Backpacking

[FOR PHOTOGRAPHERS]

Gear and advice for getting away from the crowds to spectacular backcountry locations

Text & Photography By Josh Miller

This image from summer 2021 has quickly become one of my favorites. Rarely does this spot in the Sierra have clouds at sunrise. My wife and I took our boys for their first backpacking trip to this lake, and because my pack was so large with the kids' gear, I was forced to leave my tripod and mirrorless kit at home to save weight. All I carried was a Sony RX100 VII, a small tabletop tripod and a couple of rubber ski straps. Using the ski straps, I was able to make three trekking poles into a makeshift tripod, and using another strap, I was able to attach the tabletop tripod to the top. While it was not solid enough to hold a bigger camera, I was able to do a bracketed vertical panorama shot using the RX100 VII that holds up really nicely, even in a 30x40-inch print. Isn't technology grand?

In recent years, national parks and other popular nature photography destinations have become increasingly crowded and potentially frustrating, with some even requiring reservations. With so many photographers crowding the parking lots and trailheads, perhaps it is time to skip those roadside locations and head deeper into the wilderness for a backpacking-based photography adventure.

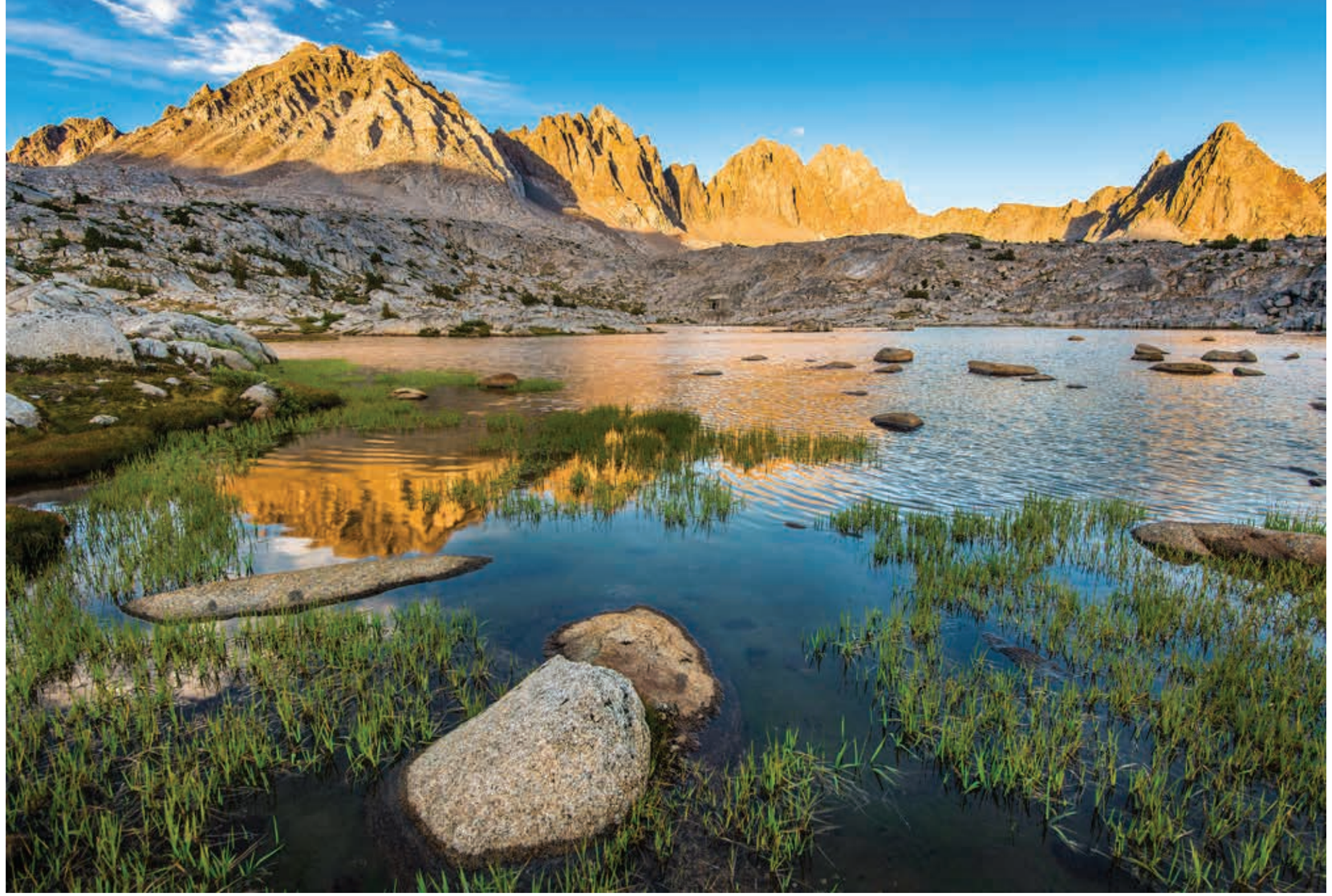
Having worked as a backpacking guide as well as a photo guide, I would say my favorite photos are the ones I have worked the hardest to get. While backpacking isn't for everyone, it is far more attainable than most people think. The best part about backpacking is that it allows you to spend a bunch of time in cool locations without crowds waiting for amazing light. At its roots, backpacking is really very easy, in that you are just putting a bunch of gear in a bag, walking to an inspiring location and unloading all that gear. Does it sound like hard work? Perhaps, but if you choose your photography destinations well and the conditions come together, the results can be exceptional. The best part is the experience and the photos you make are all your own—no crowds needed.

