

Backpacking at Oil Creek

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I like to get my kids into the outdoors. Greg has just turned seven years old, Colin has just turned five, so it's time to take them backpacking. I arranged for a two-night trip in Oil Creek State Park, Pennsylvania, on 28, 29, 30 July 1997. Accompanying us would be my sister Ellen and my mother and father. This would be Colin's first backpack trip and Greg's second. Ellen is an experienced backpacker, but she hasn't been doing much hiking in the last ten years. My mother has been going on short backpacking trips, usually three days and usually with me, for many years. She's sixty-nine years old. My father had never gone backpacking before, and had never had a good word to say about backpacking for the thirty years that I'd been engaged in the sport.

I planned a short trip: three miles the first day, five the second, two the last. These milages are appropriate for the young and the old, and for me too, because I would be carrying food and sleeping bags for three.

The first day was hot, and a lot of flies buzzed around. We found eight turkey feathers and saw a number of chipmunks. The boys found a fallen log supported at one side by a tree limb to make it angle off the ground, and scampered up it a few yards before getting scared. We waded into a small stream, Gregg Run, full of rocks and mosses. We walked through a deep old forest, full of huge hemlock and pine and birch trees. All of us were quite tired when we reached camp. Dad took a nap.

Mom cooked dinner—rice and beans—and the boys were fascinated by the fire. We had to watch that they didn't put in too many sticks and build up the fire too hot.

After dinner we walked cross-country down from camp. We passed pipelines and huge wooden oil barrels left over from a century ago when this area—now a quiet ground for recreation and inspiration—boomed as the birthplace of the oil industry. Our walk ended at the wide Oil Creek, where the boys and I took off our clothes and bathed, as well as we could, in the shallow water.

That night a cold front moved in and, without rain, changed the air from hot and muggy to cool and crisp. I had put Colin to bed on top of his sleeping bag and wearing only his pull-up night-time diaper. He woke up in the middle of the night and said “I’m cold, you blockhead.” I found his pajamas and stuffed him into his sleeping bag. The next morning I dressed the boys in long pants for the first time in months. For the rest of the trip flies were a minor problem.

The next day was long in distance, but we had all day to walk it in. The two boys got into fights with each other occasionally, but no worse than they do at home. For a short distance our trail followed a gravel road, where they walked side-by-side holding hands. We reached another small stream with rocks and waded there for about an hour. We arrived at camp in mid-afternoon, and despite the longer distance no one was overtired.

For dinner, I cooked noodles in cheese sauce with tuna, and string beans fresh from my garden at home. For dessert, we roasted marshmallows over the fire. Dad hadn’t roasted marshmallows for years, and he really enjoyed it. We heard coyotes howl during the night.

The second morning was even cooler. We crossed Oil Creek on a high bridge and threw sticks in. We collected rocks: purple, square, translucent. And after a short walk we were back at our cars.

Not an astonishing backpacking trip: no thunderstorms, no expansive vistas, no spectacular wildlife, no virgin forests—but a memorable one: companionship with family, young and old members introduced to the sport, no major mishaps, lots of wading and stick throwing and collecting of rocks and feathers. Fine with me.