made from lighter weight materials than the other bags. Compressed, it came to half the size of the next smallest sleeping bag we tested, leaving plenty of room for other gear. With an expandable foot section, the bag fit everyone, from youngest to oldest, snugly at night.

For a Good Night's Rest: Sleeping Pads

Our wants: *Lightweight comfortable sleeping pads that require limited pack space and provide more value than the average personal inflatable mattresses*

Sleeping Pads tested: *REI Trekker 1.0, Therm-A-Rest ZLite, Trail Scout and Ridge Rest*

We tested three Therm-A-Rest items and each provided vastly different levels of comfort and convenience.

In our tests, the **Ridge Rest** seemed to provide the most protection from heat loss to the ground, but the least amount of flexibility in use. As it can be packed only into a large roll, forcing it to be attached to the outside of a backpack, it's more useful as a car-camping sleeping pad than a backpacking one. The **ZLite** uses an egg-carton style in a series of panels that fold up into a relatively compact size. This pad provided good protection from heat loss, and it earned the "most comfortable" distinction from one tester. The self-inflating **Trail Scout** rolls into a compact size that can fit inside a backpack, but the pad's material does not seem as resistant to abrasions as the other sleeping pads tested.

The **REI Trekker 1.0** is a self-inflating pad designed just for kids. Shorter and thinner than the other tested sleeping pads, the Trekker packed down to the smallest size and held up well to abrasions. We found this sleeping pad provided the perfect balance between size, weight and comfort. ♦

Story and testing photos by Adam Scroggins



The REI Kindercone +30 offered a comfy headrest, but may need to be washed a few times to soften up the lining.

NEXT UP» Gear for Going Light

Summer has finally arrived and, hopefully, getting back on the trail has rekindled your love for the Pacific Northwest. By golly, it was another long winter and a somewhat relentless spring, but here we are in the prime time!

Just like you, WTA's Gear Team will be taking full advantage of this wonderful window. We're putting the newest and coolest gear through the wringer in an effort to "go lighter."

Beyond just buying the lightest gear, going lighter calls for a change in mindset while you prepare, and requires you to bring the right gear for each situation. We want to give you a good idea of all the factors you should consider when trying to lighten your load. And we'll talk about the options you have if you just cannot give up certain creature comforts.

Our September+October issue will feature gear reviews, packing strategies and other helpful tricks to help you go farther, go faster and be more comfortable doing it! Less weight means less wear and tear on the body and ultimately more years of backpacking bliss. Stay tuned—you won't want to miss this one!

—Patrick Leahy