



A CAMP ON WHEELS FIELD GUIDE

Rooftop Camping *with Kids*

Sleep above the campsite, keep the whole crew busy, eat well, and make it home with more stories than sunburns. Everything we've learned, packed into one guide.



BEFORE YOU GO

Hey there, camp parent.

If you're reading this, you're probably already picturing it: a rooftop tent glowing above the SUV, a small headlamp bobbing around the fire pit, and someone asking if you can stay one more night.

We built Camp on Wheels — a family-owned business based in Edmonton — because we wanted rooftop camping to feel simple enough for a family to actually say yes to — no trailer to tow, no tent poles to fight in the wind, and a lot less gear to keep track of than a traditional ground camp.

Along the way we've picked up a long list of small things that make a big difference when kids are along for the ride: how to keep a toddler happy on hour three of a mountain drive, what actually gets eaten at 7am in a campground kitchen, and what to pack so nobody's cold at 2am in the Rockies.

This guide is everything we wish someone had handed us before our first family trip. Keep it in the glovebox, pin the checklist to the fridge, and use the scavenger hunt page to buy yourself twenty quiet minutes at the campsite.

See you out there.

— *The Camp on Wheels Family*

The Route Ahead

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01

CHAPTER

GETTING ORIENTED

Why Rooftop Camping Just Works for Families

Rooftop camping sits in a sweet spot for families: real outdoor camping, without most of the friction. Here's why it tends to click with kids especially fast.

- 🔥 **Off the ground, above the damp.** No crawling things, no cold or wet ground seeping through — a genuinely comforting detail if you're camping with a toddler who puts everything in their mouth.
- 🔥 **Setup takes minutes, not an hour.** That's more daylight left for the lake, the trail, or simply doing nothing.
- 🔥 **The ladder is half the fun.** Kids treat climbing up to bed like the best part of the day, which makes bedtime a much easier sell.
- 🔥 **You're still parked right at your gear.** Bathroom runs and forgotten sweaters don't require a hike across a dark campground.
- 🔥 **It's a gentle first step.** Families who start with a rooftop tent often feel ready to try backcountry or multi-night trips the following season.

"The tent becomes part of the adventure — kids wake up above the campsite and the whole trip feels a little more special."

PRO TIP #1

Practice extending and locking the ladder once in your driveway before your first trip. It takes two minutes and means you're not figuring it out for the first time in a dark, unfamiliar campsite.



Ground Tent vs. Rooftop Tent, for Families

GROUND TENT

- 🔥 20–40 min setup
- 🔥 Ground moisture & bugs
- 🔥 Poles to track & pack

ROOFTOP TENT

- 🔥 Under 15 min setup
- 🔥 Off the ground, drier & warmer
- 🔥 Built-in mattress, no poles

The Family Packing List

Sleep & Warmth

- ☐ Sleeping bag rated below the overnight low
- ☐ Extra blanket for kids who kick off covers
- ☐ A stuffed animal or comfort item
- ☐ Warm layer set aside just for sleeping

Clothing

- ☐ One extra warm layer per person
- ☐ Rain shell for everyone
- ☐ Spare socks — always more than planned
- ☐ Sun hat and a toque, both

Health & Comfort

- ☐ Kids' first aid basics
- ☐ Regular medications
- ☐ Sunscreen and bug spray
- ☐ Wipes and hand sanitizer

Keep Them Entertained

- ☐ A deck of cards
- ☐ One favourite small toy each
- ☐ A headlamp per kid
- ☐ Notebook and pencil for a nature journal

Don't Forget

- ☐ Parks Canada Discovery Pass
- ☐ Campsite reservation confirmation
- ☐ Refillable water jug

Pack It Smart

- ☐ One clear bin per category: kitchen, clothes, fun
- ☐ Kids pack (and carry) their own small backpack
- ☐ Load heavy bins first, grab-often bags last

The 3 Things Families Forget Most

1. A dry change of clothes

Sealed in its own bag — for the kid who ends up in the creek.

2. A charging cable for the power station

Easy to leave at home once the SUV is already packed.

3. Cash for firewood

Many campground kiosks don't take cards after dark.

CHAPTER 03

Setting Up Camp Safely with Kids

- 🔥 Park on level ground, ladder side away from the fire pit and foot traffic.
- 🔥 Extend the ladder fully and check it's locked before anyone climbs.
- 🔥 One person on the ladder at a time — the youngest climb with a spotter below.
- 🔥 No jumping or roughhousing in the tent. Sturdy platform, not a trampoline.
- 🔥 Walk the site before dark: stakes, cords, and fire pit where nobody trips.

