

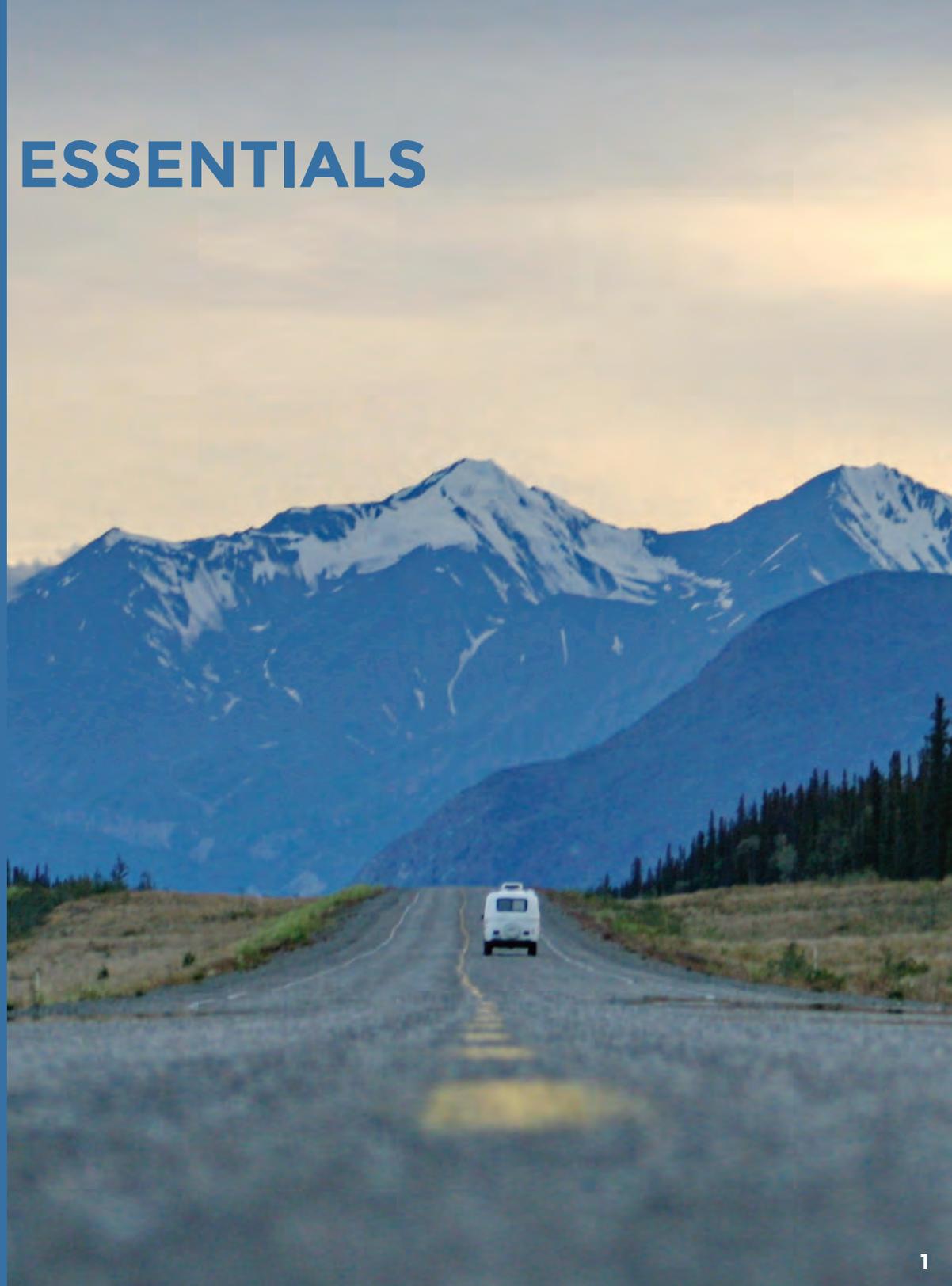
5 ESSENTIALS CAMPING GUIDE FOR YOUR FAMILY

