

The Care and Feeding of Your Bear Canister

Or

Care for Your Canister and You'll Eat Better Than the Bears

by Tom Reynolds

Using a Canister

Most weekend hikers rarely get more than 8-10 pounds of food, 6-8 days supply in a canister. However, it is possible to carry over 18 pounds of food, a 12-14 day supply totally within the canister. From Kennedy Meadows the Kearsarge Pass trailhead (Onion Valley) is 140 miles ahead while the Vermillion Valley Resort (Lake Edison from Mono Creek) is about 230 miles. Cramming 18 pounds of food into a canister may, at first, seem impossible. However, following these instructions and a little planning and patience will accomplish the task.

Volume

Volume must be considered as well as weight. For example 1 ounce of regular rice makes 3 cooked cups while 1 ounce of minute rice makes 2 cups. In terms of weight they are equal because of the additional fuel required to cook regular rice. However, in terms of volume the regular rice is better.

Food Choices

Choose foods with a high weight/volume ratio:

- I prefer regular rice and cous-cous as carbohydrates over noodles, spaghetti and other pasta. They have a much higher weight/volume.
- I also prefer tortillas over bread. They have a much higher weight/volume.
- Pack foods that waste a minimum amount of space in the canister. One size tortilla fits perfectly. The other sizes waste space.
- Pack foods that are compressible, like powders as opposed to elbow macaroni.
- Choose foods with a minimum of water [Obviously, this doesn't apply in the San Felipe Hills.]
- For your chocolate fix choose baking a chocolate cake to a Hershey's bar.
- Used powdered refried beans, chili and/or black beans.
- Use dried mix powders for sauce and/or seasoning.
- Carry dried fruit and/or Jerky.
- Choose foods with a high calorie content.
- I prefer fat like peanut butter to sugar, protein or carbohydrate. It is double the calorie/gram.
- I prefer nuts as snacks to candy (sugar).
- Pack simple foods that can be combined into many different meals. My favorite is tortillas/rice and several bean powders. I could write a chapter on the number of meals that could be made with these staples.

- Pack in bulk, not by meal. Depending on a lot of things your appetite will vary. Cook each day to your appetite

Cooking Style

- Learn to bake in a BakePacker [4 oz.] or possibly an Outback Oven [I have not used one].
- This is the #1 volume saving tool I have found. You can turn low volume, lightweight powder into high volume, high weight foods simply and easily.
- Get a stove that simmers. For BakePacking or cooking rice-simmer for 20 minutes-you need control. I personally tossed my MSR Flame-thrower years ago [I know this is heresy] in favor of a simple iso-butane stove. For a hike on the JMT (200 miles) the total weight of stove and fuel will be lighter. On a thru hike, where fuel resupply is a problem, an iso-butane stove may not be practical. Regardless of the stove you carry, make sure that you leave Kennedy Meadows with enough alcohol or other fuel to successfully cook foods that take longer to cook but require less volume to store.
- Carefully measure all food.
- Figure out exactly how many breakfasts, lunches and dinners you will need.

Opening Your Bear Canister

- Do not open the bear canister until you need to.
- Your canister should be closed (lid on) unless you are in arms' reach of it.
- Your first day's food doesn't need to be in the canister. You are going to eat it before the bear comes [night]. If there is a bear box your first day you can carry 2 days food outside the canister. Once you open a properly packed canister you will NEVER get all that stuff back in. You need a BEFORE bear canister [is opened] salt supply and an AFTER canister [is opened] salt supply and on and on--get it?

RePacking Food

- Repack food so that all air can be eliminated.
- Repack food so that the package is flexible and will squeeze into any available space.
- Pack powders in sandwich size baggies --not ziplock. Pack about 1/2 full then carefully squeeze all air out. Twist the top several times to make a tight tail and a body with NO air. Put the tie-tie at the top of the twist, then untwist the tail and flatten out the bag. A relatively flat bag will waste almost no space while a tight round bundle will waste lots of space.
- Waste NO space. Peanut butter in a plastic jar [you know, good old Skippy, not that gourmet kind that rots] is a staple. However, there is lots of space on top, even in a new jar. Fill it full.
- Puncture air holes in tortillas wrappers and the like. This way you can force air out of the package when you compress.
- Store some stuff loosely. In small nooks and crannies toss some loose rice or peanuts.

- Once you open the canister and take some food out, they will pool and you can easily them for later use

Packing the Canister

You now have two piles. You have a pile of before canister food that you have in a stuff sack and a basket of carefully repackaged food that goes into the canister. How much can you get in?

Flat stuff, like tortillas, go in first followed by a layer of powder. You smash and knead around these bags and push down with your fingers. Use a glass jar to further press down and compress the powder. You will be amazed how much more they compress.

Next irregular, uncompressible items like a peanut butter jar. Press more powder bag down around the irregular items, smashing and kneading till all space is used. If necessary, fill nooks and crannies with loose rice or nuts. Compress further with the glass jar. Continue this process -- layer by layer till the top.

At the top, no more room. Get a ram - a full glass jar - and lean on it. I mean ALL your weight - I weigh 250 pounds. When you think you are done you still have another inch. Then force the top on.

OK, If the canister weighs 20 pounds you have 17-18 pounds of food in there. If it weighs less than 18 pounds, start over. No kidding, I have repacked many canister. Typically, the second time I get 1-2 more pounds in.

Canister Do's and Don'ts

Don't

- Do not put a plastic liner inside! It just wastes space, makes packing hard and costs money. The bear can smell right thru the plastic -- trust me. Besides you want the bear to spend his time on the canister and not the packet of M&M's you inadvertently left in your shirt pocket.
- Do not hang your canister. The only known way a canister fails is to be dropped from a great height.
- Do not put a strap around the canister to tie it to something so it won't roll off -- you just are giving the bear a handle to carry it off!

Do

- Toss it 25 yards away from camp in a shallow depression so it can't roll away, down a hill or into the stream. If this is not possible block all routes of rolling with logs branches. Bushes are great. Nothing rolls in them. Toss it in the briar patch.

- Paint part of it pink or “day glow” orange. Reflective tape also works well and is wilderness friendly. This allows you to find the canister after the bear moves it.
- Keep it closed and locked ALL the time. (Except when you want to eat something!)