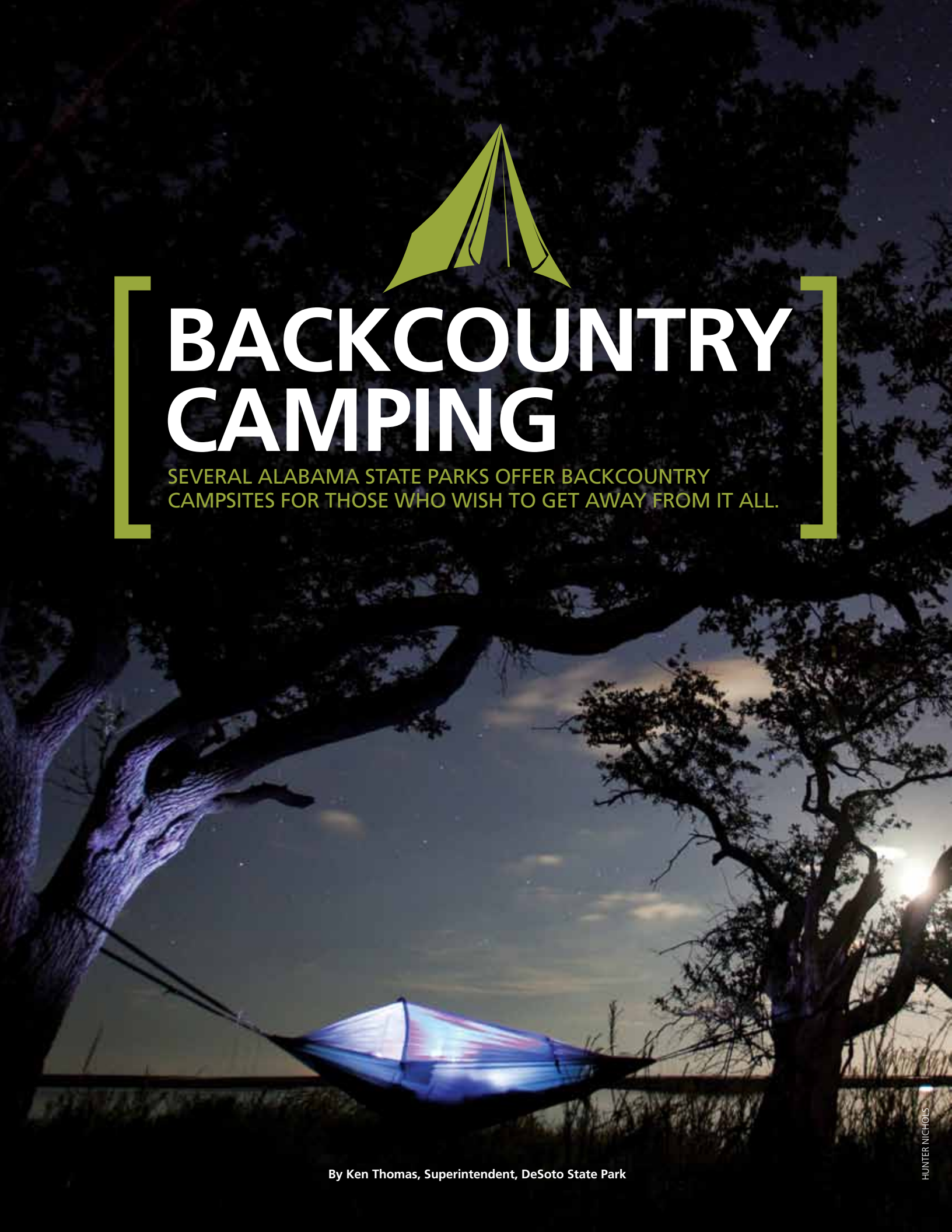




# BACKCOUNTRY CAMPING

SEVERAL ALABAMA STATE PARKS OFFER BACKCOUNTRY CAMPSITES FOR THOSE WHO WISH TO GET AWAY FROM IT ALL.



By Ken Thomas, Superintendent, DeSoto State Park

If you're looking to get away from it all, Alabama State Parks are glad to accommodate. If you are really looking to get away from it ALL, Alabama State Parks can still accommodate. Several Alabama state parks offer backcountry camping. Backcountry campsites are primitive campsites located in wild "backcountry" areas of the individual state park. Typically, campers have to hike or backpack to the campsite, which is located away from the park's more traditional camping area.

## WHAT IS BACKPACKING?

The term "backpacking" usually represents a form of low-cost, independent travel where a person carries everything needed in a backpack and travels on foot.

Technological improvements have contributed to changes in backpacking. In the "old days," backpackers didn't travel with expensive electronic equipment such as laptop computers, PDAs and digital cameras. The desire to stay "connected," combined with trends in lightweight electronics, has given rise to the "flashpacking" trend of traveling with technology. I must admit that I backpack with my iPod so I can sneak in a movie, read a book or listen to my favorite music while hiking to my destination. Other developments with space-age materials have made backpacks, tents, sleeping bags and everything else imaginable lighter, stronger and warmer.

