BACKPACKINGLIGHT®
PACK LESS. BE MORE.

The Poncho Tarp: Techniques and Gear Systems for Inclement Conditions

Poncho Tarps are not just for the eccentric. Learn how to use them in foul weather and save considerable weight and simplify your gear kit.

by Ryan Jordan and Alan Dixon | 2006-08-09 03:00:00-06

Introduction

Conventional backpacking style incorporates a rain jacket, for rain protection, and a tent, for shelter. Lightweight backpackers reduce pack weight by replacing a tent with a floorless shelter, or even a tarp. Ultralight backpackers may replace both raingear and shelter with a single piece of equipment - the poncho tarp.

Poncho tarps have been proven on long distance hikes and in inclement weather of several hundred to several thousand miles. Brian Robinson used one on his Triple Crown hikes, Andy Skurka used one on his Sea-to-Sea hike, and Demetri Coupounas used one on his unsupported hikes of the Long Trail, John Muir Trail, and Colorado Trail. The authors have used poncho tarps for several years in all conditions, from the deluge of rain on California's Lost Coast in the spring, to fall snows in the Wind River Range, to the cold and wet winters of North Carolina's Blue Ridge. We've even snapped two ponchos together as a large and stable shared tarp, at 10,000 feet in Utah's windy Uinta high country.

A poncho tarp is a simple piece of gear. Its shape is usually rectangular and approximately eight feet in length and five feet in width. Guyline attachment points at the corners and along the sides facilitate its use as a shelter. As raingear, the simplest poncho tarps have a hood sewn into its center, and sometimes, mating snaps down the long sides to minimize flapping in the wind. Some offer a drawstring on one of the short sides that can be cinched around the bottom of a backpack when worn, thus serving a third function, as a pack cover.

A poncho tarp pitched for stormy weather on a 10,000 foot bench overlooking a high lake on the Beartooth Plateau, Montana.

Ultralight rain jackets tend to weigh in the 6 to 8 ounce range, with pants coming in at around 4 to 6 ounces. Ultralight solo tarps are generally 6 to 10 ounces. Pack covers for small, lightweight packs, weigh 2 to 4 ounces. Consequently, a poncho tarp that weighs in the range of 10 to 12 ounces has the potential to simplify your kit by replacing three pieces of gear with one, and lighten your kit by saving a half pound - or more - over the ultralight items it replaces (Table 1).

Table 1. Comparison of Selected Shelter System Weights

	Light	Lighter	Lightest
Shelter	Single Wall Solo Tent (32 oz)	8'x10' Silnylon Tarp (14 oz)	5'x8' Silnylon Poncho Tarp (10 oz)
Raingear	3-Layer Waterproof Breathable Jacket and Pants (20 oz)	2-Layer Waterproof Breathable Jacket and Pants (12 oz)	Poncho (included above) & 3-Layer Waterproof Breathable Chaps (4 oz)
Pack Cover	Silnylon Pack Cover (3 oz)	Poly Bag Pack Liner (2 oz)	Poncho (included)
Wind Shirt	None	None	Hooded Ultralight Wind Shirt (4 oz)
Totals	55 oz (3.4 lbs)	28 oz (1.8 lb)	18 oz (1.1 lb)

Advantages and Disadvantages of Poncho Tarps

The key disadvantages of poncho tarps include:

- Poor coverage in wind-driven rain results in wet arms and legs.
- Poor fit as a garment results in flapping in high winds and snagging on brush.
- Use as raingear and shelter makes it inconvenient for pitching shelter, and performing camping chores away from the tarp, while it's raining.
- Guylines cannot remain attached in order to use the poncho tarp as a rain garment, adding complexity to morning and evening camping chores.
- Relative small tarp size does not provide adequate rain and wind protection in very stormy conditions, especially for taller hikers.
- Front flap while wearing it as a poncho limits visibility of your feet.
- Offers poorer ventilation to body's upper core (chest, back, and shoulders) than highly-breathable rain jackets.

