



Types of Backpacks

Many of us here at EPTI are passionate backpackers and have spent weeks living out of our packs. There are some basics to backpacking that would serve you well before you go purchase a pack or two. The first thing to understand is there are two fundamental pack types; a 'panel loading' and a 'top loading' type of pack. The difference being the panel loading pack when laid flat opens up to expose all of your contents inside, similar to a suitcase. This makes it easier to sort through various supplies and keep organized. A top loading pack has access from the top when the pack is sitting upright and sometimes side access through zippers – this is a bit more of a challenge to see all of your contents.



The second difference to consider is tactical, or military, style packs vs. recreational or backpacking style packs.

Tactical packs are typically panel loading packs designed to store and organize our kits. Some have a modular system to add additional storage attachments, the most universal of which being the [Molle System](#). An advantage of this style pack is its ability to keep your gear organized and accessible. The disadvantage of these packs are they have a militaristic appearance and may draw attention to you. They often do not have the comfort of features of recreational packs and they are not as comfortable for long term use. [The 5.11 Tactical Rush series packs](#) are a quality example of these types of packs.

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511 Tactical Rush 72 backpack with Molle System
Photo courtesy of 511 Tactical

Recreational packs are designed for comfort. They often come in various sizes, or are adjustable, to fit various torso lengths, have air flow mesh against your back, padded hip belts to carry the weight on your hips. They are by far the preferred choice of a long hike for the average person. The disadvantage being that many of these are top loading packs which makes it more difficult to access your gear and keep things organized.

In summary, we recommend you do your research and envision how you will be using your pack and what features seem important to you, such as does it have a space for a hydration bladder or a laptop. The best of both worlds may be a panel loading, recreational style backpack – which are not that common but do exist. A very popular version being the [Kelty Redwing](#) which now has a ‘tactical’ version which just may be the best of both worlds at a reasonable price.



Kelty Redwing Tactical 50
Photo courtesy of Kelty

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The following videos by REI provide some additional information for choosing your pack and how to properly pack it.

- [How to size and fit a backpack](#)
- [How to pack a backpack](#)

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