THRIVING IN THE OUTDOORS

SIX KEYS TO WILDERNESS SURVIVAL

AN INFORMATIONAL MINI-GUIDE

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For thousands of years, our ancestors, living as hunter-gatherers, relied upon their knowledge of the land and wilderness skills to not only survive, but to thrive within the natural world. Only in modern history, with the advent of agriculture, cities, and modern technologies, have these once essential life skills become absent in each person’s up-bringing and education.

In this mini-guide to wilderness survival, we will cover what we consider to be “six keys” to thriving in the outdoors: attitude, shelter, water, fire, food, and naturalist knowledge. You will find basic information to enhance your knowledge & skill and point you in the right direction. Though the guide will provide you with a good starting point, nothing can replace the value of quality instruction and experience. At the end of the guide you will find references for additional information.

Even with our modern conveniences, wilderness survival knowledge not only continues to play a role as emergency skills in the backcountry, but can also aid in urban natural disasters and awaken a part of our heritage that instills a deep sense of place and connection with our natural environment. Survival skills can bring about a greater sense of confidence in the woods, and many find practicing them to be an enjoyable recreational activity.
The most important survival skill is maintaining a level-headed mental attitude. Your state of mind is key to effectively assessing your situation and pointing you in the right direction for responding to the challenges at hand. Numerous studies have documented the devastating impacts of panic-stricken states during survival situations. When panicked, logical decision-making can go out the window and persons are known to make irrational choices that often lead to their demise.

To maintain an upright attitude, we recommend knowing your “survival priorities” and using the “SPEAR” approach:

### Survival Priorities

The “Rule of Threes” helps us understand our survival priorities. According to the “Rule of Threes” a human can generally survive for:

- Three hours exposed to the elements
- Three days without water
- Three weeks without food

This shows us that the most important survival priority is shelter from the elements, then water, and lastly food. The “rule of threes” is also supported by the fact that most lost persons perish from either exposure to the elements (hypothermia) or lack of water (dehydration). By knowing that the two most pressing survival needs are shelter and water, you are able to focus your energies towards meeting those needs.

### The “SPEAR” Approach

Surviving a difficult wilderness situation often requires meeting many challenges and not allowing yourself to become overwhelmed or panicked. To keep your mind and body occupied towards meeting your survival needs, remember the “SPEAR” approach:

- **Stop**
  - Stop what you are doing and look around.

- **Plan**
  - Take stock of your supplies, surroundings, and situation. Figure out what you need to do first.

- **Execute**
  - Put your plan into action. Engage in improving your situation.

- **Assess**
  - Periodically pause to assess your progress and next steps.

- **Re-evaluate**
  - Ask yourself if your actions are helping or hindering your survival? Determine what your next needs are.

By systematically assessing, planning, and executing your activities, you will help keep your mind and body actively engaged in addressing your situation. This will greatly aid in avoiding panic and other negative states of mind. By upholding an upright attitude, your chances of survival are greatly improved!
Shelter

As we learned from the “Rule of Threes”, protecting yourself from the elements to maintain your core body temperature, is the most important survival priority. Most lost persons perish from hypothermia, which may have been easily avoided had they constructed a shelter to stay in. Therefore, after attitude, shelter is the next key to wilderness survival.

Effective natural shelters can be constructed from all manner of materials, such as leaves, moss, ferns, branches, bark, etc… There are also a range of styles such as lean-to’s, thatched shelters, and debris huts. The key to a good shelter is to insulate yourself from all of the forms of heat loss. Your body can lose heat through direct contact with the ground, wind, or just radiating off of your body. Therefore, your shelter needs to provide insulation and protection from these elements.

A practical shelter that can be constructed in almost any environment is a debris hut. A completed debris hut is like a gigantic sleeping bag, insulated by leaves & debris, and held together by sticks. To construct a debris hut, select a location that provides ample building materials (sticks and leaves) that is safe from falling branches, pooling water, and other hazards. Prop up a sturdy 8-foot pole-like branch on a stump or crook of a tree. Lay shorter stick along its length on both sides, leaving room for a doorway. Pile large amounts of leaves and debris on top, as well as inside. Lay more sticks on top to keep the wind from blowing the debris away. A door plug can be created by stuffing a shirt full of leaves. Crawl inside, being sure to burrow into the leaves, so that there is a mattress of leaves insulating you from the ground and on all sides. Though nothing like the warmth of your own bed, a debris hut will allow you to survive the night.
Obtaining clean water and staying hydrated is the third key to wilderness survival. Ideally, a person should drink about a gallon of water per day. Many lost persons perish due to dehydration, and/or the debilitating effects of water-born pathogens from untreated water. In addition to water-born pathogens, minerals and metals can be found in waters downstream from industrial and agricultural operations. The best sources for clean drinking water in a wilderness setting are springs, headwater streams, and collecting morning dew.

Dew can often be collected from large leaves in the early morning, using a sponge or piece of clothing. Be sure not to collect the water off the leaves of a poisonous plant. As a source of water, dew is often clean enough to drink as is. This is because the water has been evaporated and then condensed in the cool morning air, similar to how a home distillation filtration system works.