The key advantages of poncho tarps are:

- Potential to save weight over possibly three pieces of gear it replaces: rain jacket, shelter, and pack cover.
- Offers some simplicity to the overall gear kit by replacing three pieces of gear with one.
- Requires more advanced skills to use in stormy weather, increasing mental rewards during the wilderness experience.
- Offers better ventilation to the body's lower core (trunk) than poorly-breathable rain jacket-and-pant combos.

Techniques for Successfully Using Poncho Tarps in Inclement Conditions

Guylines

Tight coils secured by rubber bands keep poncho tarp guylines attached to the poncho and under control while hiking in non-bushy areas.

Some users leave guylines attached to their poncho during the day, and even while wearing it as rainwear. To make this work, guylines should be secured to the poncho tarp's attachment points with a knot that won't come untied - such as a bowline, girth hitched-loop, or tautline. Rubber bands can be used to keep the guylines neatly coiled. The primary advantage of this strategy is that it saves time not having to attach or remove guylines when pitching or taking down the shelter in inclement weather. The primary disadvantage of this strategy is that guylines can become tangled in brush while hiking, and poorly-secured guylines (such as that which might occur when a rubber band breaks or a coil otherwise becomes loosened) require on-trail maintenance of the setup.

Thus, most users remove guylines before hitting the trail. Attaching guylines then becomes a matter of simplicity so that the shelter can be pitched rapidly when you arrive in camp in the rain. Cold, wet hands do not untie tautline hitches and bowline knots very well. A better alternative is to girth hitch the guyline to the tarp's guyline tie-outs. Or, try a sheet bend, which can be untied without pinching fingers around any cord at all.

Pitching Camp

To pitch and break camp quickly, guylines and stakes should be stored in a readily-accessible location, such as a top pocket of the pack, unless you leave them attached to the poncho.

Assuming you are wearing the poncho, you need to quickly transition the poncho tarp from its poncho mode to its tarp mode without getting excessively wet and cold.

First, find a reasonably dry location for your pack - under a tree, for example. If you are camping above the treeline and have no place to stash it temporarily, then we say, "good for you!" because not many folks are willing to camp with a poncho above the treeline in a storm. In this case, finding a place to stow your pack will be the least of your worries. I usually don't worry about it. I simply drop my pack below where the tarp will be pitched - then, it's accessible when I crawl under my tarp.

Once your pack is stowed, retrieve the stakes and guylines (remember - they are readily accessible). Tie on six guylines - four at the corners, and two at the ridgeline midpoints. If you are using your trekking poles to pitch the tarp, have them ready.

This is the point at which poncho tarp users tend to disagree about technique. Hikers who have a fear of getting wet (they are usually the ones that use a poncho tarp primarily in drier conditions) have developed a variety of convoluted techniques for securing the hood, inserting the stakes, and pitching the ridgeline without ever getting out from under the tarp. This technique takes an inordinate amount of time and effort, and generally, is a rather uncomfortable one, requiring a number of convoluted body movements better suited to a yoga class than recovering in camp while a storm rages outside.

Our technique is simple, fast, elegant, and requires no special skills:

1. Take off the poncho.
2. Pitch it, like a regular tarp.

Easy, huh?

OK, now is the point at which you ask, "But while I'm pitching it, I'm getting wet!" Well, sure, no kidding. Did you not read that as one of the disadvantages above? But here's how you can mitigate that some. First, choose somewhat sheltered campsites. Second, do it fast (practice, practice, practice). Third, include a water resistant wind shirt in your clothing kit, which will keep you dry enough in the short time you'll be out in the rain.

Hood Leaks

In case you haven't noticed, there is a rather large hole in the roof of your shelter. You can't patch it, or you won't be able to stick your head out when it comes time to don the poncho as raingear.

When the poncho is pitched, twist the hood into a very tight spiral, fold it over on itself, and wrap the hood's drawcord around the resulting sausage several times, finishing with a half hitch. If you've sealed the seam that attaches the hood to the main tarp panel, you shouldn't have any problems with leaks except in the very hardest and sustained rainstorms, in which case a regular drip will occur as water wicks through the hood opening. We know some folks that hang a cotton string from underneath the hood, to a guyline, so that water wicking through the hood simply wicks along the length of the string and doesn't drip. This adds complexity, and defeats the purpose of the simple life poncho tarps are supposed to provide. If the hood is dripping, then move over and let the drips fall to the ground.

