Setting up a Proper Campsite

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Picking a campsite that will remain dry when it starts to rain, is sheltered from wind and weather, and free of roots and rocks is easy on paper, but challenging in practice. This course considers how to **choose** a site and make it work within the parameters of "Tread Lightly" and "Leave No Trace".

“Picking” vs. “setting up” vs “choosing”. You can “choose” a campsite by going online and reserving the one you like with a credit card. Or, you can “pick” one out when you arrive at the ranger booth. Or, you can decide on a destination along a trail where the group will camp. In any case, once you pick it or choose it, you then get to “set it up!”

All of the usual advice in the Scout manual and other resources apply. Things to consider/avoid:

- Overhead “widow makers”.
- Level to slightly sloping ground
- Don’t pitch your tent in a basin
- Water availability
- Sufficient firewood
- Poison ivy patch?
- Hunting season
- Location of tents - kitchen - food storage

My theory is to leave as much behind in your garage as humanly possible, because the less you bring the less you need to “set up” and the less you need to dismantle and pack up on Sunday morning when you are heading home.

Leave No Trace is the perfect way to educate your troop to follow best practices, behaviors and environmental citizenship as these 7 principles point us in the proper direction in the most important areas where we can reduce our impact in our outdoor activities.

LNT, The 7 principles

1. Plan ahead and prepare
2. Travel and camp on durable surfaces
3. Be careful with fire
4. Dispose of waste properly
5. Leave what you find
6. Respect animals
7. Respect other people, visitors

Use these to think about the campsite, and indeed the entire campout.

Most important is the first: **Plan ahead and prepare.**

- What kind of campout it is?

- What are the goals of the campout?
- Who is going? What are their skill levels?
- What gear is available?

"Front country" camping. Assuming a novice or first campout or a bunch of untrained parents, a good place is a state park or other **developed** campsite. The MOST IMPORTANT resource at such a campsite is WATER, which would be available by spigot and is invariably chlorinated/treated if it is a municipal or governmental facility. Other things that might be needed for some adults are toilets, an obvious place to put up a tent, benches, tables, etc.

- What are LNT principles to observe, teach or discuss with your scouts when in a developed campsite setting?

IMHO, as soon as possible, get out of this mode of camping, it is becomes less interesting for scouts as their skills develop and they get older. But each troop and group is different and the wishes of the scouts should drive locations to a large extent.

"Backcountry" camping. What is this? In my opinion, anything without on-demand municipal water where you backpack into a non-developed site. Examples:

- Along the FLT on state land, 150 feet off the trail. No established tent sites. Probably no fire rings, No latrine.
- Up in the Adirondack wilderness areas.

Assuming above, THE key resource is water. Why? Water is heavy, 2 lbs/quart (8+ lb/gal) and you need 4-6 liters per person day when camping (this with minimal dish washing and KP!). A creek, pond, or decent seep from small cliff wall can supply water. It's nice to be within ¼ mile of the water source, closer is obviously easier. ALWAYS treat the water in a manner consistent with the group, its size and resources.

Tent sites? As the skill of the group increases the space needed per tent actually decreases as tents can get pitched closer together and individuals respect the limited space around the tents. Avoid: bowls, dips, soggy places because if it rains, you will get wet! On the other hand, modern midrange 2-person backpacking tents are phenomenal and if properly pitched (tight rain fly, staked out) and not in a low area, will keep the occupants dry. Have trainings with the scouts on how to pitch the tents properly in a dry, lit area (eg. weekly meeting). A dark, rainy night is no time to do this.

As adult leaders, you can always check out the site before the activity. If an unfamiliar site, hike in a week in advance to familiarize yourself with the area. This is OK. It increases your confidence as the leader in charge of the safety of the group. You can be sure there is adequate water in the creek, that there is enough dead and down wood and that you know the way in, especially if it is the time of year when you might be hiking into the camp in the dark. **"Plan Ahead and Prepare".**

What individual or group supplies are important in backcountry camping? What other things must be planned for and prepared for?

Travel and camp on durable surfaces. We are focused here on the campsite and less on the traveling. If you will be camping in a state park or other developed location, there might be a specified site with already laid out fire ring, water and so on.