As for that work part, the trick with backpacking is to keep your pack as light as possible. While some backpackers and "through hikers" (people hiking hundreds or thousands of miles on the Pacific Crest Trail or Appalachian Trail) get their pack weights down to under 20 pounds, for us photographers, that really isn't an option if we also want to carry serious camera equipment. However, over the years, I have spent a lot of energy refining my backpacking system and my gear to lighten my load as much as possible, and I hope to help you do the same.

In the Sierras, I can routinely go on a 5-night trip with all my backpacking gear, food plus a couple of lenses, a camera body, and a tripod with a sub-40-pound pack. Closer to 30 pounds is even better, and anything much over 45 pounds can quickly become unpleasant. As I have gotten older, I have been getting more into ultralight backpacking gear as a way to reduce my pack weight to allow me to continue carrying "too much" camera gear deep into the backcountry.

Above: This image was shot using my 2-pound, waist-tall tripod, Nikon Z 7 and NIKKOR Z 14-30mm f/4 S. Having spent so much time backpacking and scouting the Sierra, I knew this location had potential. The crazy sky in this image is the effect of a forest fire to the west. By the next morning, it was raining ash, and we were forced to evacuate early. The one time I have used my satellite messenger in the backcountry was to figure out if we needed to evacuate.

Opposite: I am always on the lookout for lighter camera gear. On this particular trip in the Yosemite backcountry, we were also planning to climb a peak, so our packs were loaded with climbing gear. We carried no tent—we slept in a cave—and I decided to borrow and test an early Olympus E-M5 camera. Though I have since moved on to the Sony RX100 VII when I can't carry my big full-frame kit, the Olympus showed me the future of mirrorless and made me realize lighter, smaller sensors had matured enough that I now often leave my "pro" gear at home.



This was one of the last trips for which I carried a DSLR. I was solo for a week and carrying a Nikon D800, 16-35mm f/4 and 70-200mm f/4, plus a week's worth of gear over the pass; rushing to make it for sunset nearly killed me. I remember thinking, "There has to be a better way." Since then, I have been working hard to lighten both my camera gear and my backpacking gear. Today, with modern ultralight equipment, I could probably do the same trip with a pack one-third of the weight.

For those new to backpacking, it is a balance of comfort on the trail versus comfort in camp. Every ounce you can leave at home means more fun on the trail or another battery or lens you can bring deep into the wilds.

The first step to lightening your pack is carrying less stuff. Don't be tempted by a huge pack that fits too much. Do you really need two pairs of pants, two jackets, three lenses or that camp chair?