Camp Chores

Now you are snug as a bug under your shelter, having successfully pitched it in the rain and remained reasonably dry.

Right, but... now you have to poop.

You don't want to poop right outside your shelter, because that would smell bad. And, if you've been brainwashed with LNT ethics, you'll need to take the time to pace out a 200 foot perimeter around your camp and nearby water sources for your restroom. Which means you absolutely have to go out in the rain.

Remember the wind shirt? It's a poncho tarper's best friend. Wear it for short forays into the rain for pooping, retrieving water, cooking dinner, washing dishes, etc. Even if the wind shirt gets wet and soaks through, the clothing underneath it will remain remarkably dry, even in hard rain. The trick here is to plan your attack and be as efficient as possible with any chores performed outside the confines of your tarp.

The alternative for short expeditions away from the poncho: go naked. Upon your arrival back to the shelter, use a 1/2-ounce pack towel to dry off before returning to your sleeping bag. If it's too cold for total buff, then some upper body clothing topped off with a wind shirt can buy you time until your cathole is buried and you're back under shelter.

Breaking Camp

Breaking camp in the rain is a miserable experience anyway you look at it. Most summertime backpackers relish those few moments of sunshine in the morning when they can exit their tent, stretch their arms, cook a lazy breakfast, take the rainfly off to dry, and drape their down sleeping bags on tree limbs for relofting.

Obviously, this is something akin to an unattainable fantasy for the poncho tarper camping in wet weather.

Breaking camp means this: doing it is fast as possible (remember, the poncho leaves you somewhat exposed to wind driven rain), doing it as efficiently as possible (by packing properly - you don't want to have to repack on the trail), and packing (or wearing) the poncho LAST.

Which means that you and your pack stay dry until the very last minute. When crunch time comes, your pack should be completely packed and sitting under the poncho. Here's the process:

1. Pull the stakes.
2. Remove the guylines (or coil them, if you prefer to leave them attached).
3. Stash the stakes and guylines in your pack.
4. Put your pack on.
5. Put your poncho on.
6. Start hiking.

This process, for the accomplished poncho tarp camper, should indeed take less than 60 seconds if it's howling outside, a bit longer if you coil your guylines.

Flap Control

Wearing the poncho in high winds does not require earplugs. The sound of flapping fabric is the least of your problems. But you do want to control flapping because a flappy poncho can let out excessive body heat in cold weather, it can catch on debris while hiking through brushy or rocky areas, and it can ride up and expose your nether land to wind-driven rain. Some poncho tarp manufacturers add an elastic drawcord, hemmed into one of the short sides, that can be drawn around the bottom of your pack (securing the poncho tarp as a pack cover) and tied around the front of your waist (acting as a belt).

Snaps down the long sides of the poncho tarp can be used to secure its sides in stormy weather as well. Missing from (as far as we know) the entire poncho tarp genre is the ability to secure the front bottom flap of the tarp, which in the wind, tends to be the most annoying because...

"I Can't See My Feet!"

And that may be the best reason not to wear a poncho tarp while travelling off trail in mountainous, tussocky, or very brushy terrain, where foot placement is so important for hiking efficiently and safely.

Supplemental Clothing

The two most important pieces of supplemental clothing for a poncho tarp aficionado are the wind shirt and either chaps or pants. Neither of these items may be necessary in the Sierras during the summer, when hypothermic (wet and cold) weather hardly ever threatens the sanctity of a Muir-like journey.

But poncho tarp campers in other seasons and climates will find that a wind shirt is vital, not only while pitching the tarp in the rain (described above), but as a secondary layer while wearing the poncho in the rain. A wind shirt provides protection and warmth for the lower arms, typically unprotected when using a poncho.

