

Backpacking Merit Badge – new merit badge book notes

October 10, 2008: Notes written by Terry Pogue, Greater St. Louis Area Council, Backpacking MB Subject Director.
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Note to merit badge counselors: remember that going to Philmont barely covers one requirement, 11a, and that trip doesn't involve food planning and budgeting for that trip as required in 11a. A scout has to do much more than go to Philmont Scout Ranch, much more knowledge has to be learned and demonstrated or done on the other hikes.

New requirements:

3a – “Tell how you would minimize risk on a backpacking trip.”

4c – “Tell what factors are important in choosing a campsite.” Good change.

6c – “Explain how to stay found, and what to do if you get lost.” Good change.

Change of wording:

9a – Was “Write a plan for a patrol backpacking hike that includes a time control plan.” The book showed a very complicated time planning program; pretty hard and I have never met an adult who did this for themselves or had every seen this.

9a – New “Write a plan for a patrol backpacking hike that includes a schedule.” Not nearly as complicated in the book and more fitting for those of us who don't backpack on a tight time schedule.

Notes about book:

Of course the color pictures are nice but content is more timely and shows things and tips that aren't requirement but good to know for any backpacker.

Pages 15-17; pretty weak info about determining minimum and maximum sizes of group

Pages 21-22; good hypothermia info, great “Hypothermia Challenge” to help determine condition

Page 24; great new section about safety in thunderstorms. Very useful and all units could use this info, not just backpackers. See on-line training for weather on the National BSA website.

Pages 36-37; good boot/shoe buying info

Pages 42-43; info about external and internal packs is too general and doesn't offer nearly enough advice about how to buy and no good info about sizing. Doesn't mention the different uses of internal and external that are accepted in the outdoor industry.

Mentions torso length in passing but doesn't explain what it is or how to measure; doesn't mention waist size of hip belts. This would have been good info since so many people buy gear on-line now.

Page 46; statement about self-inflating pads offering maximum insulating value is wrong!

Closed cell foam pads offer the best insulating value; lots of tests to prove this. They also don't warn that self-inflating pads, when punctured, lose almost all their insulating value and offer no comfort when they go flat. Think they should have mentioned that you need to know how to repair self-inflating pads on the trail.

Page 49; note about tent floors being sturdy enough to not need a plastic ground sheet is against advice from tent makers and experienced packers.

Page 51; the picture of a canister stove is wrong; it is a picture of a white gas stove with an attached fuel bottle. They only mention white gas, canister and alcohol stoves; no mention of multi-fuel stoves and lots of those are sold and we get lots of questions about those.

Page 52; very good safety tips about stoves but they call them chemical fuel stoves; gas stoves are not called chemical fuel stoves by packers.

Page 57; very weak section about loading and hoisting a pack. No explanation about the various straps on modern packs or proper placement and fitting of waist belts and shoulder straps. Many companies have good websites that show how to fit:

Page 61; good info about not urinating on trees.

Page 82; chemical treatment of water is a bit out of date. Not all chemical treatments of drinking water leave an aftertaste; the pills issued at Philmont leaves no taste.

Page 83; nice note about bear bags but they use a different system at Philmont. They also mention hard plastic food containers but don't mention that most of them cost about \$75, pretty steep for kids to each have one.

Page 88; very small note about trekking poles. Good little note but maybe they could have explained the true usefulness of poles and how to use them. They are good for much more than poking rocks looking for snakes.