The second step is lightening the gear that you do carry as much as possible. Often the heaviest items in your pack besides food and camera are the pack itself, your tent and your sleeping bag. When I switched to more ultralight versions of these, I was able to save close to 6 pounds right off the bat. That's basically the weight of my entire photo setup with a Nikon Z 7, 24-70mm lens and waist-tall Gitzo carbon fiber tripod. While not cheap, switching to an ultralight tent and ultralight pack allowed me to carry an overall lighter pack farther into the field, giving me even more access to unique locations and a more comfortable experience on the trail as well. If you can get your pack weight down with ultralight gear, it is well worth the investment.

Backpack

The first and perhaps most obvious part of backpacking gear is the backpack. Choosing a size is a good place to start. The length of your typical trip as well as what type of climate you are backpacking in will help determine the best pack size to meet your needs—colder, wetter climates require more clothes and more calories, thus potentially larger packs. For most trips, a pack in the 50- to 60-liter range is ideal. As photographers, we tend to carry more gear than typical backpackers, so confirm that all your gear will fit before buying. I have found that over time, as I improved as a backpacker and my gear got better, my pack size actually reduced.

After size, comfort and weight are the next things to consider. While lighter-weight, simpler packs help lighten the overall pack weight, lighter packs tend to be less comfortable than their heavier, more complicated counterparts once you are carrying more than about 40 pounds. The heavier the rest of your gear, the more supportive and heavy your pack will need to be.

While there are many great packs on the market, in my continuing quest to lighten my gear, if I were buying a new pack today and could keep my pack weight to 35 pounds or less, without a doubt, I would buy a 3400 Junction from Hyperlite Mountain Gear. As an ultralight pack weighing in at just 2 pounds, it can carry weights up to about 40 pounds (though 40 pounds is pushing it). Aside from the weight savings, it is also made from a super durable and nearly waterproof fabric that offers great weather protection for photographers carrying expensive cameras into the wilds where rain will happen. If you must carry weights over 40 pounds, then I would look at the Hyperlite 4400 series packs, which are still light but a bit more supportive for heavier loads. (I own the 4400 Porter and love the simplicity with its optional stuff pocket.)

If you want a more traditional larger and heavier pack with lots of pockets and straps, look at those offered by Osprey like the Aether 65 for men or Ariel 65 for women, which are very popular on the trail. My wife loves her Ariel 65.

Tent

The next-most-important part of backpacking is having a high-quality, lightweight shelter. This again is somewhat dictated by the length and climate of your trips. If you are backpacking in the dry Sierra in the summer, you can get by with a much lighter, simpler tent than if you are backpacking in wet, windy, cold Alaska. Weight is also a function of how much comfort do you want versus need? To save weight, I personally have done some trips with just a bivy sack (a waterproof sleeping bag cover) or slept under boulders, but this really only works when the chance of bad weather is very low.

In general, two-person tents offer the best options for space versus weight, and when shared with a friend can be very light. The first question to ask yourself is how much time do you plan to spend inside your tent? Do you want a tent you can sit up in, do you want one door or two, freestanding or not? Ultralight backpackers tend to choose tiny tents that are not freestanding, meaning they can't stand up without being staked out, and use trekking poles rather than actual tent poles. By doing this, a two-person tent can potentially weigh under 2 pounds. Other backpackers may choose a freestanding tent that is heavier, with more space to weather out long storms in comfort.

