

Survival 101

The best way to ensure survival should you become lost in the woods is not to get lost in the first place. Most people find themselves in the predicament of being lost in the woods by wandering off a trail or away from their companions by failing to be mindful of their actions and their surroundings.

If you do spend a great deal of time camping or hiking in the back country, investing some time and other resources in learning what to do 'just in case' makes good sense. At the most it could save your life and at the least you'll impress your friends with your MacGyver-like skills.

While being lost in the woods is a terrifying idea to most people, surviving is really a matter of common sense, patience, and knowing which of nature's gifts to use to help you. Along with shelter and water, fire is the most important thing you need to survive when lost in the bush for a few days.

Disclaimer: *These are tips or suggestions for navigating in the woods and are not necessarily recommended by any of the website partners.*

1. **Don't just strike out camping or hiking** without doing some research first. Know the area where you will be traveling. Make sure you pack a good map and a compass and know how to use them. Learn about the flora and fauna of the area you are exploring. Take a survival course. Local outfitters will be able to direct you to competent course leaders or may conduct courses themselves.
2. **Make sure someone knows where you are going** and how long you'll be gone. It's the only way people will know to start looking for you and where to begin the search.
3. **Be prepared.** It's fine to think you can start a fire with no matches or source out water but it's much better to be prepared in the first place. Basic survival tools such as map and compass, extra food and water, a knife, magnesium stone, matches, some cord, a whistle and a metal cup or small pot can mean the difference between life and death. Practice many times in a safe environment before ever leaving home.
4. **Don't panic.** Panic is more dangerous than almost anything else because you'll be unable to use your own good common sense if you're hysterical.
5. **Stand still and check out your surroundings.** This will become your 'point zero' so mark it well so it's visible from a distance.
6. **Stay in one place.** The chances are good that rescuers are looking for you especially if you told people your plans.
7. **Signal your location.** Make noise, mark your location so it's can be seen from the air. In a forest, prepare three small fires ready to ignite with heaps of wet leaves nearby in order to make smoke. Three of anything in the wilderness is a standard distress signal.
8. **Start scouting your area carefully.** Never lose sight of your 'point zero' as you look for water, shelter, or your way to safety.

Now that it looks like you'll be spending the night in the wilderness:

1. **Build a shelter.** Luckily, the woods are filled with 'natural resources.' Look for a fallen or leaning tree. Use brush or green branches (boughs) from trees to repel water, block wind, keep out snow, or create shade. Close in your shelter on as many sides as possible. If you find a cave or deep indent in a rock, great but make sure it's not already occupied.
2. **Stay warm.** NEVER take any clothes off. Cover up all the exposed skin you can. If you are wearing a sweater or jacket, do it up. The most important part of your clothing is a hat or something that covers your head. Over 70% of all your body heat escapes through your head.
3. **Find water.** You can last a long time without food but you can only last about 3 days without water. A running stream or lake is your most likely bet in Huntsville/Lake of Bays and Algonquin Park. Drink the dew from leaves or leave anything out to collect dew and lick it off in the early morning. Drinking from unknown waterways can cause illness but it's secondary in life and death situations. Luckily, in our area water tends to be abundant and often pristine.
4. **Make a fire if it is very cold and damp.** (*See - Making a Fire with One Match and making a Fire with No Matches.*) A good rule is to gather wood until you have enough to last the night, then gather three more piles of the same size, and you *might* have enough. A small fire is easier to keep burning than a big fire because it requires less fuel. Once you have a good bed of embers, keep the fire to a manageable size so you don't spend too much time looking for fuel. Remember that uncontained and unsupervised fires can lead to forest fires so be very careful!

A Word on Harvesting Wild Edibles

There is a myriad of wild edibles available throughout Muskoka that are available merely for the harvesting. Wild Leeks, Pickerelweed, Dog-Tooth Violets, Jerusalem Artichokes, May-Apples, Fiddleheads, Dandelions, Plantain, Staghorn Sumac and Cattails are just some of the wild foods that are available in the woods and swamps in the great, natural garden that is of Huntsville/Lake of Bays. Not all parts of these plants are edible. It is generally not recommended that you eat wild foods unless you are absolutely certain you can accurately identify edible and non-edible plant species and understand how they should be prepared for consumption.

