

Toilet Paper Free Expeditions

Go wild - leave the TP at home.

BY Mike Clelland for Backpacking Light: <http://www.backpackinglight.com/>

Introduction

I am always surprised when I see my camping peers walk into the woods for their privacy time, and they bring along their toilet paper. Good grief, what kind of wilderness experience is that?

Mankind has been pooping in the woods since we climbed down out of the trees, and in historical time, toilet paper (TP) is a pretty recent invention. And, a huge percentage of our comrades on this planet have never even seen TP.

If you're seeing this on a computer screen, you're obviously a member of a privileged part of the world population, the part that has bathrooms. We live in a society with toilets and they're all accompanied by a nice roll of TP. There's nothing to think about, we do our little duty and wipe and flush. This is a delightful convenience we've created. But it's separated us from what should be a very simple bit of outdoor know-how.

Why are so many campers so dependent on toilet paper? I would have to guess that they either haven't used anything other than the store bought stuff on a roll or, they've had bad luck with their one-and-only time with natural wiping material.

It's a sad truth, Natural Butt-Wiping is a lost art.

I work as an instructor for an outdoor school, and one of the very liberating skills I teach is using natural "toilet paper" - in quotes on purpose. My job involves spending 30-days at a time in the Wilderness, far away from flushing toilets. My fellow instructors and I teach a very thorough Poo-Poo class on day one, and for the next month the students get a lot of practice. In over a decade at the school, taking many hundreds of students into the mountains, I have never had a student complain, just the opposite - they all feel genuinely empowered!

That said, we do carry a small amount of TP in a plastic bag for emergencies. If a team member gets diarrhea, toilet paper becomes a very comforting tool. We keep the bag closed with a knot, and consider it part of the first aid kit. It's been extremely rare that we ever untie that knot.

The lightweight benefits? Obviously, not having TP saves 100% of its weight. But beyond that, it's fabulous to learn something that liberates you from something we "think" we need.

What's Problematic about Toilet Paper?

- It's hard to use TP in the rain.
- It's a drag to triple bag and then carry out the used TP.
- Everybody says, "Oh, I burn my TP." But, I've never had any luck doing this. It's time consuming, and I can't get it 100% to ash.
- I've seen folks burn their used TP in a campfire, and what they end up doing is tossing the entire triple bagged plastic package right into the fire. Plastic burns poorly and creates airborne pollution.
- Too many people (of course, not you) bury their used TP, or worse, they just leave it on the surface. We don't have to deal with it in the bathroom, and that transfers to people not "dealing" in the backcountry too.

What to Use?

Any camper who wants to make fun of natural TP will sneer and mention pinecones. Yikes, just the image of a pinecone with all those pointy things makes my butt wince. With very few exceptions, pinecones don't work! But, if you find a batch from a Douglas Fir, you're good to go! Please know, when you are in the backcountry, you are surrounded by a plentitude of wonderful wiping things. Please see the ratings chart.



SPECIFICATIONS REVIEWED

Ratings are from: 1= EWWW! to 5= BLISS!

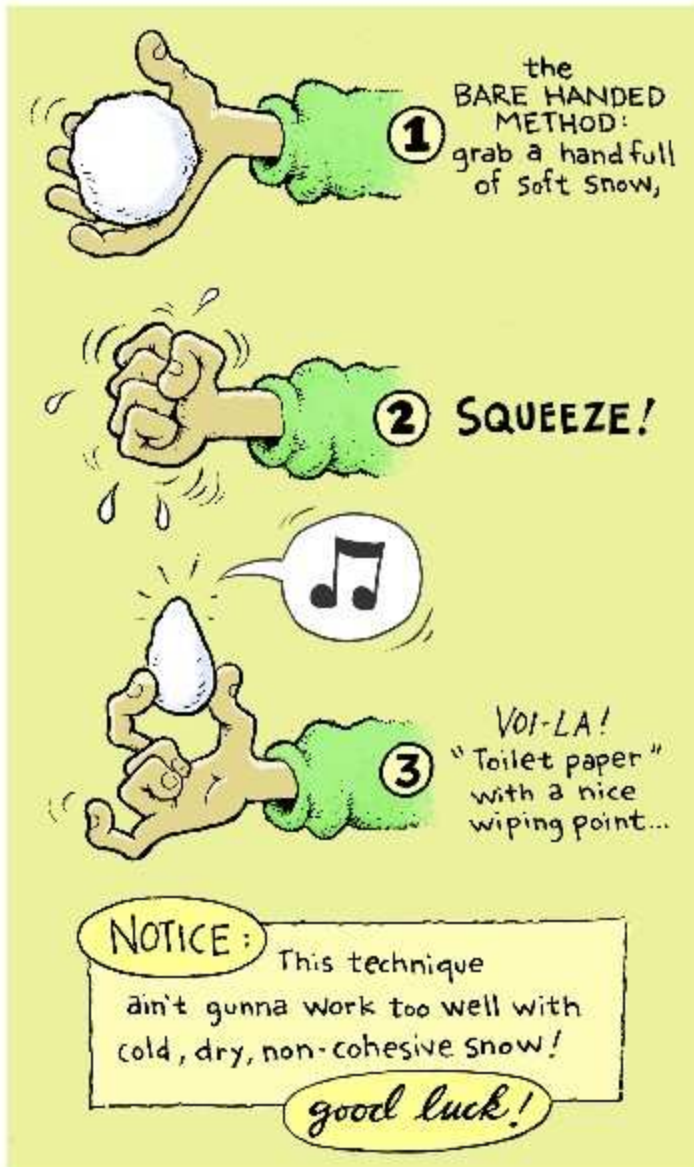
MATERIAL :	COMFORT	EASE OF USE	ABSORBENCY	OVERALL
SNOW	5+	5+	5+	5+
WOOLY LAMB'S EAR	5+	5	5	5
RIVER ROCKS	5	5	3	4.5
OLD MAN'S BEARD	5	4	5	4.5
SMOOTH STICKS	3.5	4	4.5	4
DOUGLAS FIR CONES	3	5	4.5	4
SANDSTONE ROCKS	2.5	5	4.5	4
GRASS "BRUSH"	5	2.5	3	3.5
CORN FLOWER LEAVES	3	3.5	4	3.5
ARROW LEAF BALSAM ROOT	3	3	3	3
CRUMBLY DRY LEAVES	1	1	5	2
SHARP LIMESTONE ROCKS	0	2	1	1.5
POISON IVY	0	0	0	0