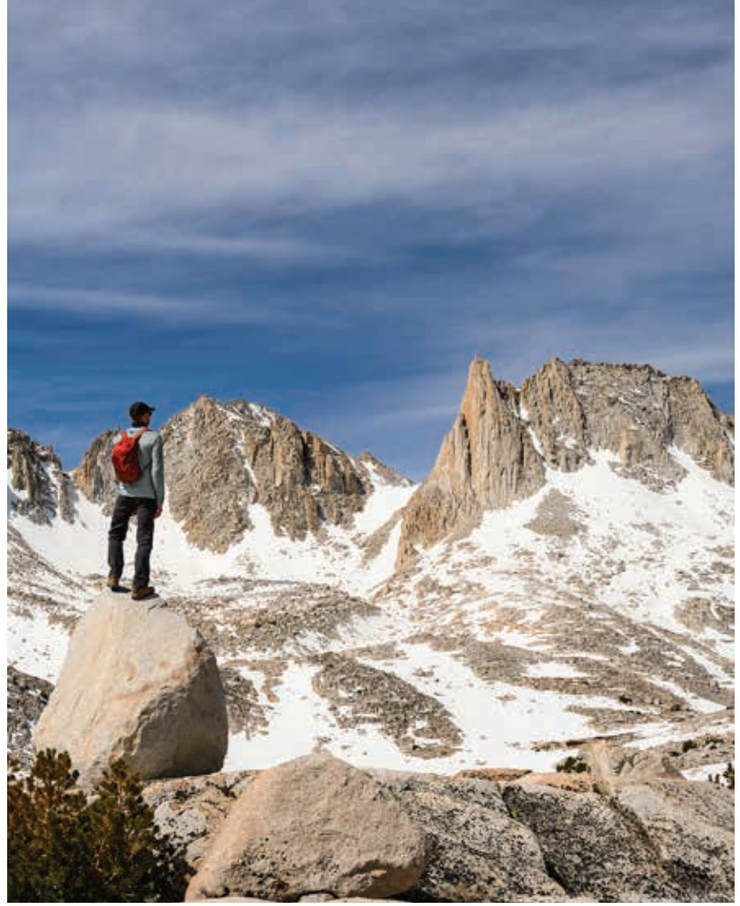
To lighten my pack and make room for more camera gear, if I were buying today and money was no object, I would buy the StratoSpire Li from Tarptent. It offers enough space for two people to weather a storm, uses trekking poles rather than dedicated poles and weighs less than 2 pounds. While not cheap, this super light tent is built with top-of-the-line materials and allows photographers the option to customize their tent by leaving the mosquito net at home to save weight. While not quite as customizable or durable, The Two tent made by Gossamer Gear is another great option that is far less expensive.

For trips involving extended periods of potentially bad weather and the need for lots of inside living space, you may want to look toward more traditional freestanding non-ultralight tents made by companies like Mountain Hardwear or The North Face that will be easier to set up, more comfortable, but will weigh closer to 4 to 6 pounds.

Sleeping Bag & Pad

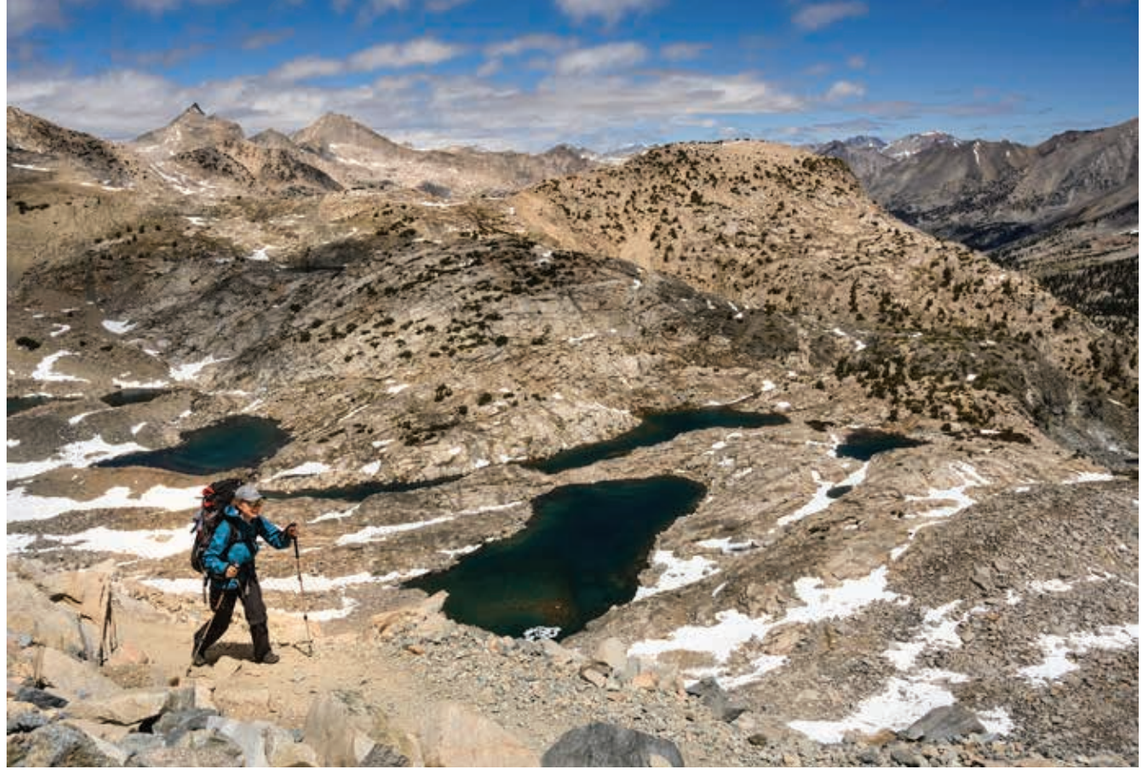
Sleeping bags are another area where saving weight often comes at a price and at the expense of comfort. I tend to be a cold sleeper, and thus I personally haven't been willing to go with an ultralight sleeping bag that is super thin.