ROGER W THOMPSON

5 CAMPING ESSENTIALS

Camping can be as simple or complex as you want to make it. Some companies will have you believe that you need an armada of gear, and preparations for a long weekend in the woods should resemble prepping for an all-out zombie apocalypse. On the other extreme are those who suggest going with no plans at all, and just living off the land. I've done both. In my experience, too much focus on gear and agenda keeps me out of the moment, as does being distracted by the effects of too little planning – terrible campsite, not enough food, too little warmth. The reason to go camping is to reconnect with something bigger, to look at the stars with wonder, and to share these enduring moments with our families and friends. So, if you're looking to get outdoors, focus first on these essentials. The rest will come.

1. **SECURE** a great campsite
2. **BRING** only what you need
3. **MAKE** memories
4. **EAT** great camp food
5. **ENJOY** a camp fire at the end of each day



A night scene of a campsite in a forest. Several tents are set up on a grassy clearing. One tent on the left is illuminated from within, showing a warm orange glow. Another tent on the right is also lit from within. In the background, a fire is burning, casting a bright orange light on the surrounding trees. The forest is dense with tall, thin trees, and the sky is dark. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and serene.

SECURING A GREAT CAMPSITE

Securing a campsite is harder than it used to be. Popularity of camping has dramatically increased in recent years and though it's great to see more people out enjoying the wild, it has also put a lot of pressure on campsites.

SECURING A GREAT CAMPSITE

Here are a few things to consider for your upcoming trip:

BOOK A CAMPSITE FAR IN ADVANCE.

- For popular campsites and the National Parks, you may need to book up to 6 months ahead of time. These campgrounds usually advertise on their websites when the advanced booking window is.
- Do your homework on campsites you are interested in and be ready to book within the first 10 minutes of the window. Seriously. It's a competition.
- When possible, I usually call the campground directly. They are always super helpful and will tell you the best way to secure a campsite.

There are still campgrounds that are more relaxed and offer sites on a first come first serve basis. The trick is doing your homework, and coming up with an appropriate plan for where you want to camp.



WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN BOOKING A CAMPSITE

- **SHADE** - Nothing wears you out faster than sitting in the sun all day, so be sure to look for a campsite with full or partial shade.
- **WATER FEATURES** - For maximum recreation and moments of serenity, look for campsites near lakes, rivers, or an ocean (swimming pools don't count...you're camping!)
- **GREAT VIEWS** (this is especially important if not camping near water). Be sure to consider nighttime views of stars too.
- **ACCESSIBILITY TO RECREATION OPTIONS** - Make a list of all the activities you and your family (or friends) want to do and make sure they are available near the campsite.
- **BATHROOMS AND SHOWERS** - Not all bathrooms are created equally. Find out if it's a pit toilet, flushing toilet, or a port-a-potty, and be sure to pack accordingly. If there's no running water you'll want cleaning wipes or something else to wash hands and body with.
- **CAMP STORE** - You always forget something. It can also make for a good afternoon outing for an ice-cream or some other treat.
- **LEARNING CENTER** - Most National Parks and larger campgrounds have centers that educate about the area's history, flora and fauna. If your campground has one be sure to allocate time for a visit.

SECURING A GREAT CAMPSITE

Where should you go?

I live in the West where camping is a year-round activity, and there are endless camping opportunities. Over the years I've found a camping rhythm to experience the best of every landscape. If you're looking for where to go, try pairing the right landscape to bring out the subtleties of any season.

SPRING



Spring is the perfect time to be in the desert. The weather is wonderful and the wildflowers are in bloom. Joshua Tree, Death Valley, Big Bend. These are the desert legends and in between are places of equal beauty, just with fewer people. At night, the dark sky will blaze with stars. Lay by a campfire and count falling stars and make your wishes for the coming year.

SUMMER



The carefree spirit of summer is perfect for water. Mountain lakes, warm weather beaches, and streams to cast a fly. In the summer, find a campground along a lake or stream, or along a southern California beach, and count time only by tides and shadows of pines.

