

Chapter 1

Surviving the Wilderness

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In This Chapter

- ▶ Being prepared for common wilderness survival situations
 - ▶ Having the right attitude and being proactive
 - ▶ Taking care of basic needs and signaling for rescue
 - ▶ Navigating and avoiding mistakes
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Knowing the threats you face in the wilderness and the wisest courses of action to take to counter those threats can go a long way toward keeping you alive in a bad situation. If you know in advance what the real problems are, then as soon as you find yourself lost or adrift, you can go to work immediately — and that changes you from victim to survivor.

This chapter serves as a jumping-off point to wilderness survival. Here, we give you an overview of the basics you need to know in practically any wilderness survival situation. We show what the threats are and how to take care of them in the right order. Finally, we take a minute to show you how so many people go wrong and how you can prevent your situation from getting worse — or perhaps how to stay out of trouble altogether!

Being Prepared and Proactive

Every piece of knowledge or equipment you carry with you makes you stronger in the wild. Preparation gives you staying power, and it frequently gives you that little extra advantage you need to stay out of a crisis. Chapter 2 discusses what you can do to be prepared.

Being proactive usually means stopping and getting control — such as slowing your swimming stroke or even floating to conserve your energy. If you're lost, don't react and don't speed up. Stop, sit, and think carefully about your situation for a long time. Take control of the situation instead of letting it take control of you.

Keeping the Right Attitude

Real survival situations feel enormously unfair. Almost all survivors face the feeling of injustice — it's as though the world is conspiring against you or the odds are simply beyond your abilities. To survive this situation, you can't let these feelings take over. You need to have your head on straight and keep a positive outlook. Chapter 3 gives more info on survival psychology.

To keep a positive attitude, the first thing you have to do is size up your situation. Take it all in. This can be very difficult for some people, and it can stand in the way of clear thinking. The truth is that most survival situations are so unexpected that they leave you a little stunned. You have to master disbelief. Many people perish simply because they can't go beyond denial.

The following suggestions can help you keep your spirits up:

- ✔ **Be resourceful.** Resources and options that you've never considered are available to you. Use rocks as hammers, nails as fishhooks, and belt buckles as reflectors for signaling. Then think of new options and work out more plans. Think of a way.
- ✔ **Be patient.** Consider that being rescued or working your way out of the problem may take time, but never assume that no one will come looking for you.
- ✔ **Never say die.** Misery and fear can fool you into thinking you're finished. Don't let your mind play tricks on you. You can keep going long after you feel like you can't. A *lot* longer. Don't give up. Keep a positive attitude, or grit your teeth in grim determination. If you slip into a negative attitude, you'll melt like a candle.

Identifying Survival Basics

When you find yourself in a survival situation, the immediate decisions you make can significantly impact what happens to you. Make sure you address your basic needs in the order they appear in this section.

You may also face a medical situation, which may take precedence over the ones we mention here, depending on its severity. For first aid procedures, see Chapter 13.

Regulating your body temperature

Thermoregulation is the management of your body temperature. It's the highest priority because being too cold (*hypothermia*) or being too hot (*hyperthermia*) are the fastest killers in the wilderness. You have to stay warm in cold environments and cool in hot environments. Here's how:

- ✓ **Cool or cold environments:** Don't allow yourself to get wet. Be careful near streams and rivers, shelter yourself from rain, and keep sweating to a minimum. If night is coming, realize that hypothermia is a threat and construct an insulating shelter.
- ✓ **Hot environments:** You need liquid and shade to cool the body. If your temperature is rising, recognize this and rest or find shade. Waiting too long is the biggest contributor to heat exhaustion. Always stay well hydrated in all situations but especially in hot environments.

The four components that govern thermoregulation are clothing, fire, shelter, and your own actions. The following sections give an overview of them.

Your first line of defense: Clothing

In a survival situation, you have to cope with the entire temperature range of a particular environment, as well as the changes in your own body's temperature. The best way to do this is to dress in layers or to improvise layers. You want to be able to add or subtract clothing. For more on clothing, see Chapter 4.



In many survival situations, people discard clothing that they don't think they need (it's true, honest). Never discard any clothing, under any circumstances. If you take off a shirt or jacket, tie it around your waist or jam it in your belt. Be prepared to carry the layers that aren't currently in use.

If you're in a cold environment, strip off layers of clothing if you start to sweat. You must stay dry. If you're facing a cold night, add insulating layers by stuffing grass, leaves, or moss inside your clothing. You can use other materials, including debris, trash bags, cardboard, or anything that you can attach to or wrap around your body, to make layers and insulation. Remember, trapped air is an excellent insulator, so you can use anything that traps a layer of air next to your body.