PRO TIP #2

Back into your spot if you can. It puts the ladder in view of the campsite and makes it much easier to line up on level ground, especially once it's dark.

Your First 10 Minutes at Camp

Park level, set the brake, pop the tent — then tour the site together: fire pit, ladder, bathrooms, boundaries.



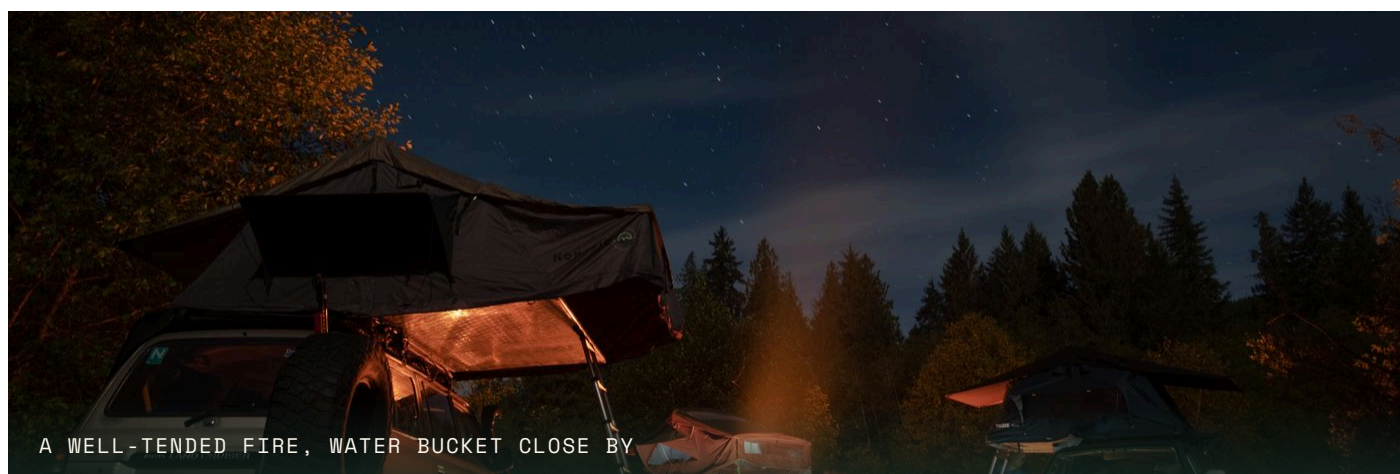
Safety First: Fire & Wildlife

1 Campfire Safety

- 🔥 Keep kids an arm's length back from the fire pit, and give younger children a "fire line" they're not allowed to cross.
- 🔥 Never leave a campfire unattended, even for a minute.
- 🔥 Keep a bucket of water or sand nearby, and know exactly where the closest tap is.
- 🔥 Marshmallow sticks come back hot. Let them cool on the ground, not in a hand.

2 Wildlife Awareness

- 🔥 Store all food, garbage, and scented items — toothpaste and soap included — inside the vehicle overnight, never in the tent.
- 🔥 Make noise on trails so wildlife has time to move away before you're close.
- 🔥 If you do see a bear or cougar, stay calm, back away slowly, and never run.



Know Before You Go

- ☐ Check the current fire ban status for your campground before you leave home.
- ☐ Ask at check-in about any recent wildlife sightings in the area.
- ☐ Ask about quiet hours at check-in so the evening wind-down isn't a surprise.

A Family Buddy System

- ☐ Older kids get a "check-in whistle" — one blast means come back now.
- ☐ Agree on the campsite boundary together before anyone explores.
- ☐ Dress little kids in something bright — much easier to spot at a busy campground.

Safety First: Weather & First Aid

1 Mountain Weather

- 🔥 Weather in the Rockies changes fast — check the forecast the morning of, not just the week before.
- 🔥 Afternoon thunderstorms are common in July and August — plan exposed hikes and lake time for the morning.
- 🔥 Know where the nearest indoor shelter or your vehicle is in case a storm rolls in.
- 🔥 Watch younger kids for signs of getting too cold or sun-tired — they rarely say anything until it's uncomfortable.

