

**EDITORS' CHOICE AWARDS** WIN THE GEAR IN THIS ISSUE!

# BACKPACKER

P. 168

THE OUTDOORS AT YOUR DOORSTEP

## Gear Guide

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**CUT WEIGHT,  
NOT COMFORT**  
28 ULTRALIGHT PICKS

[best photo pack]

**ClikElite Nature 35**

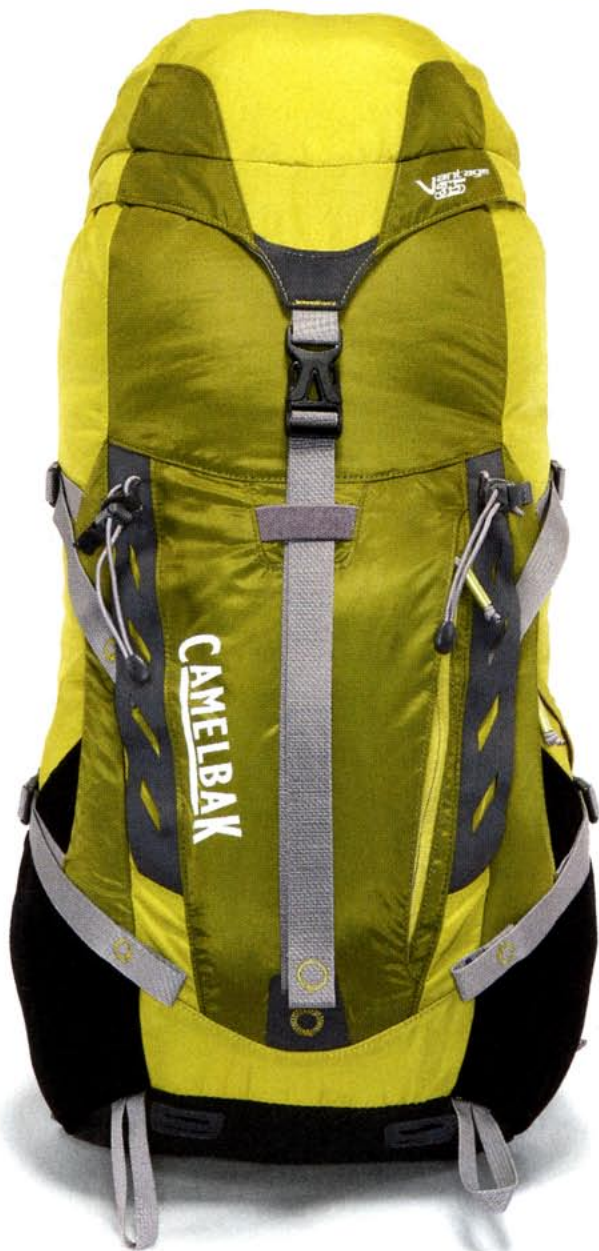
Camera packs, with all of their padded compartments and zippered slots, do one thing really well: store photo gear. But they rarely carry comfortably (bowling ball with straps, anyone?) or have space for food, layers, and water. The Nature 35 solves both problems with a stable yoke, flexible but supportive backpanel, and a back-hugging fit that keeps weight close to your spine. That means excellent weight transfer with loads up to 35 pounds, and top-notch stability for fastpacking, scrambling, skiing, and even canyoneering. And capacity? It's big enough for a day's worth of supplies in the hydration-compatible compartment up high. Photo gear goes in the well-organized, 540-cubic-inch camera compartment down low. "I packed a puffy jacket, gloves, bars, and two liters of water as well as my Nikon, three lenses, and a flash—and nothing slopped around or threw me off balance," one tester wrote after shooting on Switzerland's Aletsch Glacier. For photography on the go, ClikElite offers optional chest and holster pouches (\$20 to \$90) that attach via quick-release buckles. Torso length adjusts from 15 to 20-plus inches, with a suspension that's easily best-in-class. Bonus points: It comes with a fold-out rain cover. Demerits: weight and price. **\$235; 2,100 cu. in.; 5 lbs. 8 oz.**



[best hydration pack]

**CamelBak Vantage 35/Vista 32**

After two weeks of dayhikes and scrambles in Alaska and Utah, our Southwest-based tester did not want to part with this pack. It combines the standard-setting 100-ounce Omega Hydrotanium reservoir (included) with a packbag made for drinking *and* hiking. A separate zippered bladder compartment simplifies loading and allows easy refilling on the trail. And a semi-rigid backpanel—made of deeply-ribbed, closed-cell foam covered by soft mesh—is breathable and supportive. "My back never sweated out on a hot, 3,000-foot climb on the Harding Icefield Trail," he says. "And it proved exceptionally comfortable even when carrying 20 pounds of camera and cold-weather gear." Later, during a week of guiding in Zion Canyon, our tester stuffed the simple, top-loading packbag with first-aid kits, group lunches, and emergency water. Thick shoulder straps anchored to the pack by C-shaped fittings allow the straps to cant snugly to a variety of body shapes, giving a custom-fit feel to multiple testers. Quibbles: The top pocket is too small for lunches or bulky layers, and testers would have liked a second hipbelt pocket. **\$150; 2,440 cu. in.; 2 lbs. 12 oz.**



[summit pack]

**Mountain Hardwear Fluid 32**

If you hit the peaks year-round, you need a versatile pack with multiple gear-hauling options. Enter the Fluid 32 and its ice axe- and ski-carrying capabilities, a tough shove-it pocket that handles crampons, and a narrow packbag that carries your inevitable extra weight in line with your center of gravity. "On Pyramid Peak in Colorado's Elk Range, I felt balanced, even on small ledges," says one tester. The framesheet is made of a corrugated nylon panel that twists and flexes forward and backward, enhancing mobility, but won't bulge when the pack is tightly stuffed. Mesh-covered lumbar and



shoulder-blade pads lift the framesheet off of your back to create an air-conditioned gap that kept testers sweat-free, even while hammering up sun-baked, steep grades. A flexible hipbelt adjusts to wrap comfortably around everything from baselayers to harnesses to puffy jackets and could handle 35-pound overloads. Zig-zag compression straps that run from the top of the packbag, down both sides, and become the hipbelt's stabilizer straps keep the payload centered and stable. As one tester puts it: "It's light, simple, and made for peakaholics." **\$130; 1,950 cu. in.; 2 lbs. 7 oz.**