Thriving in the Outdoors: The Six Keys to Wilderness Survival

AN INFORMATIONAL MINI-GUIDE
By Jason Knight & Alderleaf Wilderness College
www.WildernessCollege.com
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.

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.

In this mini-guide to wilderness survival, we will cover what we consider to be the “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, hands-on instruction and experience. At the end of the guide you will find references for additional information and wilderness survival field courses.
Attitude

The most important survival skill is maintaining a level-headed mental attitude. Your state of mind is key to effectively assessing your situation and responding properly 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. As soon as you know you are lost or in a survival situation, stop what you are doing.
Plan. Organize a plan of action to meet your survival needs and current challenges.
Execute. Go to work at implementing your plan, such as building a shelter, etc…
Assess &
Re-evaluate. As conditions change and tasks are completed, assess and re-evaluate your plan.

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!
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.

An herbal treatment is another method in which water may be purified from viruses and bacteria. Grapefruit seed extract is sold as a water purifier, although there is some debate on whether or not it is one hundred percent effective.

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

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, know 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.
Naturalist Knowledge

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!
For more information about specific survival skills and related topics, visit the “articles” section of our website, www.WildernessCollege.com. Many of the specific skills mentioned in this mini-guide are explained in greater detail in these online articles. Alderleaf Wilderness College also carries one of the most comprehensive wilderness survival guides available, Camping and Wilderness Survival: The Ultimate Outdoors Book by Paul Tawrell. With over 350 pages with thousands of diagrams and pictures, this guide provides an amazing amount of information.

At Alderleaf Wilderness College, we offer an integrated approach to learning wilderness survival skills, where alongside our survival training curriculum, the skills of tracking, herbal medicine, naturalist knowledge, leadership, and sustainability are taught. Alderleaf offers a range of courses covering each of our curricular areas in detail, often in weekend and evening formats.

Our most comprehensive course is our Wilderness Certification Program. The Certification Program runs from September through June and offers an in-depth, hands-on course of study that prepares students to apply nature skills in education, conservation, and beyond. Visit www.WildernessCollege.com for the latest course schedules and information.