

# SHRINK IT AND PINK IT

Women-specific gear has advantages when you shop around and learn what works. **By Laura Lancaster**

**I** have an observation to share: at 5 feet, 5 inches with a small build, I'm what the outdoor-gear industry considers "regular" for a woman. Most of my gear comes right off the rack, I can always find

shoes my size and I happily squeeze into just about any one-person tent. **HERE'S ANOTHER CONFESSION:** Only a small fraction of my gear was made specifically for women. My go-to pack is unisex. My favorite shorts are a pair of castoffs from my husband. My sleeping bag was custom-made. And my water filter is blue, not pink. Which makes sense, really. Even if some of my outdoor gear was made with a 6-foot, 220-pound guy in mind, it gets the job done just as well for someone half his size.

But not always. Sometimes a woman-specific piece of gear can make a big difference to my comfort—and safety. Determining when it mat-

ters, when it doesn't and even when it might be a mistake not to pick the right gear requires some pre-planning and good thinking.

## WHEN TO GRAB WOMEN'S GO-TO GEAR

**YOU RUN COLD:** Most women do—at least colder than the men in our lives. Outdoor manufacturers take this into account when designing women-specific products. For instance, a women's 15-degree sleeping bag has more insulation per square inch than the same men's bag. Ditto for women's sleeping pads—the R-value (a warmth rating) for women's sleeping pads are frequently higher than men's. This is probably the most

important reason to choose women-specific gear for the backcountry.

You want to be seen: It's important to me when I'm out in the backcountry to not sneak up on anyone—man or beast. Besides making plenty of noise when I'm out hiking, I also try to incorporate bright colors that stand out from the surrounding foliage into my wardrobe—especially reds, purples and pinks. While standing out in the natural world might not be the reason that outdoor companies choose to make their clothing pink, I find this color does come in handy.

## WHEN TO TRY IT

**YOU'RE TALL SHORT, CURVY OR SLIM:**

**“Only a small fraction of my gear was made specifically for women. My go-to pack is unisex. My favorite shorts are a pair of castoffs from my husband. And my water filter is blue, not pink.”**

In other words—you are a typical woman. If the hips aren't too baggy, the thighs are too tight or the hems are dragging below our ankles. Sure, we complain that one brand's Size 6 is another brand's Size 10—but the real problem is that women's bodies

scale up or down in more than one dimension. And don't get me started on shoes—if your usual size doesn't do it in a pair of hiking boots or trail runners, try scaling over to the men's equivalent size (which will be a wider fit) before scaling up.

▼ Wearing bright, feminine colors is a great way to stay visible in the backcountry



▲ One advantage to being smaller than the average man is that it's easier to squeeze into ultralight tents.



## PLUS SIZES

Frankly, it's rough being anything larger than a Size 8 when you're in the market for a new pair of trekking pants. And if you typically wear plus sizes, it can be basically impossible. First off: ignore the hype of activity-specific gear. If you have a pair of leggings or a tank top that you like to exercise in already, use that! Mother Nature won't notice. But if you're in the market for something new, there are a few mainstream clothing companies that do a little bit better with plus sizes, like Duluth Trading Co. and Juno Active.



▲ Sometimes the best choice for your backcountry expedition will be a little big—as is the case for Frogg Togg's ultralight rain gear—size small.





▲ It's important to not buy "fitted" layers—being able to add base, insulation and other cold-weather layers as needed is essential for staying warm in winter conditions.

**WHERE ARE THE POCKETS?**

Women need easily-accessible storage space on the go—that's why we carry purses in the frontcountry. In the backcountry, we need some additional pockets to fill that gap. Unfortunately, that's not always what we get. While men's outerwear is rich in pockets—front pockets, back pockets, cargo pockets, coin pockets—women's will barely fit a hairband. Or they're seemingly designed to lose their content—curved, rounded edges with the bare minimum of Velcro to close it. Look for outdoor gear with deep pockets that close with zips or snaps to ensure you don't lose any gear on your next adventure.

