



# Snow Leopard

## MOUNTAIN SPORTS

### SELECTING A SLEEPING BAG

The right "sleep system" can make or break a backcountry or camping trip. Your backcountry "sleep system" can consist of as much as a sleeping pad, sleeping bag, bivy sac, tent and camping pillow. When it comes to having a good night sleep away from home, a sleeping bag is arguably the most important part of this system. When selecting the sleeping bag that is right for you, there are many factors to consider. The most important of these are:

- [Temperature Rating](#)
- [Insulation](#)
- [Shape](#)
- [Weight](#)
- [Size](#)

#### Temperature Rating:

The temperature rating of a sleeping bag is an indication of the coldest temperature in which that sleeping bag is designed to optimally perform. For example, a sleeping bag that is given a temperature rating of 15 degrees, will ideally keep you warm if you are sleeping in temperatures that do not drop below 15 degrees. Do not proceed with your sleeping bag decision, until you have chosen your preferred temperature rating. Consider the coldest temperatures you will encounter when using your bag, and don't choose a bag with less protection than the appropriate temperature rating offers. If you tend to be a "cold sleeper," even in the comfort of your own home, it's not a bad idea to go with more insulation. A couple of things to keep in mind: Temperature ratings are assigned by the manufacturer of the sleeping bag, and are not an exact science. Several variations will ultimately affect your overall warmth while sleeping outside.

- A tent or a bivy sac can raise the temperature as much as 10 degrees. This is very important to remember if you never sleep under the stars.
- A sleeping pad will also drastically affect your temperature, since they not only provide comfort, but an additional layer of protection between you and the ground.
- Women not only prefer "women's specific" bags for their size and shape, but also for the added insulation in certain areas of the bag. Women tend to sleep colder than men, so women's bags will often include extra insulation in the foot box and the chest area. Regardless of whether or not the bag is gender specific, women generally prefer a warmer bag.
- What you wear or don't wear in your sleeping bag can affect your overall warmth. Don't be fooled into wearing too many layers of clothing when you crawl into your bag. Let the sleeping bag do its job - wearing a parka to bed isn't necessarily going to keep you warmer. A nice layer of dry, weather appropriate long underwear will serve you best and maximize the temperature rating of your bag.
- Specific sleeping bag features are added or removed to adjust the bag's rating. Insulating fabrics, draft collars and tubes, mummy hoods, drawstring and zipper placements all affect the bag's warmth.

Remember that knowing when and where you use your sleeping bag will help you decide on the best temperature rating for you. We have organized our sleeping bags into general categories that will help you sift through the huge selection. Before settling on a category, remember all the different factors that affect the rating of the bag.

These categories are not industry standards:

**Summer Season:** 30 Degrees and up; summer use

**Three Season:** 10-30 Degrees; spring, summer, fall use

**Winter Season:** -10-+10 Degrees; winter use

**Extreme Winter/Extra Warmth:** -10 Degrees and below; winter and expedition use

## **Insulation:**

The insulation of a bag will be your next, most important consideration when selecting your bag. Sleeping bags are filled with either down insulation or synthetic insulation. Both categories have their pros and cons, although down sleeping bags are generally more desirable and therefore more expensive.

*Down* is a natural fiber found under the feathers of geese and ducks. Although deserving of an entire article of its own, down has a few defining characteristics, which are important to consider. This article will not go into the details of down, but be aware of "fill power" when considering a down sleeping bag. Fill power is the number of cubic inches one ounce of down will displace. Generally, the higher the number, the better the down. Down sleeping bags have high warmth to weight ratio. This means that you can increase the warmth of the bag without adding a lot of weight. Down bags are also extremely compactable, so even bags with very low temperature ratings will compress to a small size. Down, although expensive compared to its synthetic counterparts, has a long lifetime. A sleeping bag, filled with high quality down and cared for properly may be the only sleeping bag you will ever have to purchase. And the down side to down? You may be in trouble if your sleeping bag gets wet while in the backcountry. Down can take an extremely long time to dry, and must be washed carefully. See "[Taking Care of your Sleeping Bag.](#)"

