



A CAMP ON WHEELS FIELD GUIDE

Camping Checklist for Complete *Beginners*

Never pitched a tent in your life? Start here. What you actually need, what you can skip, and how to have a genuinely good first night outdoors — no experience required.



BEFORE YOU DO ANYTHING ELSE

Hey there, future camper.

If you've never spent a night outdoors and the whole idea feels a little intimidating, you're in exactly the right place. This isn't a guide for people who already camp — it's for people deciding whether to try it at all.

We're Camp on Wheels, a family-owned business based in Edmonton, and we talk to first-timers every single week. The questions are almost always the same: what do I actually need, how much will this cost, and what happens if it rains. Good questions, all of them — and all answerable.

This guide skips the gear-review rabbit hole and the 50-item packing walls you'll find elsewhere. It's the short version: the handful of things that matter for a first trip, in the order you'll actually need them.

You don't need to own anything special or know any special skills. You need one weekend, a few borrowed or budget-friendly basics, and a little bit of nerve. That's genuinely most of it.

See you out there.

— *The Camp on Wheels Family*

The Route Ahead

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Five Honest Answers for Total Beginners

Is it expensive? Not if you start by borrowing or renting gear. (p.04)

Will I be safe? Yes — a developed campsite is safer than most people assume. (p.07)

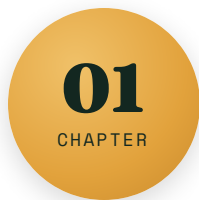
Do I need fancy gear? No. Five basics, done right, beat a garage full of extras. (p.05)

What if it rains? A cheap tarp and a plan fix most of it. (p.09)

Will I sleep okay? With the right sleep system, better than you'd think. (p.05)

How to Use This Guide

Read chapters 1 through 8 in order once, front to back — each builds on the last. After that, keep the printable checklist on page 12 handy and treat the rest as a reference to flip back to before every trip.



LET'S ADDRESS THIS HONESTLY

Is Camping for Me?

Almost everyone who's never camped has the same handful of worries. Let's go through them one at a time, honestly, before you spend a dollar on gear.

"It'll be expensive."

It doesn't have to be. Borrow a tent and sleeping bags from a friend for trip one, rent the bigger items, and buy only what you'll clearly use again. Most beginners over-spend by assuming they need everything on day one.

"I won't be comfortable."

Comfort at camp is almost entirely about the sleep system — a decent pad and a bag rated for the actual overnight temperature. Get that one thing right and most comfort complaints disappear.

"What if it rains?"

Rain is the most-feared and most manageable part of camping. A site with decent drainage, a tarp over the cooking area, and dry layers packed separately turn a rainy trip into a slightly damp story, not a disaster.

"Is it actually safe?"

A developed campground with other campers nearby, washrooms, and a site host is a very gentle introduction — closer to a quiet neighbourhood than true wilderness. Chapter 4 covers exactly what to look for.

You don't need to be an outdoors person to go camping. You just need one trip to find out you might become one.

PRO TIP #1

Pick a campground within an hour of home for trip one. If anything feels off — the weather, the site, your own nerve — you can pack up and be sleeping in your own bed within the hour. That safety net alone makes people say yes.

What a First Trip Really Costs

Borrow it

Ask around — most people know someone with a spare tent and sleeping bags gathering dust in a garage.

Rent it

Outdoor shops and rental outfits (including us) rent the big items by the weekend, no long-term commitment.

Buy the basics

A budget tent, pad, and bag together often cost less than one weekend at a hotel.

The 5 Things Every First Trip Needs

Forget the long lists for a moment. Every single camping trip, at its core, comes down to five categories. Get these right and the rest is just extras.

1. Shelter

Something waterproof between you and the weather. A basic 3-season tent that fits your group, with room to spare, is all trip one requires.

2. Sleep System

A sleeping pad or mattress (insulation from the cold ground matters more than cushioning) plus a bag or blankets rated for the overnight low.

3. Food & Water

A simple way to cook, enough water for drinking and dishes, and food that doesn't need much prep. Nothing fancy required for trip one.

