



HILLEBERG
THE TENTMAKER

EVEN EXPERTS HAVE TO START SOMEWHERE: JOHN BARKLOW'S BACKCOUNTRY TRIALS

JENNA NASH HILLEBERG WRITER

Crouched inside his tent, John Barklow glanced over at his climbing partner whose attempts to light their stove were failing repeatedly. A fast-moving storm had halted the pair on the shoulder of Mount Rainier on what both believed was going to be a straightforward climb to the summit. Their tent was doing nothing to protect them from the wind, snow, and ice assaulting them from all sides. All they could do was endure the cold and discomfort, bemoaning their self-inflicted lack of proper gear.

As we know him today, John is an extremely experienced hunter, survival expert, and outdoor educator who lends his knowledge to thousands through his social media platforms. He brings his military training together with his hunting skills and other backcountry knowledge to form one very well-rounded outlook. However, there was a time in his life when he lacked experience and wasn't immune to making poor decisions. "I

got away with a lot of stuff, looking back. It informed future trips, but I realized that I was getting away with stuff I probably shouldn't have, and if I didn't address it in a more professional manner, so to speak, it was going to catch up to me," John said.

On Rainier, he and his partner got lucky. "When [the storm] broke, we went up, tagged the summit, and got the hell off there," he continued, "We realized that we had pushed the boundaries of light weight beyond the safety factor. And part of it was lack of experience, part of it was ignorance, part of it was utilizing a piece of gear that was going to be life-critical potentially, and not testing it beforehand." The tent they chose at the time, while lightweight, was not fit to handle the storm conditions they encountered.

John describes this as a seminal moment in his career – an experience that forever altered

the way he thought about gear and the weight he's willing to carry in the backcountry. While he had this epiphany on a mountaineering trip, the principle also applied to hunting trips, and all his other outdoor endeavors, too. "The phrase I like to use is, 'cut weight, not capability,'" he said. "Because people will cut weight at the expense of safety, or capability, and that's not where to cut weight. Where you cut weight is where it's not going to threaten your life. So, cut your toothbrush in half, who cares? Don't bring a toothbrush at all." Even casual trips have the potential to quickly turn into dangerous situations, and things can go very wrong very quickly if you're not prepared for the worst-case scenario. Simply put, John refuses to lose out on security just for the sake of keeping his pack a few pounds lighter.

Weather in the backcountry can, and often does, change unexpectedly. Although John has had close calls and gotten away with traveling light, over time, he's realized that

weight, but for the immense strength it offers in any conditions. For sheep hunts with rocky terrain, its fully freestanding construction makes pitching easy, and year-round, no matter what he's doing, he trusts this tent completely. When he's alone in high country on any trip, he can count on the Soulo to brush off every kind of wind, rain, or snow the mountains throw at him.

For multi-day, fly-in hunts with a partner, John uses the Nammatj GT as a solid basecamp. It is, he says, ideal for longer, more gear-intensive trips since its extended GT vestibule provides more storage space.

It will easily handle the worst weather the backcountry can deal and provides roomy comfort no matter what's happening outside the tent. When he's backcountry skiing

during the wintertime, he appreciates the Nammatj GT's quick pitch and the overall spaciousness it provides.

John was first introduced to Hilleberg tents during his time in the military, but he has since used them on a wide variety of different trips. His depth of experience, from being part of special forces to taking countless hunting trips, inform his comprehensive understanding of the outdoors. While he shares as much of his hard-earned knowledge as he can, he also realizes talking can only do so much. "I can lessen the steepness of the learning curve, but at the end of the day, even though you can start maybe a little bit higher on the mountain, you still have to climb the mountain for yourself," he said. It's important to get out there and figure out for yourself what works for you.



bringing gear that he can't completely count on simply isn't worth the risk. "I can go use anything and get away with it for a night, especially if it's relatively close to the road. It's a totally different story when you are your own rescue. The stuff you choose really has consequences if you don't choose wisely," he emphasized. Since he's unwilling to make compromises on his safety, John has chosen Hilleberg tents for his journeys – hunts, climbs, and everything in between – for the last three decades.

"The reality is not all tents are created equal. Not all tents are going to perform the same," he said. With a Hilleberg tent, he knows no safety is sacrificed. Hilleberg's goal is not to make the lightest tents, but rather to make the strongest tents at a light weight. "I don't care what I'm doing, a Hilleberg tent would work for anything. Be it a mountaineering trip, to an Everest basecamp, or a backcountry elk hunt in September," John said. "I just know that they're built right. I know they're tested. I've certainly experienced their performance," he remarked.

He usually opts for Hilleberg's all-season models. The Soulo, a single-person dome tent, is one of his favorites, not only for its light



PHOTOS BY JOHN BARKLOW



For John, the most impactful learning moments have come from the challenges he's faced. They taught him the importance of having reliable gear and also how to use, test, and become familiar with it before going into the backcountry. "While you're doing that, of course, you may find yourself spending some cold nights out or some wet nights out. But then you understand what works or the certain limitations of things," he reflected. However, that doesn't mean you should be reckless. It takes time to learn what's going to work for you, but

using the guidance of others and quality gear, you won't have to worry about your safety. The process is a lot more enjoyable this way. "That's the fun part to me. Go out, try it, test, train, do, learn, come back, modify, reset, go back and do it again," John said.

One of his biggest pieces of advice to hunters is to get outside as much as possible. The hunting season might be short, but the outdoors is there year-round, and taking advantage every chance to test

your gear and skills will only make you a better hunter in the long run. "Backpack to that lake that's in your background, go up there, have an adventure. Try your stuff out – fish, try your food out, see if your boots fit. You can do that any time of year," he said. "That all of a sudden takes an activity and starts to broaden it and make it more of a lifestyle." Everyone's outdoor trajectory is going to look different. Some might need to experience hard knocks themselves before they reevaluate their gear. Some might be more receptive to the advice of others. And John encourages all of that.

"Obviously, I've got decades of that experience now, and yeah, I believe I'm a good source of information, and yeah, I believe you can trust what I'm telling you, but at the end of the day, I don't want you to take what I'm saying to you at face value. I want you to go and try it for yourself," he said. He had just one reminder, "Shelter is your number one survival priority. If you don't choose wisely and it fails, or you don't have it, or you can't set it up, you could be in a world of hurt, just like me and my buddy on Rainier." **EF**

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I choose Hilleberg tents.

John Barklow

Dedicated bow hunter, survival expert, and gear aficionado with over 20 years of military experience. Has taught thousands how to thrive in uncompromising wilderness situations. Sleeps outside 80 nights a year, including at least 30 nights during the wintertime. Has endured vicious blizzards from Alaska to Montana. Wants to live with the mountains on his terms, not Mother Nature's. Trusts his life to Hilleberg tents, including the Soulo.



I'VE TRUSTED HILLEBERG TENTS FOR THREE DECADES while roaming the remote backcountry. Shelter is the number one survival priority, so it's crucial to choose wisely. Hunting mostly solo, I've come to appreciate the versatility and uncompromising performance of the Soulo. It has plenty of space and storage room so I can easily ride out any storm, which positions me to take advantage of the hunting opportunities that often follow.

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