

SEE AND BE SEEN IN THE DARK

by Lisa Maloney

During the peak of the Alaska summer, it may be tempting to leave your headlamp at home: After all, who needs that extra weight when it's already light outside? But I make it a habit to carry mine year-round, because you never know when you'll end up in a shadowy forest or have a chance to explore one of the old WWII forts that dot the landscape.

That habit really pays off once the days start getting shorter. We get so used to long hours of daylight that when the darkness finally catches up to us, it's usually a surprise—so it's a relief knowing that a bright, hands-free light source is always right there in my pack. Here's a look at some of the headlamps that have saved my bacon more than once over the years:

Olympia EX550: \$69.99,
olympiaoutdoors.com

This has been my favorite headlamp for a couple of years now, ever since I stumbled across the company at an Outdoor Retailer show. They're still kind of under the radar, but this thing packs an unbeatable combination of bright light in a small, lightweight and tough package.

You get 550 lumens at max power—as much as some of the headlights people use on their bikes—in a tough, waterproof aluminum body that weighs only 5.4 ounces including batteries and has stood up to every sort of freezing, rainstorm, dropping and otherwise kicking around abuse I've subjected it to, with nary a flicker. If I know I'll be out in really tough (or dark) conditions, this is the headlamp I want to have along.

The only downsides are that like most ultra-powerful headlamps it chews through the batteries quickly in high mode; it uses a funky battery size you can't buy at Costco (CR123A lithium—get them at hardware stores, some department stores or stock up from Amazon.com) and it's super-easy for it to turn on by mistake in your pack. Just

remember to use the lockout mode (hold the power button down for a few seconds) and it'll be fine.

Black Diamond Storm: \$49.95,
blackdiamondequipment.com

A confession: I've never used the Black Diamond Storm myself, but it's a favorite among folks that I hike with, and I've always been envious of its red light mode—the only thing my beloved Olympia headlamp lacks—or, more to the point, its ability to switch into red light mode without cycling through the white light first. The newest Storm models have a green light night vision mode, too.

The Olympia EX550 can out-bright Storm users on the trail—the Storm's max power is “only” 250 lumens—and the Olympia's beam reaches almost twice as far. But people using the Storm can actually turn their headlamp on without ruining everybody's night vision, and all reports are that its sealed, waterproof housing really does tough out all kinds of storms. It weighs 3.9 ounces (including 4 AAA batteries). If you don't feel the need to carry one headlamp that can provide enough light for the entire group, this is a great choice.

Black Diamond Spot: \$39.95,
blackdiamondequipment.com

Confession 2.0: I haven't used a recent iteration of the BD Spot either... because the one I bought at least 15 years ago is still going strong. The battery compartment isn't quite as watertight as it once was, but it still does just fine in anything short of a downpour, and the light remains as bright as ever. More to the point, this was once my ice climbing headlamp of choice—so it's withstood a lot of abuse, dampness and weather of all temperatures. If it lasts another few years, I'm going to see if I can register it to vote.



That sort of toughness has been my experience with pretty much all Black Diamond headlamps, which is why you see so many of them here. Petzl used to be the other big name in headlamps, at least back in my climbing days, but I almost never see them out on the trail nowadays: What's up with that?

The new Spot still sports a waterproof battery compartment, 200 lumens of power in the “high” setting and, like the Storm, can activate the red night vision mode without cycling through the white light. It weighs just 3.2 ounces with 3 AAA batteries.

Black Diamond Ion: \$24.95,
blackdiamondequipment.com

I know this guy is really dinky, but bear with me: That's the whole point. Once you've had the not-so-great experience of changing the batteries on your main headlamp in the pitch dark (or holding your cell phone under your chin as a flashlight while you mess with batteries), you'll appreciate having a tiny backup headlamp like this along. It's just 1.9 ounces (including 2 AAA batteries), and so small that I either wear it as a necklace or tuck it into the quart-size Ziploc that holds my survival gear stash.

And yes, I actually have used the Ion's teeny light to navigate myself home when I forgot my big headlamp—twice. That was before they came out with the current version, which packs 100 lumens: Pretty dang good for a backup or, if you're more the car camping type, shuffling out to the toilet or reading a book without waking everybody else up. 🐼