Poncho tarps are not the ideal shelter if you enjoy camping in comfort in the snow, but some will argue that it's only your state of mind that is at fault. Here, Ryan Jordan keeps smiling from the tight quarters of a SilPoncho after a September snowstorm in the Wind River Range, WY.

Likewise, water resistant pants or chaps are very important when hiking with a poncho tarp in sustained wet conditions. If you skip all sorts of rain pants entirely, you risk having your lower pants getting wet in the rain. The result over several hours is that water will wick up the pant, soak your trunk, and turn your hike into quite an uncomfortable walk. Chaps may be the best type of pant protection for use with a poncho, because they are easier to wear than pants, provide plenty of protection, and are very well-ventilated.

Another clothing consideration for poncho tarp use in extremely wet weather should be the overall water absorbency of the clothing system. Inhibited ventilation and breathability in the upper torso, outstanding ventilation in the lower torso and trunk (read: cold!), combined with poor coverage of arms and legs, may mean that in the wettest and coldest weather, you may be hiking with all of your clothes on. The result will be greater accumulation of sweat and external moisture into your clothing system than what may occur with a jacket-and-pant combination that uses highly breathable materials. Thin, synthetic clothing is the least absorbent.

What the Authors Use

The Six Moon Designs Gatewood Cape is among the more sophisticated poncho tarp designs, and improves its use as both poncho and shelter, but at a cost: slightly more weight. Mystic Lake, Gallatin Range, MT.

Ryan Jordan

For summer use, I don't make many changes to my gear kit if I elect to take a poncho. However, if I know I'm going to take a poncho into extremely challenging (wet and cold) weather, my clothing system changes and focuses on the lightest, thinnest, least absorbent materials I have in my closet, so that my clothing dries fast at the end of a long day. Having spent many long distance days hiking in all-day rains wearing a poncho, one undeniable conclusion is this: you'll arrive into camp quite wet.

Poncho Tarp:

I like the Six Moon Designs Gatewood Cape in inclement weather because of the wind and rain protection it provides from all sides. In the summer, I use the much lighter Bozeman Mountain Works SpinPoncho. In good weather, guylines usually remain attached, but I almost never leave them on while wearing the poncho. I use AirCore Pro guylines because they can be stashed without coiling and don't tangle. I attach them to the poncho with sheet bend knots. An overhand loop in the other end makes staking quick and easy.

Wind Shirt:

I prefer a hooded, less breathable wind shirt that offers more water protection, so I can (1) wear it as long as possible without donning a poncho when it's raining, and (2) so I can have the flexibility to be out from under the poncho while in camp. My choice: the GoLite Ether.

Other Clothing:

For warmer but wet conditions (summer), I simply throw the poncho on over two thin layers: a GoLite C-Thru Lightweight Zip-T (top) and GoLite Stride Shorts (bottom). (If the mosquitoes are prolific, I add a pair of thin softshell pants.) If I'm hiking fast, this three-piece combination, matched with a thin (50-weight) polyester balaclava and glove liners can keep me going in remarkably foul weather. If I need more warmth, I'll add the wind shirt over the base layer and a pair of wind pants on the bottom (I like the poorly breathable MontBell U.L. Wind Pants for this purpose). The other key pieces of clothing I take in cold, wet weather include a Bozeman Mountain Works Cocoon Pullover and Pants set. The Pullover gets worn in the coldest conditions, and because it's insulation is synthetic, it doesn't lose a great deal of loft when wet. Generally, however, the pullover and pants stay in the pack until the end of the day, when they give me dry, warm clothes to change into as sleep clothing. Combined with a lightweight homemade synthetic quilt (11 ounces for a "summer weight" or 20 ounces for a "three-season weight"), my clothing and sleep gear gives me great flexibility for the wettest conditions.

Sleep System:

My preferred summer sleep system with a poncho tarp is a breathable bivy sack (Bozeman Mountain Works Vapr Nano) and a light down quilt (about a pound). The bivy sack keeps rain spray off the down bag, and adds wind resistance. For three-season conditions and/or unsupported long distance hikes where I don't have the opportunity to dry my down bag regularly, I use a synthetic quilt (20 ounces), and skip the bivy sack. I usually sleep in wet clothes when I take a synthetic bag, and they always dry completely by morning.

