

Tips for Safety and Survival in the Backcountry

Getting lost can be a frightening experience, even for an experienced hiker or backpacker. Sudden changes in weather, an injury, or encounters with wildlife in the backcountry can all occur even to the best prepared hiker. By following these tips, one can have the confidence and knowledge needed to survive in the wilderness until found by rescuers.

Tip #1 - Prevention. There are several steps that a person can do to minimize risk when going out on a campout or backpacking trip.

- **Do Your Research** - So many backcountry emergencies and rescues could have been avoided had the individuals just been prepared. When you're going on a day-hike or a backpacking trip, know the weather forecast, as well as expected temperature highs and temperature lows. Know how long the hike is as well as how much time you think it will take to complete the trip. Have a set "turn around" time, meaning that if you aren't going to reach a certain point by a set time, turn around and head back, so you'll have sufficient daylight return safely to camp or the trailhead.
- **Know Your Route** - Have current maps of the area where you'll be hiking. Don't do a hike that is above your ability level. Be aware of side trails that may break off your main trail. Stay on the main trail. The majority of hikers that become lost, wind up taking a side trail that branches off the main trail, leading them in the wrong direction. Be familiar where rivers or streams are located, and know what direction they flow. Know the local roads, wildlife, plant life climate, and possible hazards that may be unique to that area. Know how to use and read a compass or GPS.
- **Be Hydrated** - Just as important as staying hydrated on your hike, is to be fully hydrated *before* you even go on your hike. Drink plenty of water the day or two before. Don't drink alcohol leading up to or on your hike. Believe me, it's happened.
- **Observe Your Surroundings** - Even though you've done your research and you know While hiking, pause every couple of minutes and take a look around. Turn around and see what thing look like behind you. That way, it should look familiar to you on the way back.

Tip #2 - Share your travel plans. You never hesitate to share funny cat videos with your friends, so share your trip itinerary too.

- ALWAYS tell two or three responsible adults the specific location where you are going, and when you expect to return. Many hikers and backpackers feel that this is unnecessary if they are in a group. It doesn't matter how large the group is, always tell multiple people.
- Don't just tell them where you're going, give them a written itinerary That way, if you don't return by the scheduled time, the authorities can be quickly notified, and the faster a search party will be assembled, the better. Your specific travel plans should include:
 - The number of people in your group and the full name of each person
 - Hike start date and time
 - Hike return date and time (provide a cushion for your return time so emergency responders don't get dispatched if you're a little late)
 - Name of the hike/trailhead/location (ex: Buckskin Gulch from the Wire Pass Trailhead)
 - Length of hike (20.3 miles)

- Campground or approximate campsite location
- GPS coordinates
- Don't think that posting your intentions on social media is sufficient. Nobody is accountable for you when you post it on social media. Everyone is going to think that everyone else will check up on you, and then no one does.

Tip #3 - Never hike alone. It's not worth the risk. Use the buddy system on all hikes.

- Even though you may be experienced in the outdoors, don't take the risk. It takes just one unlucky thing to happen for you to be in a bad spot. All it takes is one slip, mis-step, one rattlesnake, or one wild animal. Plus, not only is it safer, but it's more fun being outdoors with others anyway. Two heads are better than one concept.
- Always use the buddy system, even with adults.
- Two or more people have a better chance of survival than one when lost. Most of the stories of people getting lost while hiking were alone.

Tip #4 - Be First Aid/CPR Certified

- Sure, you took First Aid and Emergency Preparedness at scout camp back in 90's, when you were 14 years old, so you're good to go, right? Get re-certified. This is a certification that everyone should have that can be used anywhere and everywhere.

STOP - At the beginning of a wilderness survival emergency, the most important thing you can do is STOP. Too many times, hikers keep walking around trying to find the right route, but just end up more lost and confused, so stay put. Also, too many hikers don't want to admit that they are lost. As soon as you realize that you are lost, stop. First, check on the immediate safety of yourself and anyone else that is with you. Next, relax as best you can. Drink some water. Eat a snack. Even if it's getting close to dark, you have time. You have resources. Survival is 85% mental and only 15% physical. You have a good mind. Now is the time to start using it. STOP.

THINK - Assemble the group. Use your brain to figure out what is really going on. If you think you are lost, study your map and try to determine where you are. Look around. Do you see a landmark that you can positively identify? In what direction did you travel? Note the contours of hills, ridges, or mountains and where you are in relation to streams or lakes. If you don't have a map, try to remember where you could have gotten off course. In what direction did you travel from there? If you are on a trail or a road, can you follow it back to your starting point? If you have left footprints in the snow, can you retrace your tracks? Don't go anywhere yet. There is no rush. STOP and THINK.

OBSERVE - Assess the immediate situation. What are the weather conditions? Is it going to be dark soon? Where is a good place to take shelter? Inventory everything you have in your pack and pockets, and look around to get a sense of the natural resources nearby. What clothing do you have? How can you improvise with what is available to make it suit your needs? Don't go anywhere yet. There is no rush. STOP, THINK, and OBSERVE.