First Aid Kit Essentials

- ☐ Bandages in a few sizes
- ☐ Antiseptic wipes
- ☐ Tweezers — splinters are inevitable
- ☐ Children's pain / fever medication
- ☐ Instant cold pack
- ☐ Any allergy medication your family needs

Write This Down Before You Lose Signal

Campground address:

Nearest hospital:

Poison control:

Campground office phone:

Sun & Heat Safety

- ☐ Reapply sunscreen after any water play, not just once in the morning
- ☐ Schedule the biggest hike for morning or evening, not peak afternoon heat
- ☐ Offer water on a schedule — kids often forget to ask

Know the Warning Signs

- ☐ Overheating: flushed skin, unusual quietness, headache — move to shade and offer water
- ☐ Getting too cold: shivering, fumbling hands, complaining — add a layer and get moving
- ☐ Dehydration: dry lips, dark pee, crankiness — offer water and a salty snack

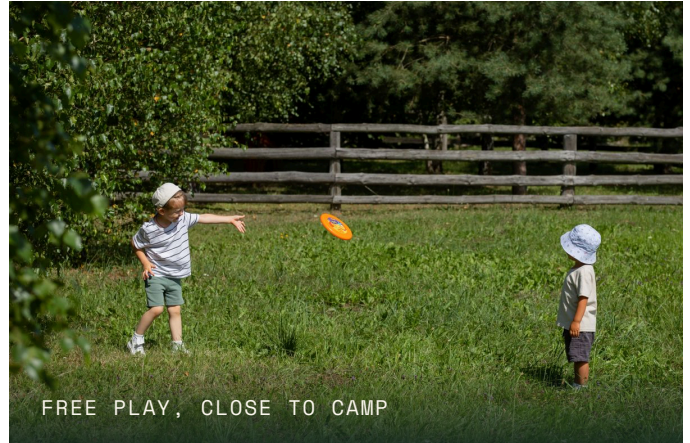
Keeping Kids Busy: Day & Road

1 On the Road

- Classic license-plate or colour-spotting games turn the drive itself into part of the fun.
- Let each kid choose one audiobook or playlist for their turn "in charge" of the car speakers.
- A window clip-on tray keeps snacks and small toys from disappearing into the seat.

2 At Camp, Daytime

- Send them on a nature scavenger hunt — there's a printable version to bring along on page 19.
- Hand each kid a real camp job — ownership beats boredom every time. The chore chart below has age-by-age ideas.
- A hammock or camp chair becomes an instant reading corner between activities.



FREE PLAY, CLOSE TO CAMP

Three Road-Trip Games That Never Get Old

- 20 Questions** — one person thinks of something, the car guesses with yes/no questions.
- The Alphabet Game** — spot something outside starting with each letter, A to Z, in order.
- Would You Rather** — silly campsite-themed questions keep everyone laughing for miles.

PRO TIP #3

Keep a small "boredom jar" in the glovebox — slips of paper with activity ideas kids can pull out any time someone says those two words.

A Simple Camp Chore Chart

Little kids: collect kindling, hold the tent stakes, hand out napkins at meals

School age: set the table, fill water bottles, help roll up sleeping bags

Twins: read the map, manage the cooler, help plan one full meal

Keeping Kids Busy: Fireside & Rain

1 Fireside, After Dark

- Shadow puppets against the tent wall or a nearby rock never get old.
- Simple card games suit almost any age — Go Fish and Snap for younger kids, Crazy Eights or Speed for the older ones.
- Take turns adding a line to a made-up campfire story. No props required.

2 Rainy Day / Tent Time

- Pack one small travel game or building set that lives permanently in the camping bin.
- A flashlight and a blank wall turns into an hour of shadow-animal experimenting.
- Let kids help plan tomorrow's menu or route — screen-free, and it buys you some quiet.



Campfire Story Starters

Read one line, then go around the circle adding a sentence each:

- "The trail sign said one thing, but the map said another..."
- "Something had been rearranging the campsite chairs every night..."
- "Nobody remembered packing the mysterious extra tent..."
- "The marshmallows had been disappearing, one per night..."

Campfire Songs Everyone Half-Remembers

You don't need to know all the words — kids rarely notice. A few reliable ones: "The Wheels on the Bus," "You Are My Sunshine," "This Land Is Your Land," and any tune with a repeating chorus everyone can join in on after the first line.

Age-by-Age Tips

Toddlers (1–3)

Keep the nap schedule loosely intact — an overtired toddler at a campsite is a much bigger challenge than an overtired toddler at home. Pack more layers than feels reasonable; little bodies lose heat fast once the sun drops behind the mountains.