WINTER



For some, winter snow brings a heightened sense of adventure in mountain or desert camping. I head to the coast. After a day of gathering sea glass under moody skies, there's nothing more cozy than a long night by a campfire, followed by sounds of waves and breezes blowing through sturdy trees of winter.

FALL



Fall is a time of lengthening shadows and the subtleties of change. Snow is already gathered in the high mountains and heat still holds in the valleys. So experience the enchantment of fall camped along foothills and meadows and mid-mountain aspens. Watch colors blaze and fade, then gather fallen leaves like treasures of memories.

A top-down view of camping gear. In the upper left, a pair of black binoculars with orange accents lies on a topographic map. The map shows various geographical features and labels such as 'LEES PASS (KOLB CANYON)', 'ZION WILDERNESS', 'LA VERKIN CREEK WILDERNESS (BLM)', and 'BEARTRAP CANYON WILDERNESS (BLM)'. In the lower left, an orange and white sleeping bag is partially visible, with a white label that reads 'Clayborne Outdoor Goods'. In the lower right, a silver Canon AE-1 camera with a lens is positioned on the map. The overall scene is set against a light-colored, textured background, possibly a table or a large sheet of paper.

BRINGING WHAT YOU NEED

Camping is largely about getting back to the basis – to simply enjoy being present with family, friends, and creation. But there are some basics that will help every camping trip be a success. This is the camp packing list we've created and used over the years. We adapt it based on exactly where we are going, and how long we plan to be gone, but it has served us well and has ensured we never lack the essentials. Use this as a starting point and as you gain experience add or subtract based on your camping preferences.

BRINGING WHAT YOU NEED: *Camping Supplies*

CAMP SUPPLIES

- Tent, poles, stakes
- Tarp or mat for under tent
- Tarps/ropes
- Camping chairs
- Lantern w/ fuel or batteries (bring extra)
- Head lamps/ flashlights
- Extra batteries
- Radio
- First aid kit
- Binoculars
- Ax and hammer or mallet
- Dust pan/ broom
- Outdoor rug
- Hammock/ties
- Repair kits for tents, tarps, sleeping pads
- Flashlights
- Folding table

SLEEPING

- Sleeping bags
- Sleeping pads or cots
- Sheets/sleeping blankets
- Pillows
- Extra blankets

KITCHEN

- Cooler/ice
- Stove with propane
- Windscreen for stove if it doesn't have one
- Matches or lighter
- BBQ grill rack
- French press/coffee pot
- Groundcoffee/half&half
- Large & small frying pans
- Large & small pots
- Pot holders
- Dutch oven
- Bottle opener & corkscrew
- Can opener
- Plates/bowls/cups
- Utensils
- Cooking utensils
- Spatula/spoons/knife/tongs
- Large water jug
- Tablecloth
- Trash bags
- Aluminum foil
- Paper towels
- Dish soap
- Cooking oil/spray
- Quick dry towels
- Mixing bowl
- Skewers/grill forks
- Funnel
- Cutting board
- Plastic grocery bag
- Resealable plastic bags
- Dish rags/towels
- Scrub pads
- Condiments
- Seasonings
- Salt/pepper
- Thermometer
- Roasting sticks for marshmallows and hotdogs
(Or just make some when you get there)

FIRE

- Matches/ lighter
- Tinder/Firestarter
- Firewood (or buy at campsite)
- Campfire stories to read to kids

BRINGING WHAT YOU NEED: *Personal Items*

PERSONAL ITEMS

(check for everyone)

- Sunscreen
- Water bottles
- Journal
- Cash
- Pocket knife or multi-tool
- Insect repellent
- Lotion
- Sunscreen
- Backpack or daypacks
- Whistle
- Toothbrush/toiletries
- Prescriptions/pain reliever/other meds
- Antibacterial wipes
- Sunglasses
- Towels/washcloths
- Chapstick
- Headlamps
- Shower bag
- Cosmetics
- Mirror

CLOTHING

- Extra socks and underwear
- Sleepwear
- Insulating jacket and/or vest
- Sun hat & beanie
- Shirts
- Fast drying shorts
- Cool-weather pants
- Sweatshirts
- Rainwear
- Jacket
- Swimsuits
- Gloves
- Water shoes

MISC.