In all environments, cover your head. If you don't have a hat, improvise one that covers your head and neck thoroughly. In the cold, a head and neck covering deters hypothermia, especially if you've fallen into cold water, and in the sun, it deters heat stroke.

Warming up to the fire

Starting a fire is crucial because it prevents hypothermia, it boosts morale, and it can be used to send a distress signal. Think overkill when preparing your first fire in a survival situation. Don't rush things. Plan it out and have lots of backups to keep the flame going after it ignites. For info on how to make fire, see Chapter 5.

Gimme shelter

Like a fire, a shelter can help you maintain a sufficient body temperature, which is your first priority. And just like fire, shelter can really boost your morale. Even if you're not a do-it-yourselfer around your home, you should know that anybody can make an insulating shelter, regardless of how much experience he or she has had in the woods.

Chapter 6 discusses how to build general shelters. But if you find yourself in a specific wilderness setting, such as a wintry tundra or a hot desert, check out the specialized shelters in the chapters in Part III.

Regulating temperature in oceans, seas, and lakes

If you're in a water environment, thermoregulation is especially important. Take the following measures to stay warm:



- ✓ **Stay as still as you possibly can.** Don't tread water if you can help it. That just makes you colder.
- ✓ **Cover your head.** If you have access to anything that can act as a hat, use it.
- ✓ **Try to keep your armpits closed by holding your elbows at your side, and keep your crotch closed by crossing your legs.** These areas leak a lot of body heat.
- ✓ **Don't take any heat-saving measure that causes your head to go under the water.** You lose more heat from your head than from any other body part.

Check out Chapter 18 for a discussion of staying warm at sea.

Signaling for rescue

The sooner you help others figure out where you are, the better. You need to be ready to signal for rescue at all times. Begin thinking about signaling for help the moment trouble starts. Don't ever believe that no one will come looking for you — someone usually does.



To get potential rescuers' attention, your distress signals need to be huge. Shouting is fine if that's all you can do, but just know that shouting is a very poor signal because the human voice doesn't travel very far. To be seen or heard, signals have to be big — choose large symbols, loud noises, bright colors, or large clusters of objects, such as debris fields or people in groups. Even if you believe rescuers are nearby, make sure your signals are big. Chapter 12 provides info on signaling for help.

Avoiding dehydration

In a hot environment, water can become a life-threatening problem within hours, but in most temperate environments, you usually have roughly three days before the lack of water completely incapacitates you. The minute you think you're in trouble, start practicing *water discipline*, which means you're minimizing your usage in everything you do.

To practice water discipline, no matter where you are, take immediate action in these ways:

- ✓ **Stop consuming diuretics immediately.** These are liquids that make you urinate a lot, like coffee, tea, soda, and alcohol.
- ✓ **Minimize your physical exertion if you can.** Even if you can't feel it, you're losing water through perspiration and heavy breathing.
- ✓ **Don't eat or smoke.** These activities use up your body's water reserves. Try to enforce this measure as long as possible.
- ✓ **Limit your water intake as much as you can.** If you're in temperate conditions or at sea, don't drink anything for the first 24 hours — you'll just lose it through urination. The only exception to this rule is if you're in very hot conditions on land. In these conditions, you have to drink as soon as you feel yourself becoming incapacitated.

Check out Chapter 7 for a discussion of catching water, finding water, treating water, and drinking water in the wilderness.

Staying nourished

Food is the last on the list, by far, because in most cases, you're rescued before it becomes a real factor. You can go a week or more before a lack of food begins to incapacitate you. Nevertheless, finding and eating something can really boost your energy and morale.



Many plants and animals are poisonous. If you're in any way uncertain about a food source, don't eat it — becoming incapacitated is the worst thing that can happen to you in the wild. For more on finding food in the wilderness, see Chapter 8.

Navigating in the Wild

The first and most basic rule of navigation is to know exactly where you are as often as you can. Now, you can't stop every two minutes to look at the map — certainly not all day — but that's not necessary to maintain good navigational awareness.

Make sure you don't allow yourself to get more lost. If you're disoriented, stop and take a moment to remember where

you were when you last knew your location. If you're lost, consider staying put — especially if you know someone is looking for you or may look for you in the future. (See Chapter 11 for more on traveling with trails and on what to do when you're disoriented or lost.) This section provides an overview of navigating in the wild with the help of tools and with the sun and stars.

Relying on tools to navigate

You may find this astounding, but many people are rescued every year even though they have a map and GPS in their hands. Satellite navigation and modern map making haven't taken *all* the challenge out of the wilderness — if anything, they've given people a false sense of confidence. Whenever navigating with instruments, make sure they're calibrated and that you're looking at the correct map. Chapter 9 provides in-depth coverage on using these tools to help you navigate in the wilderness.

