



Wilderness Travel Course



Bear Canisters

Increasingly, the counter balance method is not an accepted form of food and scented item storage in bear country. Many of the most popular backcountry areas now require the use of bear canisters for food and scented item storage.

The use of bear canisters is a more effective method of item storage and has the added benefit of keeping other unwanted intruders such as birds, marmots and squirrels from getting to your goodies. In wilderness areas, visitors are required to store all food, trash and scented items in a manner that does not allow bears or other wild animals to access it. Many areas now require Bear Canisters. Even when they're not required, they're highly recommended.

Many different brands and models of bear canisters exist, but they all share certain characteristics in common. Mainly, that when secured properly, bears are generally unable to get to the contents inside the canister. Bears can smell them. Bears can bat them around, bears can attempt to pry off the lids, but in most cases, they can't get to what's inside.

What goes in a Bear Canister?

Simply put, anything that has a scent, goes into the canister. Food, toiletries, trash, first aid supplies, gels, creams, candies, cleaning supplies, even scented dental floss all need to be stored in the canister when not in use, on your back or in your pocket. Everything mentioned above goes into the canister at night.

Using a Bear Canister:

Careful planning and preparation is required to successfully get everything required into a bear canister. Consider the following guidelines.

- Choose food and scented items that are compact and that won't squish.
- Repackage and pre-measure meals
- Choose non-bulky or flat items such as tortillas or pita bread instead of bread or bagels
- Choose small packaged toiletries, cleaning supplies, or place them in small, refillable containers. Only take as much as you'll need and share items such as toothpaste.
- Try to pack canister strategically with the last day's meals and seldom used products at the bottom and the most often used items on top.
- Take advantage of every square inch of space. It is common to have to force or squish items into the canister in order to make everything fit
- Make sure **everything** fits in the canister before leaving home. If it does not, either eliminate items, or consider renting or purchasing additional bear canisters. Make sure everyone in your group is also able to get everything into a canister.
- Carry the first day's meals outside the canister. Make sure to leave room for the trash in the canister



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During the day:

Scented items in your pack or pockets while hiking during the day is fine. Items out of the canister should be within arm's reach at all times. If you leave your pack for any length of time, all scented items need to be in the canister. If you take items out for use, keep them within arm's reach, or put them back in the canister.



The canister at night:

- Place all scented items in the canister. Make sure the canister is closed and 'locked'
- Place the canister at least 50 feet from your sleeping area
- Place it on the ground in the open, not where it can get lodged or wedged by rocks or trees which can provide the bear extra leverage
- Bears may "bat" the canister around, so place it where it won't roll into a lake or stream, roll down a hill, or roll into your tent.
- Placing the canister downwind from your tent is preferred, but not absolutely necessary in areas with only black bears¹.



¹ This handout pertains to habitat with black bears only. Food storage in grizzly or brown bear habitat differs and is outside the scope of this article.