*Synthetic* sleeping bags are filled with plastic threads - again, we're skipping the technical details here. There are a number of variations in synthetic bags - different materials have different names and various grades. Synthetic materials continue to improve, and in today's bags you can find a lightweight, compactable bag for a lot less money than its down counterpart. But, generally, synthetic materials are heavier, bulkier and don't drape as well as down. Synthetic materials will also degrade over time, so you may end up purchasing two synthetic sleeping bags over time, for the price of one down bag. On the up side, though, they insulate while wet, dry faster than down, are non-allergenic and can be less expensive.

If weight and bulk are not important considerations for you, it may not be necessary for you to spend the extra money on down. If you anticipate encountering situations where you may end up with a wet sleeping bag, a synthetic bag, especially one with water resistant fabrics, is the far superior choice. But when it comes to weight and bulk, there is no competition for down.

## **Shape:**

This category is far less important and needs no further technical research. You have two options when considering the shape of a sleeping bag - rectangular or mummy. Mummy bags are superior to rectangular bags because they contour to your body and cover your head, both lending more warmth and comfort to the bag.

*Mummy* sleeping bags, when zipped and cinched, cover your entire body. On cold nights, you can cinch the hood down to only allow a hole for breathing. They are narrower in the foot box and through the length of the legs, widening at the top to allow room for your torso and shoulders, and then narrowing again in the hood. Mummy bags may feel restrictive to anyone with claustrophobic tendencies, but manufacturers are starting to advance their mummy designs to include stretch fabrics and designs, expandable draft tubes, uneven fill placement for gender or use specific bags, and mating zippers. The mummy bag category deserves some comparison-shopping because they vary tremendously in their design features.

*Rectangular* sleeping bags are rectangular in shape. They may not indicate "rectangular" in their description, but rather will lack "mummy" as a descriptor. These bags will typically, (unless it is cotton filled and purchased at Wal-Mart), include a cinch cord at the top of the bag to pull in the edges on a chilly night. More often than not, they will also include some sort of hood, even if that is just added length on the bottom side of the bag. Since rectangular bags don't taper to the shape of your body, you may lose some insulating properties found in snug mummy bags. Restless sleepers may sleep better in a rectangular bag, since there is more room to move.

## **Weight:**

Another category that doesn't need a lot of explanation is weight. Everyone is looking for higher quality, lighter weight, less expensive. Although it is hard to find this ultimate combination, carefully consider the issue of weight if you plan to carry your sleeping bag on your back. Contrary to logic of the past, heavier and bulkier does not mean warmer. More often than not, extremely warm and expensive bags are lightweight, highly compactable and designed to hold up in extreme conditions. Do not make weight a major consideration if you do not plan on carrying your sleeping bag in a backpack, because lightweight fabrics and fillings are usually accompanied with a heavyweight price tag.

## **Size:**

In the history of sleeping bags, size is a fairly new category. Today, you can choose between short, regular and long, as well as wide and women's specific. Short sleeping bags typically fit heights up to 5'10", regular bags fit heights up to 6'0" and long bags fit heights up to 6'6". Size is important, not just for the obvious problem of being too tall to fit in a bag, but also the problem of being too short for a bag. Too much unused, dead space in a bag will detract from the insulating properties of the bag. Plus, there is no reason to carry the extra length, (weight), if you don't need it. Some of these categories may be more or less important to you when considering your bag, but being aware of all the current features of sleeping bags will help you pick the perfect bag. Although the information above covers the major categories for consideration, don't forget about the distinctive features that make each sleeping bag manufacturer and each sleeping bag unique. Fabrics, colors, stuff sacs, zippers, etc - this category of outdoor gear makes major advances every year. And, don't forget, a sleeping bag can make or break a backcountry or camping trip - so choose carefully!