- Deck of cards & games
- Paper/pens
- Solar cellphone charger
- Umbrella
- Extra toilet paper
- Camera/ clean memory cards
- Book/mags
- Maps/directions
- National park book
- Area info
- Pet supplies and food
- Two-way radios
- Star chart/night sky identifier

TOYS

(depending on location)

- Fly rods & gear
- Spin rods & gear
- Fishing license
- Stand up paddleboard
- Bikes (check tires)
- Kayak
- Life jackets
- Surfboards
- Boogie boards
- Inflatable boats
- Canoe



MAKING MEMORIES

The best memories are those made in the wild and recalled around a campfire. Depending on where you camp, there will be activities appropriate for every camper. My go to activity is fishing. I've yet to meet a kid who doesn't want to sit with their dad in a boat and catch a trout. I'd go so far to say that this is a camping rite of passage that every family should do at least once, including cleaning the trout and cooking over the campfire. Here are some other great camping activities. In fact, print this page out and have everybody in your family circle one thing they would like to do and incorporate that into your next trip.



Hiking



Rock climbing



Rafting



Mountain biking



Paddleboarding



Fishing



Sailing



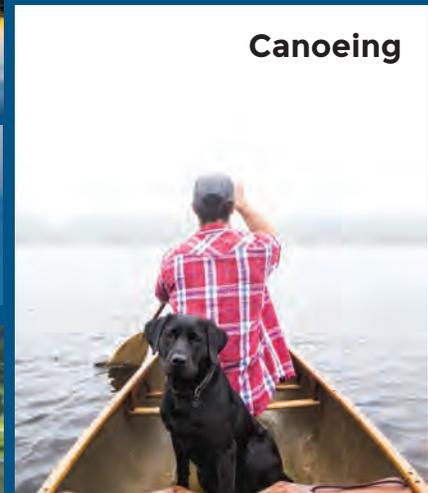
Biking



Swimming



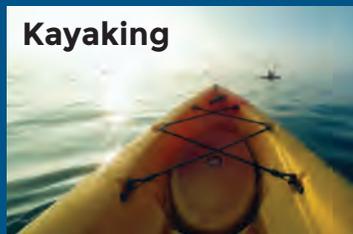
Flying a kite



Canoeing



Tide pool exploration



Kayaking



Surfing



Other camping activities:

- Carving wood
- Pine cone baseball
- Playing games on a picnic table



EATING GREAT CAMP FOOD

I like food. I like it even more when I camp. There's something about cooking and eating outdoors that makes even the most basic meal memorable. There are two things to keep in mind for keeping food in the outdoors: food needs to stay cold and it also needs to stay away from bears (or other critters). Most campsites where bears are a problem provide bear boxes and instructions on how to use them. I've actually had more trouble outside of bear country with critters like raccoons, skunks, and squirrels. If you don't have a bear box be sure to keep food in containers that require opposable thumbs to open, or keep in your car. You'd be surprised how creative these creatures get at stealing your food.

All food is going to be great when cooked outdoors, but in my opinion there are a few staples. Unless you have an allergy or food conviction, every camping trip should include eating the items on the next few pages. (Note: My version of cooking while camping is more "winging it" than following a recipe. I'm sure you can find great recipes for these items, or you can just wing it following my suggestions.)



BURGERS OVER THE CAMPFIRE

- The trick to great campfire burgers is the same as all things camping, keep it simple.
- **BEFORE TRIP:** Make patties ahead of time and keep in ice chest until ready. We will often mix into our burgers chopped onions, garlic, and favorite seasonings. Don't be intimidated to experiment. But if you have good meat, you can't go wrong with just keeping it simple. Finished patty should be about 1 inch thick. Also be sure to pack your own grate to use over the fire. Not all campgrounds will have a grate, and some that do are nasty.
- Get fire started.
- While fire is burning, season the burgers with salt, pepper, and garlic powder. While flame is settling down, prepare all the side dishes and condiments.
- When flame is settled to below the height of grate, put on hamburger patties.
- The meat should be cooked to a minimum of 165 degrees but chances are you won't have a kitchen thermometer with you. For a one-inch patty, the approximate cook time is 7-8 minutes per side. A rare burger will feel as soft to the touch as your palm when it is open and relaxed. To cook to a medium, keep it on the grill until it's as firm as your palm when your middle finger and thumb are touching. For a well-done burger, keep on the grill until it feels as firm as a fully flexed palm.
- Assemble as desired and serve.

