

**Another longwinded letter from Curt Mobley; May 2002**

## **Part 1: CM Joins the Revolution**

A year ago I did a Wilderness Volunteers trip to the Grand Canyon. We spent our days maintaining trail—moving heavy rocks, swinging Pulaskis, dragging McClouds, and contemplating Archimedes' insight about being able to move the earth given a long enough rock bar<sup>1</sup>.

One of our crew was an old desert rat, Dick, who was on something like his 25<sup>th</sup> Grand Canyon trip. Dick was well into his seventies, but showed no signs of slowing down. On the last morning as we were packing up for the hike out, I noticed that ol' Dick didn't have much more than a day pack. I wondered where his gear was. Then someone asked him how he liked his new ultralight equipment. "Great," he said, "it's the future of backpacking." This got a conversation going, and he started talking about one-pound packs, two-pound tents, and such. He claimed that if your pack weighted more than 15 pounds (not counting food and water) you still weren't clear on the ultralight concept. "Where do you get this stuff?" I asked. I certainly have never seen any two-pound tents in REI. Dick eyed me with a look of exasperation and said, "Young man, just do a Google search on 'ultralight backpacking' and get with it." He and his 15 pound pack then quickly disappeared out of sight as I lumbered up the steep trail with perhaps 45 pounds on my back. I realized that Dick was at the cutting edge of both the information age and of a new era in backpacking.

As soon as I got home, Google revealed a revolution in progress. People are hiking the entire Appalachian and Pacific Crest trails with 8 pounds for the "base pack" of pack, tent, sleeping bag, rain gear, stove, and headlamp. That really got my attention, since by base pack weight was at least 20 pounds. I was soon spending hours on the internet reading product reviews.

I unfortunately missed the sexual revolution of the 70's, the greed revolution of the Reagan 80's, and the dot-com stock revolution of the 90's, so I wasn't about to let the ultralight revolution slip away. At my age, this could be my last chance to participate in a revolution in anything other than geriatric euthanasia. Also, I am at that delicate age when a man's thoughts often turn to trophy wives and Porsches, so Ann was more than happy to have me occupy my mind with ultralight equipment. I won't bore you further; Part 3 of this epistle gives the specifics of how I spent my money. Ann considers herself quite lucky to have gotten me past my midlife crises for a mere \$1158 and a few fantasized seductions.

A good place to start your own research is the Ultralight Backpacking 101 tutorial at [www.backpackinglight.com/index/18/index.htm](http://www.backpackinglight.com/index/18/index.htm). If you still don't believe you can have a base pack under 8 pounds, see [www.promountainports.com/upk.shtml](http://www.promountainports.com/upk.shtml). Just Google it.

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<sup>1</sup>. If you're not familiar with Pulaskis, McClouds, and rock bars, you need to sign up for a WV trail maintenance trip; see [www.wildernessvolunteers.org](http://www.wildernessvolunteers.org).

## Part 2: CM Ultralights the GC

Well, to skip ahead a year, I recently started down the trail into the Grand Canyon with 24 pounds on my back, including four days of heavy, luxury food. Climbing back out, I carried perhaps 16 pounds. What a difference from last year!

I was returning to the Kanab Creek Wilderness, where I had worked the previous year. This seldom visited area is a paradise of hidden springs, Anasazi artifacts, and solitude. I wanted to take my time and do some serious photography, so I lugged along my good camera, tripod, and even a flash (all of which were *ultraheavy*). I also had been yearning all winter to do a solo trip in the GC—another midlife crisis symptom, I suppose. There is nothing like being alone in some of the roughest and most remote country in the lower 48, with no prospect of help in an emergency, to clarify your relationship to nature. I figured that if a mountain lion jumped me, I would just whack him on the snout with a trekking pole; that would teach him a lesson he wouldn't soon forget! As for broken legs and scorpion stings—well, they would be a good test of my ability to endure pain.

Mountain Sheep Spring gushes out of the cliff wall a few feet above the bed of Sowats Canyon. It is a truly magical place, a paradise of permanent water and greenery in the midst of miles of rock. The name honors the small frogs that live there in great abundance. Their evening call does indeed sound like sheep bleating.

I set up camp in a small alcove on the south side of the canyon, 100 feet from the spring. There were Anasazi pictographs on the wall above me. Within minutes, I spotted 7 Anasazi pot sherds within 10 feet of my tent. My camping spot was likely a Motel 6 for Anasazi hunting parties a millenium ago. There are no signs that any archaeologist or pot hunter has ever visited this site. I wondered what pre-Columbian art treasures might be buried in the dirt beneath my tent.

Last year I had watched a large Blackneck Garter Snake hunt for frogs downstream from the spring. He (or was it a she?) wrapped his tail around the top of a pyramidal rock about 3 feet high in the middle of the stream. He then hung motionless with his head an inch above the water, waiting with infinite patience for a frog to swim past.