Preschool (4–5)

Prime scavenger-hunt age. Give them a small bag or bucket to collect in and they'll happily explore the campsite for an hour at a time.

School Age (6–9)

Let them help set up camp — even holding a tent stake makes them feel like part of the crew. A good age to introduce fire safety and let them help, supervised, with roasting sticks.

Tweens (10+)

Hand over real responsibility — navigating the drive, running the camp stove with supervision, or teaching a younger sibling a card game. Independence now earns a "yes" to the next trip.



Meals Made Easy

1 Breakfast

- 🔥 Overnight oats made the night before
- 🔥 Breakfast burritos wrapped in foil, warmed on the stove
- 🔥 Fruit and yogurt — zero prep needed

2 Lunch

- 🔥 No-cook is the goal: sandwiches, cut vegetables, trail mix
- 🔥 Something to look forward to, like a cold juice box

3 Dinner

- 🔥 One-pot pasta
- 🔥 Foil-packet dinners — full recipe on the next page
- 🔥 Pre-made chili, reheated on a camp stove

4 Snacks

- 🔥 Pack more than feels reasonable — hungry kids and happy kids are rarely the same kids

GEAR SPOTLIGHT



A **Coleman two-burner camping stove** is worth the packing space — it lets you have a pot and a pan going at once, so sides don't go cold while the main dish finishes. Pair it with a compact cookware and utensil set and meal prep stops being the hard part of the trip.

If You've Got a Picky Eater

- ☐ Pack one "safe" familiar food for every new one you try
- ☐ Let them build their own foil packet or sandwich — ownership helps

The Camp Grocery Basics

Eggs, bread, tortillas, cheese, one protein per dinner, pasta, a bag of pre-cut vegetables, and fruit that travels well — apples, oranges, grapes.

PRO TIP #4

Pre-measure spices into one small labeled container at home — a pinch each of salt, pepper, garlic powder, and BBQ seasoning. No need to pack the whole spice rack.

The Featured Recipe & S'mores

Foil Packet Campfire Dinner

SERVES 4 • 25 MINUTES OVER COALS

Ingredients

4 portions of protein (sausage, chicken, or plant-based), baby potatoes, corn, sliced peppers, olive oil, salt, pepper, foil sheets.

Steps

1. Divide everything evenly across four sheets of foil.
2. Drizzle with oil, season, and fold each into a sealed packet.
3. Set on the grate over coals for 20–25 minutes, turning once.
4. Let cool a few minutes before opening — the steam comes out hot.



★ Classic S'mores

Toast a marshmallow to golden — not flaming, no matter what the kids insist. Sandwich it with chocolate between two graham crackers and let the chocolate soften a moment.

2 No-Cook Trail Lunch Box

Pack individual containers of crackers, cheese cubes, deli meat, grapes, and a cookie. Each kid assembles their own — lunch becomes an activity instead of a chore.

S'mores, Three Ways

The Peanut Butter Cup

Swap the chocolate for a peanut butter cup — it melts faster and holds together better.

The Cookie S'more

Two chocolate-chip cookies instead of graham crackers — no extra chocolate needed.

The Banana Boat

Stuff a split banana with chocolate and mini marshmallows, wrap in foil — 5 minutes near the coals.

Campfire BBQ Veggie & Sausage Skewers

BBQ Veggie & Sausage Skewers

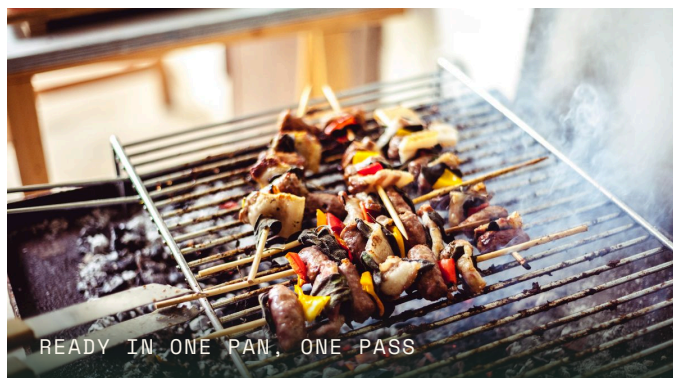
SERVES 4 • 10-12 MINUTES ON THE STOVE OR GRATE

Pack From Home

1 pkg smoked sausage (pre-cooked travels best), 2 bell peppers, 1 zucchini, 1 red onion, a pint of cherry tomatoes, olive oil, BBQ seasoning or salt & pepper, skewers — metal, or wood ones soaked in water.