Before you ever get to the place where you may get lost in the woods, take a course on identifying and preparing safe, wild foods and buy an excellent book on the subject. There are literally hundreds of things to eat from fungi to roots to leaves to nuts and berries. But just as the bounty of the earth can sustain you, there are many things that can make you sick or even kill you. And some very toxic plant products look like their more benign counterparts. Dining off the land is not something you do without educating yourself thoroughly first.

And remember, when first learning to appreciate wild edibles from the security of your own home, remember when harvesting to leave enough for regeneration.

More Survival Tips

- Keep your priorities straight – shelter, water, food.
- The more you move (once you know you're lost) the worse your chances of finding a way out become.
- Find a branch to use as a walking stick with you. The mark it makes in the dirt will help you retrace your steps.
- It is safer not to go into the wilderness alone.
- One of the most important survival tools is something that most people never consider: a tin cup. It gathers water, can be used to cook foods that need to be cooked.
- Another underrated survival item is a large trash bag. They pack down small, but can be used to carry water, can be wrapped around a leafy branch end to trap water and can be used as an emergency poncho.
- Saturate a few cotton balls with petroleum jelly and put them in a film canister with your fire-starting kit. They are an excellent upgrade from tinder, especially if you're in a wet environment.
- A compass and map are vital because knowing what direction you are going can be very comforting. (*See - Finding Your Way Without a Compass.*)
- A military-type knife is better than a machete or a Swiss Army Knife
- Don't let technology like cell phones, GPS units, or radios to give you a false sense of security. Most often there is no signal in the deep woods.
- If you don't have a lighter or any matches it will be more difficult to start a fire but not impossible. By far one of the best tools to start a fire is magnesium stone. It's a necessity to be included in your survival kit. A cheap and effective supplement to the magnesium stone is the lint that collects in your dryer. Dry lint can be carried in a zip-lock bag, weighs almost nothing, and is exceptional tinder. The sparks from the flint part of your magnesium stone will catch in lint much quicker than other materials. (See Starting a Fire with One Match and Starting a Fire with No Matches.)
- An important acronym to remember is STOP, which stands for stop, think, observe, and plan.
- Whenever you go out in the wilderness take a whistle. 1 blow means "I'm lost", 2 blows means "I'm coming" (if you hear someone else blow a whistle), and 3 blows means "This is an emergency" (if you are hurt).
- At night, there is a greater risk of becoming hypothermic. Stay dry. Bundle up. Get yourself off the ground by making a bed from layers of branches, leaves, twigs, whatever is there, and cover yourself with the same stuff. To stay warm at night, heat the rocks in the fire before burying them. Sleep on top of the buried rocks and don't burn yourself.
- Rain, snow, or dew can be a good source of clean water. You can use anything from a cup to a piece of waterproof cloth to a large leaf to collect precipitation.
- If you cannot stay where you are until someone finds you try to go either uphill or downhill. Going uphill may lead to a vantage point while downhill may lead to water.
- Never, ever go into the woods without a compass and map. But if you do, use or learn your cardinal directions from the stars and the positions of the sun and moon.
- Bootlaces make good rope in an emergency situation, but remember once they're removed, walking will become more difficult.
- The sleeves of a waterproof jacket can be used to hold water by tying one end of them.

- If you want to fish, you can make a fishing rod out of a stick about 2 meters (6 feet) long and 1-3 inches thick (you will need a fishhook, which should be in a survival kit). Use an insect or worm for bait.

Finding Your Way Without a Compass

Ideally, you'll be lost but have a survival kit including a compass and map with you. If that's not the case, there are a number of methods for finding direction without modern means, so long as you know the four cardinal directions (or cardinal points) of north, south, east, west or any combination thereof that you should be heading.

First...Look Up

The first tricks you might resort to are among the fastest and easiest, as they require no tools or reference to any particular geographic feature.

In daylight: Wait until either a few hours prior to or following noon, when the sun is clearly rising or setting on its appointed route. First, place your right shoulder toward the sun (putting it to your right side). Having done so, if it's before noon, the sun is rising and so is still to the east, meaning that you are now facing more or less northward. If in the afternoon or evening, then the sun is setting in the west, and with your right side to it, you now face south.