GRILLED TROUT



- Get fire started.
- Make sure trout is cleaned and pat dry.
- Place each trout in its own foil. Make sure foil is large enough to loosely wrap around fish.
- Squeeze lemon inside and out of fish. Then sprinkle salt, pepper, and garlic powder inside & outside.
- Tent the foil around fish with edges tightly sealed. (But don't tightly wrap fish...make sure there is some room. You just don't want the juices to escape.)
- Place on grate above fire and grill 5-7 minutes per side. When it is finished it should be able to flake easily.
- To eat, lightly scrape meat off the bone with a fork. Be careful, there will be lots of bones in the fish.

BREAKFAST BURRITOS

- Boil water. I use a JetBoil to get it done fast.
- Use boiled water to make coffee (my preferred camp coffee is made in a stainless steel French Press...I've broken too many glass ones).
- Have several drinks of coffee. Now start breakfast.
- If you plan to cook breakfast over an open fire, which is always a great idea, get fire started. Otherwise, set up your camp stove.
- Remove bacon and place in large skillet.
- Cook to desired crispness.
- Set bacon aside and eat a piece with your coffee because you're camping.
- Remove excess bacon grease and put finely diced potatoes or hash browns into bacon skillet. (Make it easy on yourself and bring ready to cook, frozen hash brown mix). Season with salt and pepper.
- Cook potatoes to desired crispness and while they are cooking chop up the bacon.
- When potatoes are about half way done cooking, add a second skillet to the fire (or stove) and put in scrambled eggs, 2 eggs per serving. To make things easier, we scramble the eggs into a container at home and only bring the pre-scrambled eggs.
- Continue to scramble the eggs while cooking and season with salt and pepper.
- When eggs are nearly complete, add the chopped bacon and stir until eggs are complete.
- Once the potatoes and eggs with bacon are complete, heat up your tortillas over the fire or stove, and set up an area for extra fixings of grated cheese, salsa, and sliced avocados (and anything else you might like).
- Assemble burritos and serve.
- Have a second cup of coffee if desired.

S'MORES



- Make one of the activities during the day gathering long twigs and collecting them near the campfire.
- While dinner is cooking, have any older kids or dads (who act like kids) carve the end of the sticks into skewers. Burn ends in the fire and when cooled, wipe clean.
- Because it's terrible when the chocolate isn't fully melted, make a warming area near the fire by either cleaning off a flat section of rock or placing a cleaned block of wood near the fire (or cover either with tin foil).
- While toasting the marshmallow, place half a graham cracker on the rock or block with a chocolate square on the cracker.
- Toast marshmallow to desired toastyness and then place on warmed graham cracker and chocolate. Add the top half of graham cracker and enjoy!
- Though it's tough to beat the classic combo of milk chocolate, marshmallow, and graham cracker, experiment with new flavors by substituting the chocolate with other chocolate based candies (like reeses peanut butter cups, dark chocolate, peppermint patties, or any other of your favorites).

A serene landscape photograph capturing a sunset over a calm lake. The sky is a mix of deep blues and vibrant oranges, with the sun's glow reflecting on the water's surface. In the foreground, three people are gathered on the shore; two are sitting together on the left, and one is crouching in the center, possibly preparing a campfire. To the right, a white tent is pitched near a large, dark tree trunk. The overall mood is peaceful and inviting, typical of a wilderness camping scene.