NON-SCIENTIFIC CONTINUUM

PLEASE NOTE: the rating scores are a guide only. Choose the material that best meets your individual performance needs.

Snow:

If you have snow available, you will have a stupendously clean bung hole! No foolin' - snow has all the properties that make it the crème de la crème of natural butt wiping. Don't use gloves, use your bare hand and make a snowball by squeezing. You don't want a round shape; you want a pointy feature for the business. Snow is the perfect combo of smooth and abrasive, it's just wet enough for a little extra cleaning power - and, it's white! The whiteness will allow the wiper to accurately monitor any residue in the area in question. Plus, if you have snow, you usually have a LOT of it. Here's an insight into my personal wiping habits: I use a LOT of wiping material. I am never satisfied until I know that things are super-duper-clean.



River Rocks:

Smooth and elegant, these polished beauties are the second best behind snow. Before visiting your private zone, collect a load of these rocks. Not too big, not too small, a little flat, a little pointy and NOT round. Once again, grab a lot of 'em.



Wooly Lamb's Ear:

The Northern Rockies has been graced with this gangly weed, and a very similar plant called Mullein (*Verbascum thapsus*). It's a rather homely plant with a dull purple flower, but the leaves are like the wings of an angel. They are big, thick, strong, fuzzy and satisfying. This is a pretty common plant, and they grow in clumps. If you are collecting these leaves, please carefully get them from multiple plants, taking just a few leaves from each. Do not strip one of these cute plants of all their leaves just to guarantee yourself a tidy butt. You don't need to kill anything for hygiene!

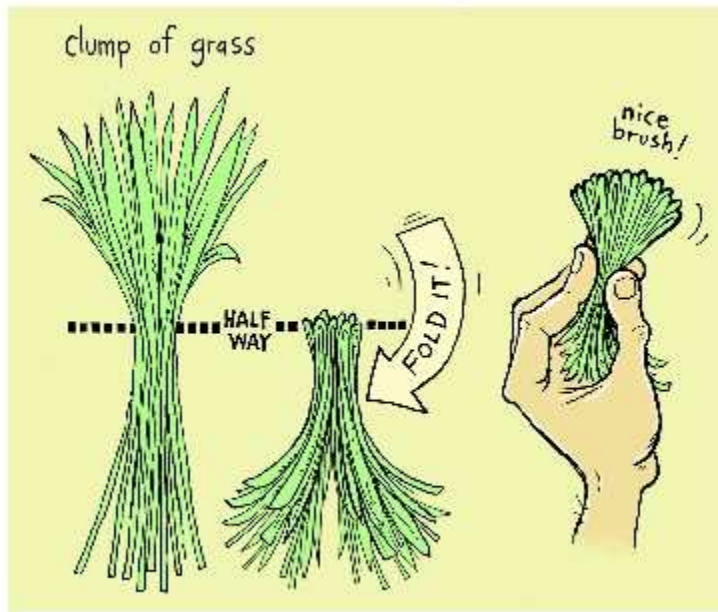


Old Man's Beard:

Have you ever marveled at that weird electric yellow moss that hangs from the pine trees? This stuff is great. Once again, grab a little bit from multiple trees.

Grass:

A goodly clump of grass makes for a pretty good cleaning tool. For a nice stiff set of bristles, you can fold the grass into a very tidy little brush. Grab the grass from a big zone; avoid stripping an area of all the green stuff.