Steps

1. At home, cut the vegetables into bite-sized pieces and pack them in one container.
2. At the campsite, slice the sausage into thick coins.
3. Let each kid thread their own skewer — the easiest way to get a vegetable-skeptic to eat their vegetables.
4. Brush lightly with oil and a sprinkle of BBQ seasoning.
5. Cook on the stove's griddle or a fire grate, turning every few minutes, about 10–12 minutes.



Don't Forget the Firewood

Cooking over the fire instead of the stove? Grab a bundle of dry firewood at the campground kiosk on your way in — supply runs low by evening.

Make It a Full Meal

Serve the skewers over instant rice or tucked into buttered buns. A bag of salad kit on the side rounds it out with zero extra cooking.

Picky-Eater Mode

Thread one skewer that's all sausage, no vegetables. Everyone eats, nobody negotiates, and the campfire stays a happy place.

GEAR SPOTLIGHT



GSI Bugaboo Base Camper Cookware

Nonstick pots and pan that nest into one stack — enough to cook this whole dinner. [See it on Amazon](#)



CHAPTER 12

Bedtime in the Treetops

- 🔥 Start the wind-down routine earlier than you would at home — climbing the ladder, brushing teeth, and settling in all take a little longer in camp.
- 🔥 Make the last bathroom trip before anyone climbs up for the night.
- 🔥 A few minutes of stargazing from the ladder or a nearby chair is an easy way to signal "we're slowing down now."
- 🔥 Keep a headlamp on its lowest setting within reach for middle-of-the-night moments.
- 🔥 If a child is nervous about the height or new sounds, leaving the rainfly partly open on the first night — weather permitting — so they can see out often helps more than reassurance alone.

PRO TIP #5

An offline white-noise app on a phone can mask unfamiliar outdoor sounds for a light sleeper — download it before you lose signal.

Weather & Seasonal Packing

Summer (June–Aug)

Warm days, surprisingly cool nights once you're up in the mountains. Pack a genuine warm layer for evenings, even in July.

Shoulder Season (May, Sept)

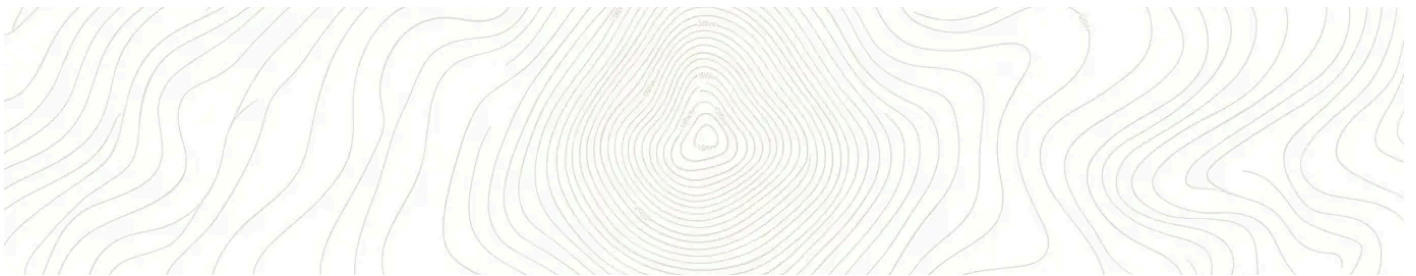
Layers are everything. Mornings can start near freezing and end in a t-shirt by 2pm.

Cold-Weather Trips

If you're camping in the shoulder months, winter tires make a real difference on mountain roads, and an insulated tent liner adds several degrees of warmth overnight.

Rain

Mountain rain rarely lasts all day — keep rain shells within reach and string a clothesline between showers so wet gear can dry.



GEAR SPOTLIGHT



Mountain nights run cold even in July. The **Coleman Flatlands sleeping bag** has a roomy rectangular cut kids don't fight, and it unzips flat into a fireside blanket for the evening wind-down.

The Night Before You Leave

- ☐ Check the mountain forecast, not just your city's
- ☐ Charge headlamps, phones, and the power station
- ☐ Lay out tomorrow's layers for each kid

A Sample 3-Day Rockies Route

1 Day One — Edmonton to Kananaskis

About a 2.5 hour drive. Set up camp early and leave the afternoon for the easy, stroller-friendly trail at Troll Falls.