ENJOYING A CAMPFIRE

HOW TO START A CAMPFIRE

There are lots of ways to start a fire ranging from rubbing sticks to gasoline and a match. Unless you are training to be a wilderness survival expert, give yourself a break and just use the simple, tried and true Teepee method. To begin, there are three types of fuel you need:

- 1. Tinder.** Every good fire starts with good tinder. Tinder can be anything that is dry and burns easily. Dried grasses, bark and leaves can work. So does paper and cardboard.
- 2. Kindling.** Tinder burns fast so you need something to keep your flame going long enough for the fuel wood to catch fire. This is where kindling comes in. Kindling is typically formed of small branches and twigs about the width of a pencil. It needs to be dry and you need a good supply. You can tell if it's dry enough if it snaps easily. If it bends instead of snapping, it's not dry enough.
- 3. Fuel wood.** This is what keeps the fire burning. Most campgrounds will sell on site split logs that have been felled or gathered from the area. If you're not sure, bring some of your own. Not all areas will have a good supply of fuel wood laying around.

Gather twice as much of every type of fuel as you think you'll need and stack near the campfire. Now it's time to make the Teepee.

1. Pile the tinder in the middle of the campfire site. Be sure to use the designated campfire ring.
2. Above the tinder, form a teepee with some kindling. Leave enough space between the twigs to allow good airflow.
3. Begin with smaller kindling pieces and continue adding larger pieces until the outer layer is made up of the pencil sized twigs.
4. Create a larger teepee structure around the kindling teepee with the fuel wood.
5. Light a match under the tinder and gently blow to get the tinder burning good. The teepee structure will direct the fire upward so it will first catch the kindling and then the fuel wood.
6. Eventually the teepee structure will fall and at that point you can just keep adding fuel logs to the fire.