The beauty of backpacking to many, including myself, is that your life and all your belongings are hanging off your back. Visiting places only accessible by hiking is what drives many people to experience backpacking over and over again. Some of the most beautiful places in Alabama can only be experienced through a backpacking trip. Whether alone or with a group, the backpacking experience teaches people about themselves, their ability to "rough it" and be totally independent, and how to be responsible for themselves.

In addition, a campfire is more comforting than an indoor fireplace, food cooked outside tastes better, and the air you breathe just seems better for you when you are outdoors.

## GETTING STARTED

To get started in backpacking, you will need a few essentials. The big three are a pack, a sleeping bag and a shelter. Backpacks come in all shapes, forms and prices. Getting advice from an experienced backpacker is probably the best method of choosing the right gear, and the Internet can be your friend in finding reviews and prices. I have had two backpacks in my life, and I went for comfort and price both times.

Choosing the right sleeping bag for the time of year is important. You may want a good sleeping bag for colder temperatures and a lightweight fleece bag for the warmer times of the year. Do you need a solo tent or one for multiple people? That's a decision you will have to make depending on your situation.

The ultimate rule of thumb for backpacking is the lighter the better. All the other gear can come later, like a stove, mess kit, utensils, water filter, sleeping pad, stuff bags, etc.

For those of you who have never experienced backpacking, I encourage you to read about and research the activity before you strike out on your own. I have learned much from experienced backpackers, many of whom are more than willing to share their time and experience with others. There is a tremendous amount of material and information on the Internet, not to mention the old-fashioned method of books, which can guide you on preparing for your first backpacking experience. Start out slowly by taking a few short, overnight trips. Then you will have some experience before jumping into the multi-day trips.



# BACKCOUNTRY CAMPING

## GET AWAY FROM IT ALL



Backcountry camping allows you to truly get away from it all, as Brady and Malynda McLaughlin of Birmingham, Ala., recently found out. “This was our first campout together. We were married on September 24, 2011, and were so excited to experience the beauty of one of Alabama’s state parks! We

booked the backcountry site ‘Never-Never Land’ hoping for a secluded, serene campsite that was off the beaten path. We arrived after a short trek of about a mile to the campsite. What a pristine area! The site had a three-sided, roofed shelter, a small fire ring, and a sitting area. It was perfect for us to cook and rest. We definitely recommend this campsite for others who are seeking a beautiful, quiet area to enjoy the wilderness of Desoto State Park!”

John Odell of New Orleans, La., enjoyed his trip as well. “We had a wonderful time, only wish we could have stayed longer!” he said. **PA**

FOR MORE INFORMATION  
[WWW.ALAPARK.COM](http://WWW.ALAPARK.COM)

## ALABAMA STATE PARKS OFFERING BACKCOUNTRY CAMPING

Several Alabama state parks offer access to backcountry camping. In all cases, a small fee is required and backpackers must register at least one hour before sunset.

### → CATHEDRAL CAVERNS

Located near Grant, Ala., Cathedral has one backcountry campsite located off the Green Trail atop Pisgah Mountain. Using this site requires a ¾-mile, strenuous, uphill hike to reach the campsite. This site is limited to a maximum of six people and two tents. Fires are allowed in designated fire pits only.

### → DESOTO

DeSoto State Park, located near Fort Payne, Ala., recently added two backcountry campsites. One is located near the historic site of the Civilian Conservation Corps rock quarry, and the other is located along the hiking/biking trail in an area nicknamed “Never-Never Land.” This backcountry campsite was built on property obtained through the Forever Wild Program in 2005. A cooperative partnership between Alabama State Parks, the National Park Service and NASA provided funds to construct a shelter at the Never-Never Land backcountry campsite. Sites are limited to six people and two tents. Fires are allowed in designated fire pits only.

### → OAK MOUNTAIN

Oak Mountain is Alabama’s largest state park and is located just south of Birmingham near Pelham, Ala. Three sites are currently available for backpacking parties of no more than eight people. Backpackers can travel multiple routes to reach their reserved backcountry campsite. There are many nearby historical and natural features to explore while in the backcountry on Double Oak Mountain. Fires are prohibited and butane or propane stoves are encouraged for cooking.

# 10 Backpacking Essentials



- 1. Navigation**  
*(map, compass, GPS)*
- 2. Sun protection**  
*(sunglasses and sunscreen)*
- 3. Insulation**  
*(extra clothing)*
- 4. Illumination**  
*(headlamp/flashlight)*
- 5. First aid supplies**
- 6. Fire**  
*(waterproof matches/lighter/candles)*
- 7. Repair kit and tools**
- 8. Nutrition**  
*(extra food)*
- 9. Hydration**  
*(extra water)*
- 10. Emergency shelter**