I took an afternoon stroll to see if my friend was still there. Sure enough, there he was, hanging head down from the same rock. What a great life: get up in the morning, slither to rock, wait for frog, eat frog, slither home, go to bed, repeat the next day. What would he think about the hectic life I lead back in Seattle? I took a nap to get myself on snake time.

The next day I wandered down Sowats Canyon and up Jumpup Canyon, another oasis of running water. On day three I moved a few miles to Kwagunt Hollow. Along the way, I went a couple of miles cross country to find another spring shown on the topo map. I saw no sign of it, but maybe it was dry, since last winter was one of the driest on record in that area.

I did cross paths with a rattlesnake during the search for the spring. He gave me a warning buzz when I was still eight feet away, for which I thanked him kindly. We remain good friends, respectful of each other's territory. Some naturalists believe that rattlesnakes are now rattling less. This is a plausible consequence of Darwinian evolution. Just as some people tend to talk more than others, some snakes probably rattle more than others. The snakes that rattle get noticed and killed by stupid people. The snakes that don't rattle are overlooked and survive, thus leading to natural selection of non-rattling rattlesnakes. Of course, it is to our advantage to encourage rattlesnakes to rattle so that we can avoid stepping on them, but most people can't seem to comprehend that; they just want to kill rattlesnakes. May their homes be overrun by the rats their victims would have eaten.

Kwagunt spring was almost dry. Last year, the canyon downstream had been a photographer's delight of small waterfalls and pools. This year it was just dried mud and sunbaked rock. But no problem; now I have an excuse to return next year for more photography.

The afternoon brought a light rain shower and the wonderful smell of rain in the desert. I finished the day photographing the sunset on the canyon rim above my camp.

The next day I hiked out of the GC, or rather, I almost floated out with my light pack, now a total convert to ultralight equipment. Thanks Dick!!

The next week I did another WV trip, this time removing Russian olive trees from the main Escalante River corridor in southern Utah. The first day was a ten mile cross country hike over very rugged slickrock and canyon country. Even with water, my tools (saw, loppers, and a bottle of herbicide for the stumps), and my share of group equipment, I don't think my pack was much more than 30 pounds. Others were carrying 50 or more. I can only imagine the comments that were made behind my back as I flitted about like a hummingbird while everyone else plodded along like a latterday sauropod species, *Backpackus giganticus*, unaware that their ilk is doomed to extinction.

BTW, if you're now inspired to withdraw \$1158 from your 401(k) and outfit yourself to repeat my GC adventure, I suggest that you also invest \$22.95 in copy of the book *Over the Edge: Death in Grand Canyon* by Ghiglieri and Myers. It's an entertaining account of the nearly 600 people who have taken one-way trips to the big ditch. You'll enjoy their stories as you wait for the buzzards to arrive....

## Part 3: Comparison of Old and New Equipment

All weights were measured on the same postal scale. All weights are meaningful totals, e.g., the tent weight includes poles, stakes, ground cloth, and stuff sack. Prices are either what I paid or MSRP (not including sales taxes or shipping); you can often find cheaper prices on the web.

OLD	weight	NEW	weight	weight savings
<b>Pack:</b> Wilderness Experience, expedition sized (~8000 in <sup>3</sup> ; replacement cost for similar pack: \$400-\$600)	6 lb 8 oz	<b>MountainSmith Ghost</b> (\$179) [~3100 in <sup>3</sup> ; not <i>ultralight</i> , but has good hip belt and suspension worth the extra weight; pocket for water bladder; very comfortable with room enough for group gear] www.mountainsmith.com	2 lb 7 oz	65 oz
<b>Tent:</b> Marmot Nutshell (MSRP \$259; I got it for \$179 on sale) [2 person; 30 ft <sup>2</sup> ; a good tent, which I'll now use for car-camping]	6 lb 10 oz	<b>Wanderlust Nomad Lite</b> (\$275) [1 person; 23 ft <sup>2</sup> ; much better than a tarp for keeping bugs and rain out; uses trekking poles for tent poles] www.wanderlustgear.com	32 oz	74 oz
<b>Trekking poles:</b> none [Lewis and Clark didn't need them, so why should I?]	0 oz	<b>Black Diamond Ascent</b> (\$99) [needed for the Nomad tent, and I quickly came to like them for flipping rattlesnakes out of the way] www.bdel.com	22 oz	(22 oz)
<b>Sleeping bag:</b> Mountain Hardware 1 <sup>st</sup> Dimension (\$160) [synthetic fill, so good for wet conditions]	2 lb 7 oz	<b>Nunatak Backcountry Blanket</b> (\$273) [goose down; opens to make a blanket or velcros together to make a bag] www.nunatakusa.com	1 lb 8 oz	15 oz

