

CARE AND FEEDING OF YOUR DOWN BAG

A down bag is a lifetime investment—if you treat it right. Here's how.

By Bruce Ransom

Do you know where your down sleeping bag will be this winter? If you're not winter camping, chances are you'll store that lofty bag in the most convenient way you can: jammed into its stuff sack, tossed in the back of your closet.

Well, that makes as much sense as keeping your ice cubes in the oven. Storing a down bag all scrunched up robs it of the very feature that gives it its excellent insulating ability: Loft. As almost any backpacker knows, loft is the important ability of down to fluff up, trapping the dead air that provides the sleeper with all that wonderful warmth. While the tiny clumps of down are very resilient, each time they are compressed they lose a bit of that ability to spring back, and the longer they stay compressed, the more resilience they lose.

Granted, only a fraction is lost over the course of, say, a month or two. But if down items are routinely stored this way, they'll eventually lose enough loft to affect their ability to trap dead air.

The best way to store your down bag is to let it fluff to its full loft, then hang it in a clean, dry location. I hang mine upside

down from the ceiling of a closet. Many down bags have a loop sewn in at the foot for just this purpose. You can also lay your bag flat under your bed, or roll it loosely and store it in a corner. Many companies sell large, muslin "storage bags"—another good way to stash it. Even storing your bag in a large duffel bag is all right; just don't stuff it into a tiny sack.

If winter is your "off-season," now's a good time to clean your down bag. And the safest and most effective way to wash any down item is by hand. Some manufacturers claim machine washing and drying on gentle cycles is alright, but there are risks.

First, down is an excellent sponge, as anyone who's been caught in a rain storm wearing a down jacket can attest. And, as we all know, water is heavy. Now imagine

your bag as it shifts and tumbles through the cycles of washing and drying, with all that watery weight tugging and pulling on internal baffles, and on quilt seam lines. You're asking for a "blow-out," when a seam or baffle bursts inside and the wet down oozes into compartments between the lining and shell.

Dry cleaning is another alternative to hand washing that's sometimes recom-

If you do plan to dry clean your down bag, check with your sporting goods store, or with the company that made your bag. Often they can recommend a reputable local cleaner. You can often get a proper job for about \$10, so expense shouldn't stand in your way. However, be aware that many dry cleaners send their work out to a central facility, making it impossible to know how well it will be done.

If your down bag has a Gore-Tex nylon shell, *do not* dry clean it under *any* circumstances. Dry cleaning chemicals become lodged in the material, and, since they break down water droplets into particles small enough to pass through the Gore-Tex membrane, will permanently turn your shelter into a sieve.

Frankly, I've always been reluctant to experiment with new and different cleaning methods for my \$300 down sleeping bag. I've relied on dependable hand washing, and, while the whole process takes a long time, there's very little actual *work* involved. Here's my method:

Fill your tub half way with warm, soapy water. I use a mild soap, usually one of the liquid soaps especially formulated for down. If your bag has a Gore-Tex nylon shell, avoid flake soaps, since they can gum up the material, altering the surface tension and making it leaky.

Lay the bag on top of the water and gently submerge it. Scrub any soiled areas with a soft sponge. Now, let the bag soak for about 12 hours, making sure it stays fully submerged. Turn it over and gently agitate it a couple of times while soaking. *Never* lift the wet bag out of the water; all the extra weight may rupture an internal seam or baffle.

When the bag has finished soaking, open the tub drain. Let water drain from the bag for an hour or so. Gently press out as much additional water as you can, then refill the tub and agitate the bag again to get rid of the soap. Do this at least three



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mended by down bag and garment manufacturers. The trick here is to find a dry cleaner with a good reputation for cleaning down. Most will say they can clean down garments and sleeping bags safely, but often really don't give them the special time and attention they need. There's a big difference between washing feather pillows and prime goose down sleeping bags: An improperly dry-cleaned pillow can still be used; but a down bag, its insulation ruined, might as well be used as a lap robe at ball games.

The problem here is that dry cleaning chemicals must be free of impurities. (That in turn means they must be changed often, an added expense not every cleaner cares to incur). And, they must be thoroughly rinsed out of the down. That takes time, and time, too, is money.

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times until all residual soap is gone, then drain and press out the water one last time.

Now, how do you get it out of the tub? Place both hands under the bag, lift it out, and either hang it over a line or strong shower curtain rod to drip-dry or lay it flat on towels, turning it over and inside-out occasionally. Break up the clumps of down with your fingers as the bag dries.

When the bag is almost dry (only a bit of dampness remaining in the down clumps) you can put it in the dryer at low heat to finish the job. Some people toss in a tennis ball to help fluff-up the down as it dries. Whatever you do, be certain when you take it out that the bag is completely dry; damp down can literally rot inside your bag—not a pleasant thought.

Of course, the whole reason for having down gear is to use it. Despite advances in synthetic insulations, including machine washability, prime goose down still provides more loft and insulation for the weight than any other material. But you do have to keep it dry, so it's important to keep your bag well protected in your tent and in, or on, your pack—especially if it doesn't have a Gore-Tex nylon shell.

Make sure your tent doesn't leak, and that it is well ventilated so that condensation won't soak your bag. Use a foam pad or air mattress, and try to keep wet gear away. When hiking, store your bag in a coated, waterproof stuff sack, and make sure that its seams are sealed. For extra insurance, line the stuff sack with a small, plastic garbage bag, and pack the bag either in your pack's sleeping bag compartment, or well under the top flap.

Once you've set up camp, unpack your sleeping bag and fluff it up to its full loft. Then look forward to a good night's sleep. As soon as you return from your trip, unstuff your bag, turn it inside out, and let it air overnight. This will get rid of any moisture from either perspiration or the elements.

Keep it clean, dry, and properly stored, and the down bag you now own could very well be your last. ☺

Freelance writer Bruce Ransom, who lives in soggy Seattle, knows the importance of keeping down clean and dry.

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