But if it is a "non-developed site" along a trail, then by definition you are traveling on a durable surface (the trail). When you reach your site, take a look around and see if you can find an already established fire ring. If you have a choice of a pristine meadow or the edge of the meadow, under pine trees, choose the location under the trees, there will be less vegetation to be trampled and the more bare ground (perhaps covered with leaves or pine needles) is much more durable than the meadow. The advice of avoiding heavily leaning trees, major dead overhead branches and so on is good advice, but we have all stuck our heads out of our tents in the morning and found unsavory things overhead when we arrived in the night.

If you are in a more pristine site try to not make "cattle paths" by treading the same paths time and time again. Disperse while hiking and while in camp if at all possible. When you break camp, "fluff your duff" with a branch or stick and try to obliterate evidence of your presence. This is nice to do even in established sites and it only takes a couple of minutes and sets a good example!

Be careful with fire. Managing a fire properly might be the most important responsibility we have as users of the outdoors. Objectively there is less fire danger in upstate NY versus the western US where even modest wildfires can cause hundreds of millions in property damage to say nothing of wildlife loss and long-term loss of ecosystem services. Even so, fire safety is a key item for training scouts. Use an existing fire ring if available, might need to scout around in a trail side location.

Part of the fire question revolves around how your group will cook: open fire or stoves. Regardless of the kind of stove, stoves save lots of time, allows easy heating of water and food and will work regardless of the weather. If needed, stoves can be used under a properly set-up tarp so the group can stay out of the rain during cooking.

On the other hand, cooking over an open fire (to say nothing of building it!) is a skill that is only developed with repeated practice. Patrol fires are perfect for this, but the site chosen should have enough firewood (dead and down) available for the group. Low branches should **not** be broken from trees, **only** collect down branches that have fallen naturally from the trees. The quantity of wood needed to keep a patrol going for an entire day (breakfast, lunch, dinner and evening) on a winter campout) is staggering.

Dispose of waste properly.

- Human waste. Developed areas will have washrooms, perhaps with running water, so no problems there. More primitive sites (perhaps near a lean-to on the Finger Lakes Trail) might have an outhouse available. While much more primitive and sometimes with a certain yuck factor, this is an easier solution than squatting. Don't forget hand sanitizer,

ingestion of fecal material from improperly cleansing hands after the "bathroom" is the most common source of intestinal illness in outdoor activities.

- Consideration should be given to training scouts in digging a "cathole" and how to use it. Delicate subjects, but scouts will not inherently know how to do this. Do training in scout meetings. Don't expect first year scouts to be doing this in the absence of training, pre-trip programs and support from their peers. There is a lot to using a cathole and entire books have been written on the subject (ex: "How to sh** in the woods"). Perhaps the most important aspect is to handle toilet paper so that you don't allow a "TP garden" to develop after you leave. Thus, either pack your toilet paper out (a very advanced skill) or stir it extensively with your waste and soil and then bury it under soil.
- Garbage. This is a different and simpler issue. Pack it and pack it out. Nothing else need be said. Don't bury it, don't burn it unless it is clean paper (no plastics or foil). Purists will argue that burning even clean paper is improper and should not be done.

Leave what you find. Don't vandalize the site. If there is a fire ring, use it and do not dismantle it. Conversely, if you find garbage, cans, or bottles, pick them up and pack them out. Leaving what you find can refer to things like historic (or modern) structures or petroglyphs and the concept of leaving them alone for others to enjoy in the future. It also means leaving the natural resources of the area alone. Don't muddy the stream, don't cut branches from living trees and so on.

Respect animals. Some areas will have specific regulations to protect wildlife. This is especially critical during mating and nesting seasons, when animals might be under additional stress and less able to handle human presence. In NY, the DEC prohibits group camping in wildlife management areas (WMAs) for just this reason. As the adult leader, model the correct behavior by following human roles related to animals.

Respect other people, visitors. People go outdoors for many reasons and solitude is just one of them. It is striking how few people a troop can encounter when camping along the Finger Lakes Trail, either in a primitive site off the trail or even an established lean-to. But in state or local county parks, human density is more of an issue and the effects of our behavior on others should be considered. Presumably your troop will not have amplified music so this should not be an issue. And since scouts are courteous, general behavior should not be a problem.