4. Layers

More clothing than feels necessary. Temperature swings between afternoon and 2am are the single most underestimated part of a first trip.

5. Light

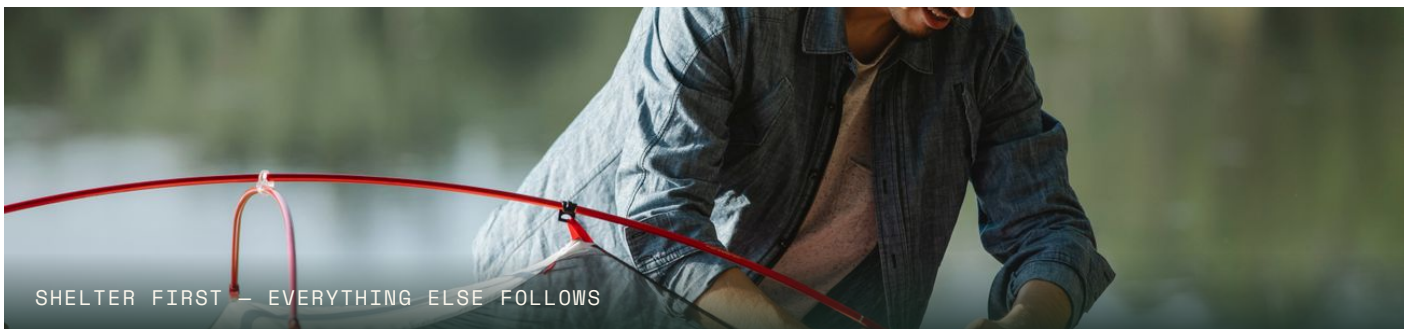
A headlamp or flashlight per person. Campgrounds get genuinely dark, and fumbling for a phone flashlight gets old fast.

Everything Else Is Optional

Camp chairs, a lantern, a hammock, games — all genuinely nice, none of it trip-critical. Add extras once you know you like this.

PRO TIP #2

If you can only borrow or buy one thing well for your first trip, make it the sleeping bag. A cold, sleepless night ends more camping careers than bad weather ever does.



What to Actually Pack

Sorted by how much it matters — not one giant list. If money or space is tight, the first column is genuinely all you need for trip one.

Must Have

- ☐ Tent, with stakes and a footprint or tarp underneath
- ☐ Sleeping bag rated below the overnight low
- ☐ Sleeping pad or mattress
- ☐ Water — more than feels necessary
- ☐ A way to cook or reheat food
- ☐ Headlamp or flashlight per person
- ☐ Rain shell and one warm layer each
- ☐ Basic first aid kit

Makes It Comfortable

- ☐ Camp chairs
- ☐ A lantern for the picnic table
- ☐ A pillow from home
- ☐ Extra socks and a dry set of clothes
- ☐ A tarp for shade or a rain cover over the cooking area
- ☐ Cooler with ice
- ☐ Bug spray and sunscreen

Skip for Trip One

- ☐ Specialty backcountry gear
- ☐ A second tent "just in case"
- ☐ Elaborate cooking equipment
- ☐ Anything you'd only use once
- ☐ Gadgets you haven't tested at home first

The 3 Things First-Timers Forget Most

1. An extra warm layer

Alberta nights drop fast, even in summer — pack for colder than you expect.

2. Cash for firewood

Many campground kiosks don't take cards, especially after dark.

3. A dry towel

For dew, rain, or a dip in the lake — you'll want it before you think you will.

Choosing Your First Campsite

- 🔥 **Go developed, not backcountry.** A "developed" or "front-country" campground has drive-up sites, washrooms, and often showers — you're never far from help.
- 🔥 **Backcountry** means hiking gear in, no facilities, and no easy way out — save it for a future trip with more experience.
- 🔥 Look for a site with reasonably level ground and some tree cover for shade and a wind break.
- 🔥 Sites near — but not right beside — washrooms are the sweet spot: convenient without the foot traffic.
- 🔥 Book ahead in summer. Popular Alberta campgrounds fill up months in advance.