2 Day Two — Exploring Kananaskis

A family-friendly canoe rental or an easy stop at Mount Lorette Ponds, a campfire dinner, and an early bedtime after a big outdoor day.

3 Day Three — Onward or Home

Stop at a viewpoint along the way, and use your included Parks Canada Discovery Pass for a quick detour into a townsite before heading back.

Build in one "nothing day" — an afternoon with no plan is often the one the kids remember most.



Prefer a Different Direction?

Jasper route — about 3.5 hours from Edmonton, with easy family stops at Maligne Canyon and Pyramid Lake.

Waterton route — a longer drive south, best saved for a 4-day weekend with older kids.

More family-tested routes:

blog.camponwheels.ca/tag/trip-suggestions

Book Early

Kananaskis campsites reserve up to 3 months out for summer weekends.

Fuel Up First

Fill the tank in Calgary or Canmore — options thin out past the gate.

Cell Signal

Coverage is spotty past the park gate — tell someone your route and return day.

PRO TIP #6

Screenshot your campsite reservation and offline map before you leave home. Don't count on opening an email once you're out of signal range.

Family Packing Checklist

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

PIN
THIS
UP

1 Sleep & Clothing

- ☐ Sleeping bags for every person
- ☐ Extra blanket
- ☐ Warm layer per person, for evenings
- ☐ Rain shells
- ☐ Spare socks (more than planned)
- ☐ Sun hats and toques
- ☐ Closed-toe shoes for camp

2 Kitchen

- ☐ Camp stove & fuel
- ☐ Cookware & utensils
- ☐ Cooler with ice
- ☐ Water bottles, filled
- ☐ Extra snacks (always more)

3 Safety

- ☐ First aid kit
- ☐ Sunscreen & bug spray
- ☐ Headlamp per person
- ☐ Regular medications
- ☐ Campground address saved offline

4 Fun & Comfort

- ☐ Deck of cards
- ☐ One small toy per kid
- ☐ Nature journal & pencil
- ☐ Camp chairs
- ☐ Parks Canada Discovery Pass
- ☐ Camera or phone, charged

Nice-to-Haves

- ☐ Hammock for downtime
- ☐ Portable power station
- ☐ Bug net for the picnic table
- ☐ Extra tarp for a rainy-day cover
- ☐ Clothesline and clips for wet gear

GEAR SPOTLIGHT

The Core Gear Kit

A rooftop tent and ladder, a two-burner camp stove, a compact cookware and utensil set, and sturdy camp chairs — these four cover most of what a family trip actually needs.

Junior Ranger Scavenger Hunt



Camper name: _____ Date: _____

☐ A pinecone

☐ A rock shaped like something else

☐ Something red

☐ A feather

☐ An animal track

☐ Something that makes a sound

☐ A spider web

☐ A bug with more than 4 legs

☐ Three different leaf shapes

☐ The moon or first star

☐ A squirrel or chipmunk

☐ A cloud shaped like an animal

Found them all? You've officially earned Junior Ranger status for this trip.

Bonus: Campfire Trivia

Q: What do you call a group of s'mores ingredients ready to go?

A: A s'mores kit! Graham cracker, chocolate, marshmallow.

Q: True or false — you should run if you see a bear.

A: False! Stay calm and back away slowly.

Q: Why do rooftop tents keep you drier than ground tents?

A: You're up off the wet ground, on a solid platform.

Q: What should always be within arm's reach at night?

A: Your headlamp, set to its lowest brightness.

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 camp with our own kids in the same tents we rent out — every fix, near-miss, and trick in these pages was earned on a real trip.

If you're ever curious what a rooftop-tent trip looks like without owning the gear, you can find us at camponwheels.ca — but mostly, we just hope this guide gets some use.



Need your next route?

Scan for more family-tested trip ideas, or visit

blog.camponwheels.ca/tag/trip-suggestions



THANKS FOR READING

Now go make some *noise at a campsite.*

We hope this guide saves you a few headaches and adds a few good memories along the way.

One last tip: keep this guide on your phone or print the two checklist pages — they're the ones you'll actually reach for at 6am while everyone else is still asleep.

The Whole Guide in Five Lines

- 🔥 Pack one more warm layer than feels reasonable — per person.
- 🔥 Food and anything scented sleeps in the vehicle, never the tent.
- 🔥 Give every kid a job and a headlamp; boredom solves itself.
- 🔥 Practice the ladder in the driveway before the first trip.
- 🔥 Build in one "nothing day" — it's the one they'll remember.

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
