

DOG PACKS

By Oliver Cameron
with Ole Wik

In an emergency, you can make a dog pack out of a small gunny sack. You sew up one end, fold it halfway, and cut a slot on the side of it. You then have a rough bag that fits over the dog.

You can improvise a strap to hold it ahead. Dogs are pretty patient, and they'll put up with quite a bit, but I don't like to use simple rope for any kind of harness. Only for a short time.

Instead, you should have a lead rope on a pack dog. Otherwise, it might go romping off after a rabbit or a caribou, and then you can lose the load, or even the whole pack.

You start with a light load. The dogs are using a different set of muscles than what they use for anything else.

My dog weighed around 65 pounds, and could carry five gallons of water from the lake—around 40 pounds. But I never had him carry anything that heavy for any distance. Unless dog is broken into carrying, I'd never load on more than about 30 pounds if we were going quite a ways.



Oliver carrying a load of hay, with some help from his dogs.
Image by ? via Heidi Dammann

Longest trip I ever made was maybe five or six miles. That time we were hauling meat, which is heavy and solid. It was in plastic sacks. I also carried a load. I usually only have one or two dogs. At that time I had only one.

When you load a dog pack, most of the weight has to be forward, because a dog can't carry much on its hind legs. If you load him too far back, he'll sit down, and it will be hard for him to get up.

You also want to balance weight from one side to the other. One way to do that is to tie a rope around the handle of a single bit axe and use it as a simple scale to check the weights of both sacks.

The shape of the load also makes a big difference. If both sides weigh the same but one side is bulky and sticks out a lot while the other side is more compact and lies close to the dog, the side that bulges won't ride the same way. The centers of gravity of the two sides will be different, and the bulky side will sag.

After you start out, you will soon see which way the pack wants to work. You can shift materials around, or add some weight (like a stick of wood) to the lighter side. I usually have some small items that can be transferred from one side to the other.

A Duluth packsack made for a man to carry is made roughly the same way as I will explain for my dog pack, except that I have one on each side of the dog.



Duluth packsack. Image source:

<http://warymeyers.blogspot.com/2011/06/1882-camille-poirier-duluth-pack-sack.html>

I usually start by draping a long piece of material across the dog's back, from the front legs to the middle of his back. It comes down on each side. The ends will fold back up on each side to make the pockets.

The bag has an area of 4-5" between the openings of the bags. The lower end of the bag should be down just slightly below the dog's stomach, so that he can lie down and get the load off his back a little bit if we stop to rest.

I sew a flap over the opening of the bag at the top. I make it fairly long so that if I have some bulky stuff in the pack, I can cover it over.



Oliver's adaptation of Duluth packsack for use on his dog, Pack.
Image: Unknown, via Heidi Dammann, via Oliver



Close-up of dog pack



Another dog pack, top view. Images: Heidi Dammann



I put three loops on the top and three fairly low on the bag. A string ties them together. If I don't want to use them, I just tuck them inside the bag and they're out of the way.

I usually attach those loops up about where the flap is fastened near the spine. That way I can use them either to tie the flaps down, or I can put something light on top of the dog—for example, a bulky roll of foam pads—and tie it on from one loop to the other.

It's good to have those loops up fairly high. When the bags are loaded, they tend to sag down a little bit, and you want to be able to pull them up a little so they don't hang down too low.

The lower loops attach about halfway down the side of the bag. One loop is centered, and the others are not all the way to the back and the front. It's just a flat bag, and there has to be room for it to bulge out.

Sometimes I take a flat bag like that and lay it down so that there's a corner sticking ahead. Then back from the corner I sew a cloth so that it makes in a boxed-in corner. Lay it down flat now so that seam along the side is folded back toward the middle of the fold in the material.

The front corner doesn't wear so well. I like to square those bottoms off anyway. Sometimes I cover the front corner and bottom with leather so that they don't wear.

At the top of the bag, the material is the same width as your bag that you're using for your flap. When the bag is loaded, the sides are pulled in somewhat, so the flap is still plenty wide to cover your load.

I also put loops on the side, pretty close to the edge of the flap. If the load is huge, I quite often tie the flap down to the tie loops on the sides. But if the load is small and I want to pull the side loops pretty close to the back, I tie to those on each side of the pack.^{1,2}

The flaps are tied shut with separate piece of rope, fastened to one of outer loops on top. It comes down through the loop below it on the pack, and up through the middle loop. It goes down again and back up through the last top loop. Then it goes down through the last lower loop and is pulled up tight and tied to middle of one of the other strings. Likewise for the flap on other side.

Then I take some material—a folded gunny sack or a blanket—and pad the top of the bag where it rides across the dog.

On one side of the pack, at the bottom, I fasten a strap that goes under the dog's chest, behind the front leg. I put a strap with a buckle on the other side to hold the pack on the dog. It is sewed to the bag fairly high on the side.

Then I add a strap that crosses the dog below its neck. I usually make it fairly wide, like several layers of canvas, 1-1/4 or 1-1/2". It slopes down slightly, comes around, and then comes up slightly and fastens to the bag on the other side. Since the bags will be pulling out some when they're loaded, I fasten the strap to the inside of the bags, a little ways back from the front seam—not right at the front.

There are two ways to keep a pack from sliding ahead when the dog goes downhill. Some people put an extra belly strap behind the ribs, but I don't like that. I prefer to fasten a strap on the inside of the pack, down far enough so that it comes around under the dog's tail to the other side.

This under-tail strap is made of fairly stiff material. Again it doesn't fasten to the seam on the back. You need to leave room for the bag to fill out when it's loaded.

To keep the tail strap from falling down, I fasten a short piece of webbing to the back of the pad between the packs, at the center. It attaches to a strap that goes across and over the dog's back, just ahead of the tail, from the tail strap on one side to the tail strap on the other side.

As for material, I have used a tightly woven canvas, like heavy filled No. 10 duck, and have worn them out. I prefer a coated nylon that is something like pack cloth, but quite a bit heavier. It wears longer than the duck.

I usually have a plastic bag that goes in each pack so that if the dog wades through water, the contents stay dry.

1) This essay stems from a series of telephone conversations that Ole Wik had with Oliver between December 2007 and February 2008. Highlighted text indicates remarks made by Ole.

2) I take this to mean that with a large load, you connect the loops on each individual bag. With a small load, you tie the loops of the bag on the left side bag to the loops of the bag on the right side.