If lost at night: Ideally seek adequate shelter and leave travel for the morning. Only if there's no option, look to the stars. If you're lost somewhere in the Northern Hemisphere locate Polaris (the North Star). It will be one of the brightest lights in the sky on any night and forms the last point in the 'handle' of the Little Dipper constellation. As the name implies, this star can be used to mark north.

Look Around . . .

Should clouds or dense foliage hamper your view of the heavens, there are clues to be found on the ground which can indicate north versus south.

Trees: Most people have heard the old saying that moss grows on the north side of a tree, but keep in mind that moss is in no way forbidden circumnavigating a tree trunk all together. Instead, try to locate a felled tree and examine its growth rings. Regardless of hemisphere, tree growth is more pronounced on the side facing the equator, and so the side of the stump with wider spacing between individual rings faces south if you're north of the equator, and vice-versa.

Telling Time Without a Watch

The easiest is to simply wait until the sun is due south (in the Northern Hemisphere), at which time it's high noon at your location. At night, you can tell time using the handle of the Big Dipper as the hour hand on a clock - the direction it's pointing indicates the approximate time but it's not nearly as accurate as using the sun.

There is a method so precise that explorers Lewis and Clark used it. Unfortunately, to do this, you need a telescope or good binoculars, a book with the orbital parameters of the moons, and a calculator. Let's face it, if you are lost it's likely the last thing you might have on your person.

Starting a fire with one match

To prepare for the fire gather small bits of wood or other material available. The twigs at the end of a fallen branch are small and easily gathered. They must snap which tells you they are dry enough. Small pieces of bark, grass, or shavings from a stick are good starters. Cotton balls saturated with petroleum jelly and protected in a film canister are an excellent upgrade from tinder, especially if you're in a wet environment

One trick to use is to 'fuzz' a stick. Use your knife to shave little splits along the stick; it will look like a tiny Christmas tree. Fuzz sticks will take off when lit.

Pine needles, pinecones, dry leaves, dry grass, old bird nests, pine tree sap and other such things are good fire-starters. A good rule of thumb is to start off with a fuel that is smaller or thinner than a match. This match size or smaller fuel is called tinder, and, as long as it is dry, you know that it will burn with the touch of a match.

A campfire must have oxygen in order to burn. The only way you can get fresh oxygen to your fire is to build it so that air can easily flow through it. There are two things you can do while building your fire that will dramatically increase the airflow to your campfire; stack your wood loosely so that air can easily flow through it and make an air gap under the fire so that air can get in from below.

To keep your fire going you need to have piles of dry fuel already prepared and waiting to add to the fire as it becomes established.

Do not rush the preparation. There is nothing more disheartening than to have your fire go out because you added green wood or because you didn't take the time to assemble a stock of dry fuel. And you'll now be down to zero matches!

Starting a fire with no matches

Use a magnifying glass on a sunny day: Angle the magnifying glass in the sun over the tinder so that the focal point is directly on the pile. Once it begins to smoke you can encourage the flame by blowing gently on the tinder from the bottom. Broken glass, bottles or eyeglasses can also work, if their focal point is bright enough. Again, be patient. Ensure that you have plenty of dry fuel to add as the fire builds and don't smother it!

Use Friction: Place the point of a straight stick into a groove in a piece of bark or flat wood. Ideally, both of these pieces contain no sap or moisture. Rub the stick vigorously between your hands, while the point creates friction against the other piece of wood. Eventually the wood will heat until it creates a small ember, which you can drop in the tinder nest you have carefully prepared.

Nobody ever plans on getting lost. Survival in the woods is largely a matter of what you did before you got lost including informing someone of your plans. The key to surviving if you get

lost in the woods has a lot to do with preparation. Any time that you are going to be in the wilderness (and this includes driving through areas that are uninhabited) you need to have a basic survival kit with you. The good news is that in the vast majority of cases, lost campers and hikers are found before they come to any great harm. Your chances can be greatly improved by following a few survival tips and using the best weapon of all – some common sense.