The first thing to decide with sleeping bags is down or synthetic. For most of us, down is a far better choice because it is much lighter, compresses smaller and lasts longer. The tradeoff is that down is more expensive and is basically useless once wet. On the other hand, synthetic sleeping bags are heavier, cheaper and larger but will keep you warm when wet. I don't use a synthetic sleeping bag very often, but I live in the Sierra, and I mostly do trips in dryer areas of the country or watch the weather forecast to know if a big storm is coming. The place I do use my synthetic bag is on trips in Alaska where it often rains for days, and it is nearly impossible to keep a down bag dry. For most fair-weather backpackers, a down bag is a better choice—just



Left: While I think of myself as a landscape photographer first, I always work hard to get shots of people within the landscape as well. By including a person, it often gives a sense of scale and adventure. On this particular trip, a friend and I spent three nights in this same basin exploring and waiting for the light. When passing through a good photo location, I always try to spend more than one day to increase my chances of having clouds at sunrise or sunset.

Opposite: When photographing friends on the trail, I always ask them to put on clothes with some color. I get teased that all my clothes are bright colors, but in a few cases, I have even loaned the clothes off my back to help get them to "pop" against the background. Then I run ahead and find a good angle and, much to the chagrin of my friends or wife, I make them walk the same section of trail several times. **PRO TIP:** I make prints for my subjects after the trip, and now they are all excited to model—and sometimes they even end up in a magazine or in advertisements.



remember that the best photos often happen when the weather is the worst.

When choosing a sleeping bag, look for the warmth rating versus the weight. You are looking for the lightest warmth-to-weight ratio you can find. Depending on where you backpack, typically a 15-degree bag is perfect for everything but true winter camping. If you sleep warm and don't plan to do early spring or late fall trips, a 30-degree sleeping bag might be enough. Yes, high-end 800+-fill down sleeping bags are expensive—the higher the fill number, the better warmth-to-weight ratio—but think of buying a high-quality down sleeping bag as an investment that, with proper care, should last for decades. In a good year, I typically spend 40 or more nights in my 15-year-old, 15-degree Mountain Hardwear down sleeping bag, and it is still going strong. If I were buying again today, I would look at the high-quality sleeping bags made by Marmot and Mountain Hardwear.

Don't forget the sleeping pad as well. My personal favorite is the Therm-a-Rest NeoAir XTherm, but a foam pad will also do the trick and never pops.

Camp Stove

While not essential, stoves add a degree of comfort to any backcountry adventure that is well worth the weight. For a single-night trip to shoot a sunrise, I might skip the stove and just pack a sandwich, but otherwise, a stove goes on every trip I take. Not only do they provide a warm hot meal at the end of a long, tiring day, but also a hot water bottle in the bottom of your sleeping bag is pure joy on a cold night.