PRO TIP #3

Call the campground office or check recent reviews before booking. Ask about site drainage and tree cover — five minutes of research avoids a lot of first-trip regret.

Provincial Park or Private Campground?

Provincial parks (like Kananaskis) tend to be quieter and more scenic; private campgrounds often add showers, a camp store, and sometimes a pool — a gentler landing for a first trip.



Setting Up Camp for the First Time

Setting up camp is easier when you do it in the right order. Here's the sequence that avoids the most common first-timer scramble.

1 Arrive With Daylight to Spare

- 🔥 Aim to arrive at least two hours before sunset — everything is harder to figure out in the dark.

2 Pick Your Tent Spot

- 🔥 Level ground, clear of rocks and roots, away from the fire pit and low branches overhead.

3 Pitch the Tent

- 🔥 Lay the footprint first, then the tent. Stake all four corners before you worry about anything else.

4 Set Up Your Sleep System

- 🔥 Pads and bags go in while it's still light — fumbling with a sleeping bag by headlamp is nobody's favourite.

5 Organize the Kitchen Area

- 🔥 Stove, food, and water together at the picnic table — one spot, easy to find after dark.

6 Walk the Site

- 🔥 Locate the washroom, the fire pit, and any tripping hazards before the sun goes down.

PRO TIP #4

Practice pitching the tent once in your backyard or living room before your trip. Ten minutes of practice at home saves thirty frustrating minutes at the campsite.

The Only Rule That Matters

Everything that's hard to do in the dark should be done in daylight. That single habit prevents most first-trip stress.

If Two People Are Setting Up

One person pitches the tent while the other organizes the kitchen area — camp comes together in half the time, and nobody's standing around waiting.

Bring the Kids or a Friend Into It

Handing someone a job — holding a stake, unrolling a sleeping pad, collecting kindling — turns setup into a shared activity instead of one person's chore, and it's a good way to learn the routine together for next time.

Common Beginner Mistakes

Under-packing Warm Layers

The single biggest regret. Alberta nights can drop 15–20°C below the daytime high, even in July. Pack a genuine warm layer, not just a hoodie.

Skipping the Rain Plan

Rain isn't a maybe in the Rockies — it's a when. A tarp, a dry bag for spare clothes, and a plan for wet gear turn rain into a non-event.

Arriving After Dark

Pitching a first tent by headlamp, in an unfamiliar site, is a rough start. Build in buffer time — traffic and slow gas stops always happen.

Leaving Food Out

Food, garbage, and anything scented belong in the vehicle overnight — never in the tent. It's about curious wildlife, not just bears.

Not Testing Gear First

A campsite is the worst place to discover a tent is missing poles or a stove won't light. Set everything up at home first.

Overplanning the Itinerary

Trying to hike, canoe, and sightsee all in one weekend leaves no time to simply enjoy being at camp. Plan less than feels ambitious.



A RAIN PLAN TURNS A WET NIGHT INTO A STORY, NOT A DISASTER

PRO TIP #5

Keep a running note on your phone of anything that goes wrong on a trip, no matter how small. Every mistake on this page was once somebody's actual first-trip note.



CHAPTER 07

A Simple First-Night Routine

- 🔥 **Arrive, set up, walk the site** — the order from Chapter 5, done while it's still light out.
- 🔥 **Cook and eat early.** A simple dinner eaten with daylight left beats cooking by headlamp.
- 🔥 **Sit by the fire for a while.** This is the part people picture when they think of camping — let it happen.
- 🔥 **Do a quick camp sweep before bed:** fire fully out, food locked in the vehicle, headlamp within reach.
- 🔥 **Last bathroom trip, then in the tent.** Expect it to feel strange the first hour — that's normal, not a sign anything's wrong.

PRO TIP #6

Unfamiliar night sounds are the most common first-timer worry. Almost everything you'll hear is wind, small animals, or other campers — it sounds louder than it is when you're not used to it.

08

CHAPTER

YOU DID IT — NOW WHAT?

