CAMPsite Selection

The sun is dipping toward the horizon and you're seeking a place to spend the night in the backcountry. Here's what to keep in mind:

Spring through Fall

- Schedule your day so you arrive at your chosen campsite at least 2 hours before sunset. You don't want to race to finish last-minute chores in twilight.
- Seek out previously impacted areas. These are usually flat, shaded spots close to a water source.
- Consider the feelings of others when selecting your site. Are other people camped within easy earshot of a site you are considering? Then try looking around for another option. Don't crowd other campers unless positively no other choice exists. Also: Don't plunk down your tent in a spot that spoils a view that other people came to see. When you enter the wilderness, blend in, don't barge in.
- What's the most important consideration when selecting a campsite? The view? It's important, true, but your site's proximity to water is usually Factor No. 1. You will need water for cooking, cleanup and filtering for your next day's drinking supply. Plus, camping near water gives anglers a chance to test the waters for fishing prospects. The final bonus: The sound of a rushing stream or of a lake's small waves lapping a shoreline provides a soothing audio backdrop as you drift off to sleep.
- You want to be close to water, but not right at water's edge. Choose a spot 200 feet away from the trail and water. You want to 1) stay out of sight (if possible) of other hikers and 2) give wildlife an unobstructed path to water.
- One of the negatives of camping near a lake or slow-moving water: bugs. If mosquitoes are a problem where you want to camp, try to select a site where a breeze is stirring. That won't solve the skeeter problem, but some wind might help ease it.
- If you will use your campsite as a basecamp for day trips, choose a site that offers ample shade during the day. You want to minimize the amount of time your tent is exposed to the sun. A tent's nylon canopy deteriorates when left in direct sunlight for prolonged periods.
- Many people like to point the head-end of their tents toward the east to catch the sun's early morning rays. It's not essential, but if you want to get an early start, this tactic may help nudge you out of the sack in the morning.
- Anticipate the wind. If it's gusting, try to select a campsite where boulders or trees provide a windbreak.
- Be mindful of low spots. If you are camping along a river or within narrow canyons, seek higher ground when making camp in case bad weather moves in overnight. Low spots tend to collect water. Cold air sinks, of course, making low spots chillier. So, if your destination gives you the option, take the high road.
- If you're camping on the beach, choose a spot beyond the most obvious tide line.
- Don't pitch your tent in a plant-filled meadow, on a lakeshore or in some other pristine, picturesque, never-before-trampled spot. While scuffling around, you may cause damage to the scenery that will take years to reverse. If you are off-trail and must camp in some rarely traveled area, camp on smooth rock or bare ground (sandy, light-colored mineral soil, for example) so your impact will be barely noticeable to future visitors.
WINTER

- Where should you set up? Either on snow or on bare ground that supports little or no plant growth. Camping on snow reduces your environmental impact to nearly zero—very appealing. Just be mindful of animal tracks; try to avoid disrupting a path that might serve as a lifeline for the resident wildlife. If the only bare ground you can find harbors plant life that would suffer from your trampling, camp on snow.
- Camp higher rather than lower. Cold air really sinks in winter. Avoid valleys if possible.
- Calculate where the sun might arrive first in the morning. Position your tent so you won't be sitting in the shadow of some peak while a spot a hundred yards away will receive full-throttle sunshine an hour earlier.
- Consider the wind. Examine the surface of the snow where you might camp. Has it been shaped by wind? Does it have a frosty, brittle texture while other spots in the area are soft? These signs indicate harsh wind patterns. It's best to look elsewhere for a site.
- Scan the area around your potential campsite, particularly above it, for signs of past avalanche activity. Can you spot a section of trees that was mowed down by a past avalanche? Any piles of avalanche debris in the area below you? See any snow-collection basins or steeply pitched couloirs looming high above you? If so, make tracks to a less-threatening area.

YEAR-ROUND

- Keep your site clean. This should be obvious, but some people ...

Bottom line: Be responsible, and treat the backcountry gently. You appreciate arriving at a clean campsite in a wild, beautiful setting, right? Please do your part to make sure those coming after you will enjoy the same experience.