Looking to the heavens

Finding direction with the use of the sun and stars is really quite easy. You can start with the sun — it rises in the east and sets in the west, and if you're anywhere in North America, Europe, or Northern Asia, it's due south of you at midday. Check out Chapter 10 for specific ways you can use the sun and stars to find your way.

Surviving Injury

When you're in the wild, staying healthy and injury-free can go a long way toward surviving your experience. To do so, keep the following tips in mind, and for more on first aid, check out Chapter 13.

✓ **Always be on guard for hypothermia and hyperthermia.**

Even if you don't feel the symptoms, someone in your party may be becoming incapacitated, and unfortunately, people don't necessarily cry out when they're afflicted by hypothermia — they just lie down.

✓ **Treat trauma immediately.** If a member of your party has suffered a trauma, you must make sure his or her ABCs are working:

- **Airway:** Check to make sure nothing is interfering with that person's airway.
- **Breathing:** Make sure the subject is breathing.
- **Circulation:** Make sure he or she has a pulse.

Be prepared to administer cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR). If you've checked the ABCs and they're fine, put the subject in the *recovery position*, which means lying on his or her side with the head on an arm.

✓ **Stop bleeding.** If you have a bleeding wound on your hands (or anywhere else!), keep in mind that nothing's changed since you were in Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts: Direct pressure for about 10 to 15 minutes does more to stop bleeding than just about anything else.

Avoiding Some of the Causes of Survival Situations

Most survival stories never make the news. This section looks at some of the most common reasons people end up lost in the wild. Use this info to ensure you don't end up in the same situation.

Making errors in judgment

The leading cause of crises in the wilderness, according to various authorities, is *errors in judgment*. This is an exceedingly broad term, but a few examples can do a lot to show you how people commit errors in judgment in the wilderness:

✓ **Not watching out for potential falls:** Be especially careful whenever you're near cliffs or when traveling at night or in low visibility conditions. Watch for ledges and earthen trails that can give way.

- ✓ **Letting yourself become dehydrated:** You only have to dehydrate by about 5 percent to become physically and mentally impaired by 20 percent. When you add this on top of fatigue and hypothermia, you end up incapacitated.
- ✓ **Trying to walk too far:** Anytime you or one of your party isn't physically fit, you need to be prudent in estimating how far you can go. If you've missed a meal or have been through an excessively exhausting event within the previous 24 hours, don't push it.
- ✓ **Continuing to walk long after you're lost:** Doing so just gets you more lost.
- ✓ **Wearing inadequate clothing:** You should know that wet cold is vastly more dangerous than dry cold. Anytime you face wet cold, take extra precautions. This type of environment causes fatalities. Chapter 4 discusses important clothing information.
- ✓ **Carrying inadequate gear:** Not having durable or warm clothing and footgear or the tools to start a fire are the prerequisites for a deadly hypothermia scenario. Chapter 2 identifies the equipment to take.
- ✓ **Relying too much on GPS or cellphones to carry you through rough conditions:** Not watching your maps because you have GPS or ignoring a deteriorating situation because you think you can always call for help is a recipe for disaster. Take a look at Chapter 11 for more on this.

Losing it: Behaviors that help you get lost

You can get lost in the wild for an infinite number of reasons, but certain common denominators frequently crop up in statistical surveys of lost persons. Chapter 11 has more info about avoiding getting lost and what to do if you're lost.

- ✓ **Leaving the trail to take a shortcut:** An inordinate number of people get lost every year because they leave the trail to try a shortcut. Stick to the trail, especially if you're in unknown territory.

- ✔ **Letting your awareness lapse:** You pass through a tunnel in the foliage, or you're concentrating on your photography or on seeing a particular species of bird, and suddenly you're not exactly sure where you are.
- ✔ **Walking downslope from a trail:** Whenever you walk down from a trail (descend), you break your line of sight with the trail.
- ✔ **Being overconfident in wilderness areas where you haven't been in for a while:** You can easily get lost when going back to your old stomping grounds.
- ✔ **Turning onto false trails:** Keep in mind that the world's wilderness areas are constantly in flux. One good rain can wash away enough earth to make it appear as though there's a new trail.
- ✔ **Forging ahead:** Many people get lost because they reach a point where the trail fades or is poorly marked and they continue on but can't pick up the trail again. Be on guard for this, and make sure you leave behind your own markers in these areas.
- ✔ **Going farther than you normally go when hunting, hiking, bird-watching, shooting outdoor photography, or berry- or mushroom-picking:** You leave your normal stomping grounds — you push a little farther, and then when you turn around to come back, you get turned around.
- ✔ **Falling behind the group:** Parties of friends or social groups get spread out, or one particular person becomes begins to straggle.
- ✔ **Getting separated from the group:** This can happen whenever you're transported to a remote area, such as when you're taken to a dive site or a location in the desert.