Your Second Trip: What to Change

Made it through trip one? Good. Here's what most beginners adjust once they know what actually matters to them.

Fix Your One Complaint

Everyone has exactly one thing that bugged them — usually sleep, warmth, or food. Solve that one thing before adding anything else new.

Buy Fewer, Better Things

Now that you know what you actually used, replace the weakest borrowed item with one solid piece of your own gear rather than a whole new kit.

Stay One More Night

A two-night trip feels completely different from a one-nighter — you get a full day at camp instead of just arriving and leaving.

Try a Different Site Type

Loved the developed campground? Try one with fewer amenities next time, or a walk-in tent site — a small, comfortable step further.



TRIP TWO: THE SAME ROUTINE, A LOT MORE EASE

PRO TIP #7

Invite a friend who's never camped to join trip two. Explaining the routine to someone else is the fastest way to realize how much you've actually learned since trip one.

However trip one went, you already know more than you did last week. That's the whole point of a first trip.

The Beginner's Packing Checklist

Pin this to the fridge, or tuck it in the glovebox.

PIN
THIS
UP

1 Shelter & Sleep

- ☐ Tent, stakes, footprint or tarp
- ☐ Sleeping bag rated below the overnight low
- ☐ Sleeping pad or mattress
- ☐ Pillow from home
- ☐ Extra blanket, just in case

2 Food & Water

- ☐ Camp stove or way to cook
- ☐ Basic cookware and utensils
- ☐ Cooler with ice
- ☐ Water — more than feels necessary
- ☐ Simple, low-prep meals

3 Clothing & Safety

- ☐ Warm layer per person, for evenings
- ☐ Rain shell for everyone
- ☐ Spare socks and a dry change of clothes
- ☐ First aid kit
- ☐ Sunscreen and bug spray

4 Don't Forget

- ☐ Headlamp or flashlight per person
- ☐ Cash for firewood
- ☐ Campsite reservation confirmation
- ☐ Offline map or directions saved
- ☐ Camera or phone, charged

Nice-to-Haves

- ☐ Camp chairs
- ☐ A lantern for the picnic table
- ☐ A tarp for shade or rain cover
- ☐ Clothesline and clips for wet gear
- ☐ A deck of cards

GEAR SPOTLIGHT



Coleman Classic Recharge LED Lantern

One good lantern covers the picnic table and the tent vestibule — a simple upgrade from a single headlamp.

[See it on Amazon](#)

ONE LAST THING

Where This Guide Came From.

This guide was put together by Camp on Wheels, an Edmonton-based, family-owned rooftop-tent SUV rental business. We've introduced hundreds of complete beginners to camping, and this is the short version of everything we tell them before their first trip.

Once you've got a trip or two under your belt and want to skip straight to sleeping above the campsite, rooftop-tent rentals are ready for you at camponwheels.ca.

Ready for What's Next?

Once you've got your first trip behind you, our other field guides cover rooftop-tent camping, family trips, and easy campfire recipes — all free at camponwheels.ca.



THANKS FOR READING

You don't need experience.

You just need one trip.

Everyone who camps now was a complete beginner once. This guide is everything you need to make your first trip a good one.

One last tip: print the packing checklist and keep it in the glovebox — it's the page you'll reach for every trip, not just the first one.

The Whole Guide in Five Lines

- 🔥 Start with a developed campground, close to home.
- 🔥 Get the sleep system right; everything else is a bonus.
- 🔥 Pack one more warm layer than feels reasonable.
- 🔥 Arrive with daylight left, and do the hard parts before dark.
- 🔥 Food and anything scented sleeps in the vehicle, never the tent.

WHO WE ARE



We are an Edmonton-based small family business built around a simple idea: the best camping experiences should feel easy to start and hard to forget.

After exploring Alberta and the BC Rockies with a rooftop tent, we wanted other families, couples, and first-time campers to feel the same freedom we felt: drive a comfortable SUV, keep the gear organized, sleep above the campsite, and wake up close to the mountains.

"Go outside and start collecting memories."

— THE CAMP ON WHEELS FAMILY

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