Springs and headwater streams can also provide a good source of water. These waters usually do need to be treated to remove viruses, bacteria, and protozoa. Do try to be sure that your water source is not downstream from agricultural or industrial activities, as most minerals and metals can be nearly impossible to remove from the water in a wilderness setting.

Water Purification

Popular modern methods for purifying/treating water include filtering pumps and chemical treatments, such as iodine. These can be efficient and effective solutions if you have access to these items in a survival situation.

The most widely used and proven method for safely purifying water is boiling. Bringing water to a boil and allowing it to continue to boil for 2-3 minutes will kill bacteria and viruses.

By maintaining a level attitude, creating a shelter, and obtaining clean water, a person can successfully survive for many weeks.
Though not a direct survival priority, fire can aid our other survival needs in a variety of ways. It can provide a heat source for a shelter, allow us to boil water, cook survival foods, and offer psychological support. For these reasons, fire is our fourth key to wilderness survival.

Ideally, when traveling in the wilderness, it is best to carry multiple fire-starting tools, such as a lighter, matches, flint and steel, etc. Even with these implements, starting a fire can be challenging on rainy days with natural materials. We highly recommend practicing starting fires in different weather conditions within different habitats. Good fire-making skills are invaluable.

If you were to find yourself in a situation without a modern fire-making implement, fire by friction is the most effective primitive technique. Popular friction fire-making methods include bow drill, hand drill, fire plow, and fire saw.

For the beginner, the bow drill is the least difficult technique to learn. The bow drill consists of a wooden spindle that is rotated inside a notch of a wooden fireboard, using a short bow, while exerting downward pressure with a handhold. The downward pressure, speed, and friction creates dust, and then enough heat to turn that dust into a coal. This coal can then be added to a tinder bundle and blown into flame.
Food is our fifth key to wilderness survival. Though humans can survive for three weeks without it, we probably wouldn’t choose to go that long without food. Most natural environments are filled with a variety of items that can meet our nutritional needs. Plants can often provide the most readily available foods, though insects and small wild game can also support our dietary needs in a survival situation.

Common and Abundant Plant Food Sources in North America

**Cattail**: known as the “supermarket of the swamp”, the roots, shoots, and pollen heads can be eaten

**Conifers**: the inner bark, known as the cambium, is full of sugars, starches and calories, and can be eaten on most evergreen, cone-bearing trees [except for yew, which is poisonous]

**Grasses**: the juices from the leaves can provide nutrition, and the root corm can be roasted and eaten

**Oaks**: all acorns can be leached of their bitter tannic acids, and then eaten, providing an excellent source of protein, fats, and calories

Be sure to properly identify any plant you plan on consuming (using field guides and/or the guidance of an experienced expert). Many plants can be difficult to identify and some edible plants have poisonous look-alikes. If you cannot identify the plant, do not eat it.
The more you know about nature, the better you will be able to survive in the outdoors. Naturalist knowledge is our sixth “key” to wilderness survival. To be great at wilderness survival skills requires an in-depth understanding of a variety of nature skills. For example, wildlife tracking skills allow one to effectively locate wild game for food, and knowledge of herbal medicine allows one to heal illnesses with wild plants.

Especially for the situation where you may choose to purposefully practice survival living for a lengthened period of time, naturalist knowledge is absolutely invaluable. All of our hunter-gatherer ancestors had classification systems for living organisms, knew their names, understood their uses, recognized how they inter-related to each other, and were aware of how to utilize those resources in a sustainable fashion. This knowledge was at the foundation of their ability to thrive within the natural environment.

For even the recreational wilderness skills practitioner, a basic knowledge of the natural sciences (such as botany, ecology, geology, etc…) can be very useful and enriching. A great place to start is by purchasing the relevant plant and animal field guides for your region. These resources can help you begin to identify species and understand how they relate. Now, with these six keys to wilderness survival, you are well on your way to thriving in the outdoors!
Additional Resources

Our Survival Book

If you enjoyed this mini-guide, then you’ll love our survival book, *The Essential Skills of Wilderness Survival*. It shows you the details you need for: building shelter from natural materials that keep you warm and protected from the elements; finding water and purifying it with or without equipment; starting campfires even in the pouring rain without matches or lighters; recognizing staple wild foods; navigating without the aid of a compass; and creating the right type of survival kit to be prepared for emergencies.

Learn more at:


“Whether you’re a seasoned nature enthusiast or new to the outdoors, this beautifully illustrated and masterfully organized survival guide, that simplifies Jason’s decades of experience, will be an invaluable companion!” —Jonah Evans

Online Survival Course

Transform your experience with the outdoors! Our most accessible training opportunity is our online survival course—**Essential Wilderness Survival Skills** (EWSS). You can now learn these core skills in a format that allows you to participate at your own home and at your own pace. Gain practical life-saving skills, a deeper relationship with nature, greater confidence, and resources to share with your family & friends in emergencies and for fun. Take advantage of our years of experience teaching thousands of students to accelerate your own learning! Learn more about EWSS at:

https://www.wildernesscollege.com/essential-wilderness-survival-skills.html

“This course was invaluable! I highly recommend it for anyone, whether they want to pursue a career in the outdoors—or simply want to learn how to take care of themselves in the event they have to.” —Cameron Langford