<b>Sleeping pad:</b> Therm-a-rest Standard 3/4 length (\$50)	1 lb 10 oz	<b>Therm-a-rest Ultralight 3/4</b> (\$60) [I used a Ridgerest (9 oz, \$16) for 2 weeks but it was so uncomfortable I bought the Therm-a-rest, which is well worth the extra cost and weight] www.cascadedesigns.com	18 oz	8 oz
<b>Rain Jacket:</b> Marmot Goretex (around \$300; water proof and breathable; heavy duty material)	23 oz	<b>Golite Squall</b> (\$92) [waterproof and breathable] www.golite.com	11 oz	12 oz
<b>Pile Jacket:</b> Patagonia Marsupial Synchronilla (\$76)	16 oz	<b>Longsleeved bike jersey</b> (\$50)	9	7 oz
<b>Headlamp:</b> Wonder, lithium battery and bulb (weight includes extra battery; replacement cost around \$60)	14 oz	<b>Black Diamond Moonlight</b> (\$35) [uses 4 LEDs and gets 70 hours from 3 AAA batteries, so no need to carry spares; plenty bright for hiking] www.bdel.com	4 oz	10 oz
<b>Stove:</b> MSR (an old version much like the XGK Expedition; uses white gas; replacement cost \$110)	16 oz	<b>MSR Pocket Rocket</b> (\$40) [uses gas canisters; I used only 2 oz of fuel in 4 days in the GC] www.msrcorp.com	4 oz	12 oz
<b>Cookpot:</b> Sigg Aluminum, 2 quart (\$20)	9 oz	<b>Evernew Titanium</b> , 2 quart (\$40) [no weight savings, but a better pot with built in insulated handle]	9 oz	0 oz
<b>Water container:</b> Two, one-liter Nalgene bottles (\$15) [double this for desert trips, triple for the GC]	9 oz	<b>MSR Dromedary</b> , 2 liter (\$15) [heavy duty material; fits in the bladder pocket on the Ghost pack] www.msrcorp.com	6 oz	3 oz

<b>First aid and repair kit:</b> comprehensive first aid kit and separate repair kit	32 oz	combined and reduced to what is reasonable for self treatment (I then made a bigger “group” first aid kit to carry with large groups)	14 oz	18 oz
<b>Total weight of old equipment listed above</b>	<b>394 oz = 24.6 lbs</b>	<b>Total weight of new equipment listed above</b>	<b>192 oz = 12.0 lbs</b>	<b>savings =202 oz = 12.6 lbs</b>
<b>Approximate replacement cost of old equipment</b>	<b>\$1550</b>	<b>Total cost of new equipment</b>	<b>\$1158</b>	<b>savings = \$392</b>

I still have a ways to go before I am fully ultralight, e.g., I still carried my old rain pants and a heavy MSR water filter. But if you think the 12 pounds I’ve already cut from my pack isn’t enough to matter, you’ve obviously never hiked out of the Grand Canyon. The volume of the ultralight gear is also much less. My ultralight tent and sleeping bag are no bigger than loaves of bread.

**Final comments:** I bought a pair of Chaco sandals with vibram soles (1 lb 9 oz) in the hopes that they would be adequate for hiking. They were not, both because of lack of ankle support (even for a light pack) and because sandals give no protection from rock and cactus thorns. So I’m still hiking in my lightweight Lowa boots (1 lb 11 oz) and carrying the Chacos for camp use. I recommend getting the Chacos with the light weight sole.

For serious photography, you need a serious camera. I have a Nikon F100 with at 28-200 mm zoom lens. It is the most sophisticated piece of technology I’ve ever owned and I love it. It also weighs about 4 pounds. Add a tripod, a flash for shady slot canyons, extra batteries, a dry bag to protect your \$2K investment from the rain, and pretty quickly you’re approaching 8 or 10 lbs. Not exactly ultralight. I also have a Cannon SureShot A1 (MSRP \$250; \$160 at [www.bhphotovideo.com](http://www.bhphotovideo.com)), which I highly recommend. It weighs only 11 oz and is waterproof to 5 m, so you need not fear rain. I use mine snorkling and kayaking. Its underwater shots of coral reefs are amazingly good, even with slide film, as are its everyday photos in a variety of lighting conditions. Some of the best shots I got on my Grand Canyon raft trip a couple of years ago were action shots in the rapids with the A1. It is an excellent choice for a weatherproof 35 mm ultralight camera.

My two best pieces of ultralight equipment are the Wanderlust Nomad tent and the Nunatak Backcountry Blanket. Each is made by an entrepreneur working in his garage, so you won’t find this stuff at REI (who has yet to discover the ultralight movement and, in any case, would rather sell you a \$500, 7 lb expedition pack than a \$100, 1 lb ultralight pack). Tell Curt (Wanderlust) and Tom (Nunatak) that I sent you....