Size Matters

For obvious reasons you'll want to keep your hands away from the contaminants that you're trying to wipe away. So, whatever you use - make sure it's big enough to keep your fingers a good distance from the working area.

Time Required

The humble act of pooping in the woods involves a goodly amount of busy work. If your partner says it's dump time and then comes back after just a minute, don't let 'em put their hand in your bag of gorp! To do a good job requires at least 10 minutes.

Plan Ahead and Prepare

Before the urge becomes a raging alarm, there are a few small things you'll need to do. The act of collecting the wiping tools may take a little time and some searching. While hiking on the trail, begin filling your pockets with nice round rocks, lots of 'em. Keep an eye out for the perfect collection of broad leaf plants. Is it a short walk to a small batch of snow from last winter?

Do not - I repeat, DO NOT just squat down and expect to find the perfect wiping material within arms reach. It won't be there, I know from experience. No need to describe this unpleasant dilemma.

What to Do with the Used Material?

After wiping you'll need to dispose of the goods. If you've dug a deep enough hole, depositing the wipers in there is a great solution. Re-fill the hole, and you're done. But, often the hole is too full (or barely deep enough) so you'll have to toss 'em. Carefully look around for a good place to toss the contaminated post-wipe product. Avoid any place a fellow camper may travel or step, and think about where water will run in the rain. Under a nice bush is a good solution.

Hygiene

Wash your hands when you're done! Don't be a slob - fecal contamination is the cause of backcountry NVD! That's Nausea, Vomiting & Diarrhea!

For the highest degree of success, employ your teammate as a helper. When you come back from your dump-run, tell 'em that you'll require their assistance. They'll dig through the pack and touch the water bottle. They put the soap in your hands and they pour the water. Your contaminated hands touch NOTHING.



Ryan Jordan of Backpacking Light wrote an excellent feature/instructional titled [Backcountry Hygiene for Ultralight and Long-Distance Hikers](#).

Hygiene Tools

Purell Alcohol Hand Gel, repackaged in a tiny vial.
Dr. Bronner's Castile Soap, repackaged in a tiny vial.

Also, I know some folks that take the liquid anti-bacterial hand soap (repackaged in a tiny vial). But, it's my understanding that the germ killing benefits advertised with these products isn't any better than a good washing with plain ol' soap. This might be an okay alternative, but after reading the Dr. Bronner's label, I'm devoted to the ALL-IN-ONE goodness of the castile soap, and Almond is my favorite.

On a long trip, I'll include a few WET-ONES SINGLES. These are the individually packaged moist towelettes, with alcohol as the active ingredient. I keep these in the first aid kit, but they are a godsend if there's a poo-poo accident. Four of these weigh in at 0.5 ounces. Get 'em at the grocery in the picnic or diaper section.

Clean your Butt!

A fellow backcountry traveler once spoke this little truism, "A clean butt is a happy butt!" Words to live by. On a long trip, taking a little time to wash your butt is essential to your wilderness experience. This humble act can genuinely make the world a more wonderful place. I've taught this valuable skill and my students really enjoy the benefits.

Find a private spot away from the trail and away from any running water. You'll need at least a liter of water in a bottle and some kind of soap. A nice warm day makes this all the more pleasant. Pant's off and squat down. The area getting washed will be positioned low, so all the water should run off onto the ground. Dedicate one hand for doing all the clean work (right), and the other for doing all the dirty work (left). The right hand opens the water bottle and squeezes the little soap vial. Just a tiny bit of soap is plenty. The left hand rubs and scrubs. C'mon, get right in there and do a high-quality job!

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Here's a rinse trick. In the squatty pose, you can pour water along your left arm with your right hand, the water will run like a "sluice" and gravity will deliver it down into that work-zone. This rinsing works perfectly. When the washing is done and the soap is rinsed off, the pant's come up.

Then, wash your hands, and do a good job! Take a full minute with the soap, sing a song, and don't be lazy. Really rub those hands together, this scrubbing action is essential. And point your fingers downward so gravity will let the water and soap (and those germs too) fall off and onto the ground. If you fingers are pointed up, everything runs down along your arms.

Give a good rinse with non-soapy water. If you have antibacterial alcohol gel, use a little and you're done. I do NOT use a hanky or a washcloth for washing anything "private" in the backcountry, it's just too hard to clean completely.



Note: This is not an instructional for Leave No Trace pooping skills, insights into this very important subject can be found at www.lnt.org

About the Author



Mike Clelland! divides his time between illustration work and instructing for the National Outdoor Leadership School, NOLS (www.nols.edu). He teaches in Alaska, Canada, the North Cascades and the Rockies. His books as illustrator include *LIGHTEN UP!* by Don Ladigin and the *Allen & Mike's Really Cool* series. Mike is a regular contributor to *Climbing* magazine. He lives in Driggs Idaho.

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