This problem is compounded when you're trying to find the right backpack. Women-specific designs are modified to take the differences between women's bodies and men's bodies into account—shorter torsos, a different arch to the back panel and shoulder straps that naturally curve around our chests. But having even just one dimension that scales up or down more than the others can make finding the right pack a challenge. My torso happens to be longer than the average woman my size, and so the hip belts on most packs are too large for me.

One way to find the perfect pack is to mix and match some of the women's and men's elements together. There are a few packs now where you can interchange hip belts—such as those from ULA and

the REI Traverse—making it that much easier to find the perfect fit.

**WHEN TO SKIP IT**

It's a "lifestyle" brand: Another confession—and this is a difficult one: I care about how I look in the backcountry. But the image I want to project in the woods isn't one of sophistication or glamor—it's of competence.

When I know I'm carrying gear that reflects my experience level and knowledge, it, in turn, makes me more confident. And if that bit of vanity helps me to pause and consider more carefully what I'm packing before heading into the wilderness, then all the better.

But that's not the only type of vanity that you get in the backcountry. Sometimes the vanity of the front-country seeps in: sequins, wedge



▼ The longer style of men's athletic shorts are both a comfortable and practical choice for the backcountry—especially with their deeper pockets.

heels the brand called lululemon. But don't let frontcountry fashion influence your backcountry gear choices. What looks good at the trailhead still needs to work 20-miles or more deep into the woods—where there is no one to see you.

You're looking for something technical: Sometimes, finding an option designed with women in mind just isn't even possible. While a lot of great gains have been made in women's gear over the years, most of it, for now, has been at the beginner's level. And for good reason from the manufacturer's standpoint: That's where most of the profits are. But it's left a gap at the more technical level, particularly in the area of winter gear. Any gear, ice axes, crampons are all thought of as unisex—which means sized to fit men's bodies.

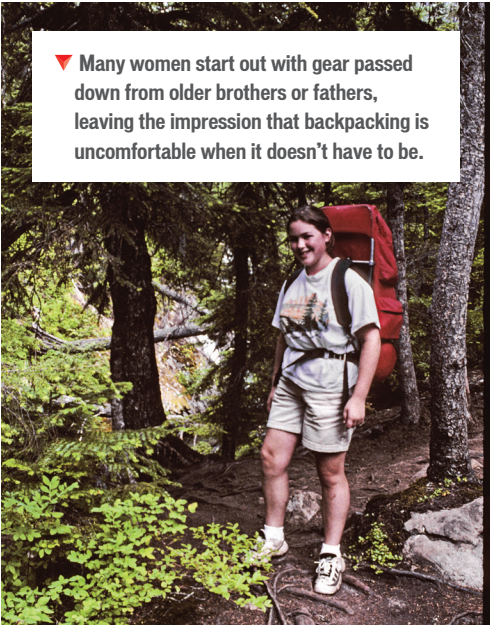
**IT'S NOT YOU**

More often than not, women will blame any problem they have with a piece of gear on themselves before they blame the gear. Either they are wearing it wrong, or packed it wrong or their body is wrong. But, more often than not, it was the gear all along. If something in your kit isn't working for you, don't hesitate to try as many other brands, sizes, colors—or even the men's options—as you need to find what works. ☒

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▲ The only women-specific gear I carry are my base layers, warm layers and sleeping pad.



▼ Many women start out with gear passed down from older brothers or fathers, leaving the impression that backpacking is uncomfortable when it doesn't have to be.

**HIKING SKIRTS**

Now here's something outdoor gear manufacturers are getting right: hiking skirts. Cute, feminine, and—most important—practical. Unlike your typical running or trekking shorts, skirts preserve some modesty when nature calls in an exposed landscape. And insulated winter skirts actually do a better job of keeping you warm when the temperatures drop than their two-tube counterparts. Check out some options from Purple Rain Adventure Skirts or Outdoor Research.