The authors' summertime poncho tarps, an Integral Designs SilPoncho (left) and a Bozeman Mountain Works SpinPoncho (right) in the Uintas, Utah.

Alan Dixon

Poncho Tarp:

For summer I take an Integral Designs SilPoncho. Ryan and I have used a poncho tarp in a lot of wild places and seen them through a lot of bad weather together (I'm not yet sold on lighter spinnaker cloth ponchos!). My AirCore Pro (or Trip Tease) guylines remain coiled and attached to the poncho.

In wetter weather, I too prefer the slightly heavier Six Moon Designs Gatewood Cape. While not as well-ventilated as a SilPoncho, the Gatewood Cape provides more rain protection and a larger, more comfortable shelter. Since I will be wearing the Cape as a poncho for a significant amount of time, guylines remain unattached.

Other Clothing:

I don't make many changes to my usual clothing ensemble, although I do include very light nylon shorts (or pants with zip-off legs). That way, I can hike in the rain without getting a lower layer wet or have water wick up to my torso. I take a light, long-sleeve wool shirt (Ibex Outback) with a hooded windshirt to layer over it. I also take Bozeman Mountain Works Cocoon Pullover and Pants for colder conditions. My clothing is designed to absorb the least amount of water and dry quickly. In wetter weather I switch from wool to a synthetic base layer - a long sleeve Patagonia Lightweight Capiliene top. I don't take a base layer bottom. I will sometimes take a very light pair of zip-off nylon pants (legs usually stashed) or sometimes shorts with wind pants. If it's cold enough, I might use waterproof-breathable GoLite Reed rain pants over shorts (breathability is not as important on the bottom when it's cold). I prefer a warmer hat and gloves than Ryan, so I take a two-ounce fleece balaclava and possum wool gloves (sometimes a second pair) with a one-ounce pair of waterproof-breathable lobster claw mitt shells. My feet run cold so I include an extra pair of dry sleep socks.

Wind Shirt:

My windshirt is a hooded Outdoor Research Ion. The Ion has a deep chest vent with reasonably durable and water resistant fabric.

Sleep System:

My bag varies between a North Face Propel (for warmer and/or wetter weather) to a Marmot Atom (for cooler and/or drier weather). I find that I can usually keep the bag dry, especially if I do a good job of drying off with a small pack towel before getting in. Wet clothes stay outside the bag. I usually make my forays outside the tarp naked and towel off in a similar manner.

Conclusion

Two are better than one. A pair of Integral Designs

Poncho tarps are not for everyone. Some say they are only for the eccentric, or the dry Sierras, or ultralight freaks who like to suffer. Fortunately, there are enough different models of poncho tarps on the market, and enough different manufacturers of them, that you have some choice in how eccentric you'd like to be. From the delicately ultralight (Bozeman Mountain Works SpinPoncho) to the durably simple (GoLite Poncho Tarp) to the sophisticated and performance-oriented (Six Moon Designs Gatewood Cape), there is enough choice for the eccentric in all of us to be satisfied.

SilPonchos snapped together to form luxurious accommodations for two in the windy high country of Utah's Uinta Range.

Citation

"The Poncho Tarp: Techniques and Gear Systems for Inclement Conditions," by Ryan Jordan and Alan Dixon. *BackpackingLight.com* (ISSN 1537-0364). http://backpackinglight.com/cgi-bin/backpackinglight/poncho_tarp_techniques_gear_inclement_conditions.html, 2006-08-09 03:00:00-06.

COPYRIGHT ©2003-2011 BEARTOOTH MOUNTAIN PRESS LLC
U.S. Library of Congress Serial Registrations: BackpackingLight.com (electronic, ISSN 1537-0364) & Backpacking Light Magazine (print, ISSN 1550-4417)
BACKPACKING LIGHT® and the FEATHER/MOUNTAIN icon are registered trademarks of the Beartooth Media Group, Inc.

Mobile Version