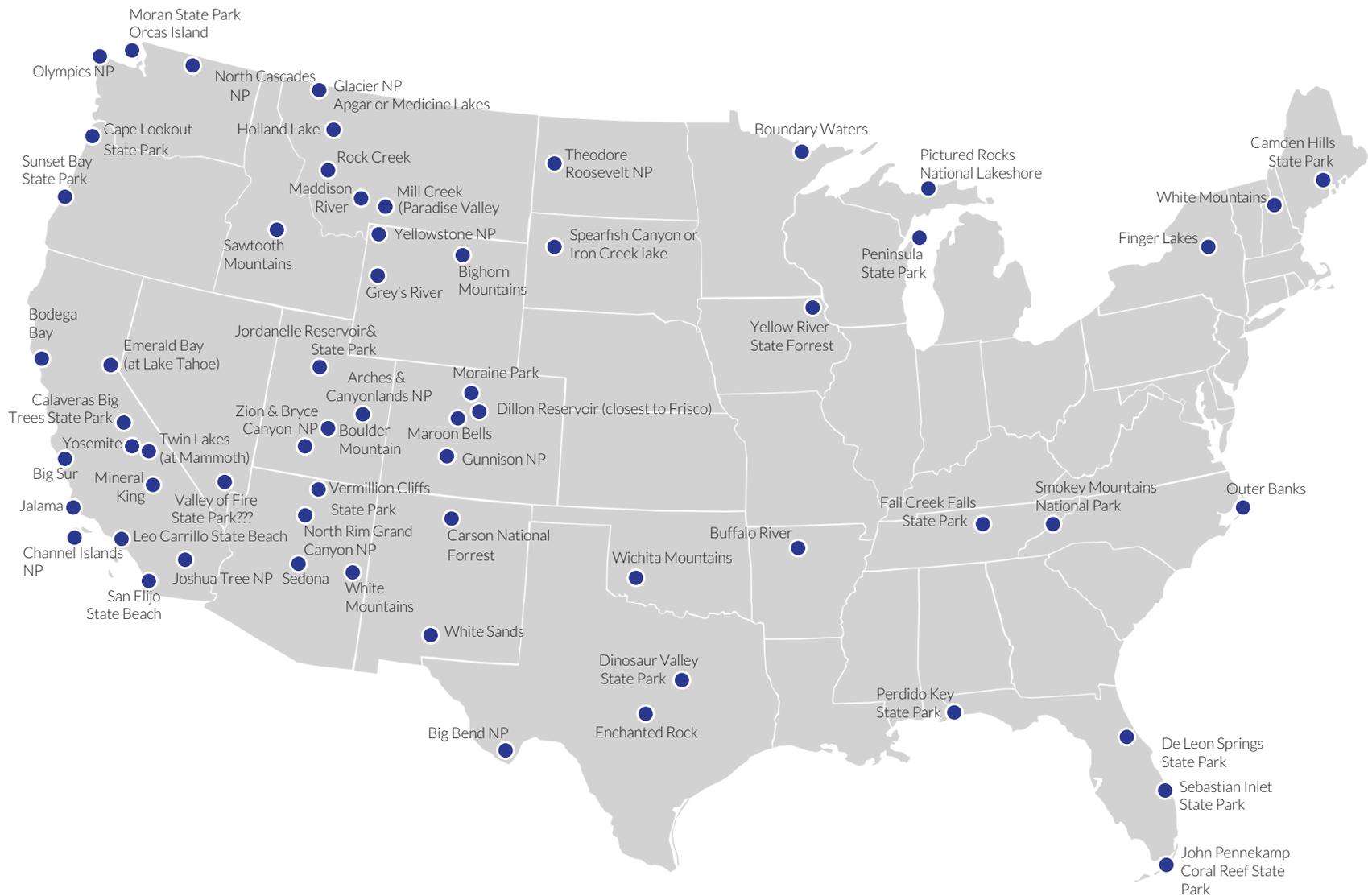
TELL A CAMPFIRE STORY

A photograph of a group of people sitting around a campfire at night. The fire is the central focus, glowing brightly with orange and yellow flames. The people are silhouetted against the dark background, with some light reflecting off their hair and clothing. The scene is intimate and cozy.

Throughout all of history the campfire has been a place for story telling. Continue the tradition by gathering your kids around the fire and after s'mores telling a tall tale. The best campfire stories are ones that are made up on the spot using the surrounding area as a setting. Use your imagination and get the kids involved. If you're not comfortable making up a story on the spot (not everybody is), then be sure to have another story ready to go. I've got a fun story about a squirrel attack that your kids will love. (Note: it's rated PG for a semi-crude reference to the male anatomy as "acorns"). You get it automatically after buying my latest book, ***We Stood Upon Stars***.

AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL

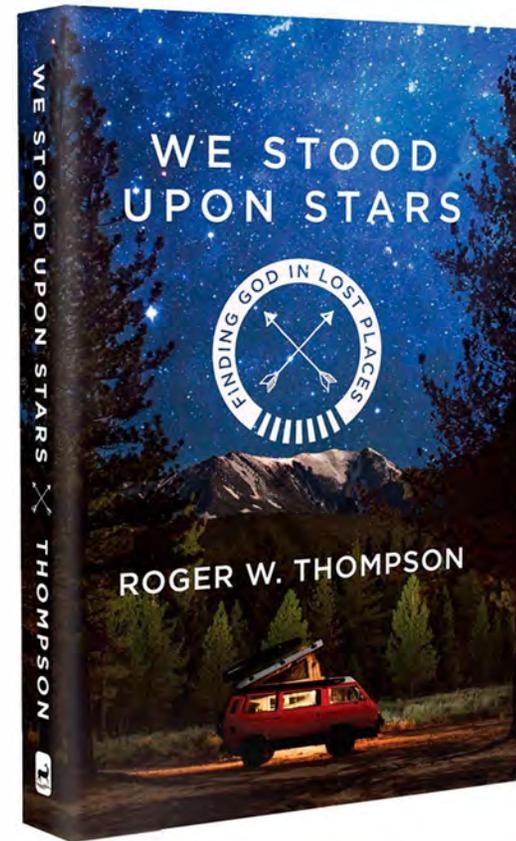
When people ask me where they should go camping, here are a few places I recommend. I've compiled these from a collection of my own camping adventures and those of some of my closest friends. These have been selected through a combination of beauty, accessibility, and adventure opportunities. This list is in no way exhaustive, but is a good place to get started. Also, because I live out west the map is heavily loaded for my area of the world. As you get more comfortable try venturing off to find your own secret spots. My very favorites will never show up on any map.



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