When comparing stoves, look for something small and light that will work with whatever cooking setup you plan to use. Also think about what types of meals you plan to make. Are you just boiling water or making a gourmet feast from scratch? Probably the most popular setup is the all-in-one Jetboil stoves that include a pot, stove and lid as a single unit. The more weight-obsessed backpackers may gravitate toward the smaller MSR PocketRocket-style stove or even homemade alcohol stoves. Over the years, I have used them all and have started using a simple setup, with a single 900ml titanium pot/lid with the MSR PocketRocket Deluxe. Without fuel, my entire stove and pot kit only weighs 7 ounces. With the weight savings, I upped my game this year and started carrying a separate mug for the first time—such a luxury.

Water Filter

For safety, you should filter or boil all the water you drink. Years ago, we all carried heavy hand pumps that were slow and clogged often. Over the last few years, there have been great new developments in filters that just screw onto the top of a narrow-mouthed water bottle. The most common is the Sawyer Squeeze, which is so easy to use that we actually bought one for each of our boys this summer when we took them for their first real five-night backpack. All you have to do is fill your bottle in any stream or lake and then squeeze the bottle into your mouth; done! You only need to carry enough water to reach the next water source. No more carrying multiple bottles of heavy water in your pack for the entire day, and no more messing with hoses and pumps.

Packing & Carrying Your Camera

While every backpacking photographer has their own system, nearly all agree that avoiding big, heavy dedicated camera bags is a must. While some photographers just carry their camera on its strap over their shoulder and others attach their cameras directly to their pack shoulder strap using the Peak Design Capture Clip, I prefer to carry my camera in a lightweight chest pack inside my larger pack. This keeps it out of my way while hiking and allows me to remove it from my pack once in camp and use it to carry and protect my camera around camp and on day hikes. I bring a shoulder strap for the bag, and if I bring a second lens, I hang it in a lightweight lens pouch from this shoulder strap. This allows me to put the entire kit over my shoulder as I scramble up ridges looking for the best angle at sunrise. On the trail, I tend to hike with just a 24-70mm and camera body on my chest, with any extra lenses in my pack, knowing that if something is good enough to change lenses for, it is probably also worth taking off my pack to shoot in depth.

For years, I have used the F-Stop Navin bag, which can either be attached to my waist belt or on my chest with connector straps. A newer option, the Hyperlite Mountain Gear Camera Pod, is an even lighter and more weather-resistant chest pouch that weighs less than 4 ounces. While I haven't used one of these bags yet, it seems like the next evolutionary step in lightweight camera protection.

Portable Power

Powering the camera and your other electronics can be a bit tricky in the backcountry. For shorter trips, the simplest thing to do is just bring enough batteries to last the entire trip. For longer trips, a USB power bank like those offered by Goal Zero or Anker work really well. Just make sure you can either plug directly into your camera or bring a USB camera battery charger.

Typically when backpacking, you are never out for more than about a week without a food resupply, so a battery bank is often enough power, but for longer trips where you can't resupply your power needs, it is time to look at solar. Solar works great when you have good weather and can leave it set up for many hours in base camp situations. Riding around on the back of your backpack, small solar panels don't generate all that much power for their weight and may take a day or more just to recharge a single camera battery. My advice is to avoid them on shorter trips and just carry a USB battery pack.

Emergency Communication

I would be remiss in writing an article about backpacking gear without mentioning the new world of satellite messengers. Personally, I held out on getting one for a long time with the logic that the entire reason I go into the backcountry is to take a break from modern life, but once we had kids, the game changed a bit. Now I carry the Garmin inReach Mini that pairs with my smartphone and allows me to send and receive texts and send an SOS for help if the worst happens. I still don't turn it on, but knowing it is in my pack offers a degree of security. Just remember that pushing that SOS button risks rescue personnel's lives—so don't push it because you ran out of memory cards. **OP**

See more of Josh Miller's work and learn about his workshops, including Bald Eagles and Bears of Alaska, Yosemite, Costa Rica and Lake Tahoe, at joshmillerphotography.com.