

'We're going to PHILMONT!'

"Zach — did you buy the sunscreen? We need two bottles. Nick, you're bringing spices, right? Mr. Eystad, do you have the first aid gear packed? David, the repair kit?"

Jasper, our fearless crew leader, barked out the orders almost as fast as the guys huddled around the table could reply. It was our last meeting before our departure. We are GOING TO PHILMONT!

Anyone who has ever been involved with the Boy Scouts of America knows about Philmont. It is mecca for scouting — 214 square miles of rugged mountain wilderness in the Rocky Mountains of northern New Mexico. It's the largest youth camp in the world.

Philmont has been inextricably tied with scouting. Waite Phillips donated the land in 1938, and scouts from all over the world have been using it for backpacking expeditions since 1942.

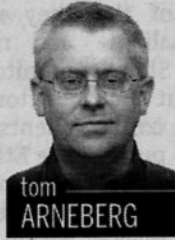
I've heard legends of Philmont since my youth, but demand is high — we have been unsuccessful getting a slot for the last six years.

In October 2008 we were once again denied for the summer of 2010. But last fall, some other crew canceled (probably to go to the National Jamboree), so here we are getting ready for our very first trip to Philmont. And we are PUMPED!

Hikers at Philmont are organized into crews of 7-12 people. We're taking a full crew from Troop 72 in Chippewa Falls, including eight lucky Scouts: Mackenzie Nutzmann, David Arneberg, Andrew Nelson, Gabe Solberg, Nick Wells, Brennan Schrader, Zach Williams and their elected leader, Jasper Arneberg.

Adults are allowed, of course, but take a back seat. Crews consider the adults "on vacation," there only to consult on safety issues or for emergencies.

Otherwise, as in all Boy Scout outings, the boys run the show.



tom
ARNEBERG

pamphlets, guidebooks and countless e-mails.

One sentence in the guidebook caught my eye: "Unless you come from a very unusual scout troop, this will probably be the first time that you or your crew members have ever carried personal and crew gear, food for several days, and several quarts of water in a pack at one time."

I guess we are a very unusual troop then! We backpack often. After tiptoeing into the sport in 2002, it's now an important part of our program, bringing us to the backwoods of Wisconsin and Minnesota at least twice a year.

Backpacking the Rockies is something else, though — especially for 12 days! The temperature extremes, altitude and climbing can do you in if you're not prepared.

Arid New Mexico can get sweltering hot in the afternoon sun. On the other hand, we'll be scaling mountain peaks as high as 12,600 feet, and camping as high as 9,200 feet, so sub-freezing temperatures are possible, even in July.

Buying a sleeping bag that is light and small but warm enough for 25 degrees is a top priority. My trusty old down bag is plenty warm, but I just can't afford the four pounds of weight. A sturdy rain suit is also mandatory (it rains almost every day there), along with good boots and pack.

The climbing and relentless hiking have made me reconsider what I bring. After eight years of throwing whatever I wanted into my pack (it weighed 58 pounds on a weekend

"Vacationers" on this trip are Rod Schrader, Mike Wells, John Eystad and yours truly.

I've been very actively preparing for this trip since October. I've read

trip in May), I had to buckle down.

I weighed every single item in my backpack, to the nearest quarter ounce, and put it all in a big spread-sheet. Then I started whittling away the things that aren't truly needed, with the help of other scout leaders across the country on a Philmont e-mail list.

Sure, I love playing harmonica around the campfire, but can I really afford three ounces for the privilege?

"Take care of the ounces, and the pounds take care of themselves," goes the old saying. I have managed to reduce my total pack weight by SIX POUNDS using the spread-sheet method!

Choosing gear is a big deal, but the most important thing to bring is a conditioned body. That's not a problem for the kids in our crew, since most of them are high school athletes. It's us old guys who have to be concerned. (I turned FIFTY this month!)

I made a goal for myself. I've always enjoyed biking, hiking, skiing, strength training and racquetball, but I had to get out of my habit of being active only two or three times a week. I now use a heart monitor, and make sure I get into my target heart zone for at least 45 minutes on any day that ends in Y.

Results: I have only missed 11 days since Dec. 1! (And yes, I have the charts to back it up.)

So I think I'm ready. I have even been practicing with the crew gear I was assigned to bring by Jasper: My 45.25-ounce digital camera.

It's a tough job to bring a camera on vacation, but someone has to do it. Now if we can just survive the 2,500-mile van trip with eight teenage boys...

Tom Arneberg of Chippewa Falls is a community columnist for the Herald. Contact him at Tom@Arneberg.com.