PLAN - When you have figured out what your situation really is, the group can put together a plan for what to do next. Build your plan on what you have observed, what you have in the way of equipment, what you can improvise from native materials, and how you can keep yourself safe.

After taking care of your immediate safety and formulating your plan, the four things that every individual needs to survive in order of priority are:

Oxygen

Shelter

Water

Food

Put into practice the survival steps that you have learned, and wait as calmly as you can for help to arrive. Plan carefully and cautiously; don't make your situation worse by acting hastily. Most people are found within the first 24 hours of becoming lost or encountering difficulties in the backcountry. You could, if necessary, survive much longer.

Being prepared is the key. There will be times when you don't want to bring a backpack. I carry a backpack with me on all my hikes regardless of the length of hike. I always make sure that I have all my survival essentials in my hiking backpack.

The Ultimate Survival Gear Checklist

- ☐ Navigation (map and compass)
- ☐ Sun protection (sunglasses and sunscreen)
- ☐ Insulation (extra clothing)
- ☐ Illumination (headlamp/flashlight)
- ☐ First-aid supplies
- ☐ Fire (waterproof matches/lighter/candles)
- ☐ Repair kit and tools
- ☐ Nutrition (extra food)
- ☐ Hydration (extra water and water filtration)
- ☐ Emergency shelter

Here is what I carry in my backpack at all times. It may look like a lot, but I'm accustomed to carrying it around. I prefer to have a little heavier pack, but know that I can survive for several days with what I'm carrying if needed. Some of the items that you have with you will depend on the season.

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> First Aid kit | <input type="checkbox"/> Large Trash bag |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Knife | <input type="checkbox"/> Map of hiking area |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2-3 liters of water | <input type="checkbox"/> Whistle |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Headlamp/Flashlight | <input type="checkbox"/> Watch |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fire starter/Lighter | <input type="checkbox"/> Signal mirror |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 5'x7' tarp | <input type="checkbox"/> Poncho |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 25 feet of paracord | <input type="checkbox"/> Dry bag |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Aluminum tent stakes | <input type="checkbox"/> Emergency Blanket |
| <input type="checkbox"/> LifeStraw | <input type="checkbox"/> Aluminum can |
| <input type="checkbox"/> GPS | <input type="checkbox"/> Bug Repellent |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Spare batteries for GPS and headlamp/flashlight | <input type="checkbox"/> Hand Sanitizer |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Compass | <input type="checkbox"/> Sunscreen |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Emergency candles (winter) |

Building a Shelter

Take time to select a safe spot for a shelter. For example, don't build one on the top of a hill or in a dry river bed. Don't camp in a clearing where you may be the tallest object and a target of lightning. Look and make sure that there are not any dead trees nearby that could fall over in a storm or strong winds. When building a shelter, the smaller the better. Many individuals try to build a bigger shelter than they need. A smaller shelter traps your body heat better than a big shelter, and it takes less time to build. If selecting a natural shelter like a cave, make sure it is not a home to a wild animal. Throw rocks inside, etc. Look for signs of wildlife in and around the cave before entering. Avoid building a shelter right next to a lake or game trail. Be very careful when constructing a snow cave, as cave ins and asphyxiation are real threats.

Building a Fire

Fire is essential in a survival situation. It increases morale. It provides heat at night and protection from wildlife. Fire boils your water to make it safe to drink. Keep in mind, what is the purpose of your fire? Cooking? Heat? Signaling? There are different types of fires you can build depending on your needs.

Purpose of a fire

- Warmth
- Signaling for help
- Cooking
- Protection from wildlife/insects

Here are some basics:

- Pick the location for your fire very carefully. It's a lot easier to move your fire before you start it.
- Too many people make the mistake of starting the campfire before they've gathered enough firewood. The most effective fires consist of tinder, kindling, and fuel. Gather plenty of each so you won't have to leave the fire to get more wood. I would recommend gathering more wood than you could possibly use.
- When building a fire, the most time should be spent preparing a "bird's nest" for your fire, for easy lighting.
- If you are using the fire for warmth, build a reflector of wood or stone on the opposite side of the fire from where you are so you can take full advantage of the heat produced by the fire. For a signal fire, you'll want to produce large quantities of smoke by placing green foliage on the fire.

Signaling

There are several ways to signal for help when out in the wilderness. As discussed above, a fire covered with green foliage gives off smoke that can be seen for miles from land or air.

A signal mirror is an effective method of signaling aircraft. Reflections from a mirror can also be seen from miles away.

Lining up piles of wood or rocks, and drawing an arrow in the dirt can all be methods to alert rescuers. Use what you have around you. Search and rescue will notice man-made signs while searching on foot. If you have bright clothing, use it as a signal device.

Purifying Water

Depending on your needs, select the water filter or purification system that works best for you. I recommend always carrying your water filtration/purification system with you on every hike. There are several techniques that one can use to purify water, ranging from very simple to the most intricate. Depending on your circumstances and budget, choose the one that has the most options you want.

If you do not have a filtration/purification system, boil water for at least five minutes just to be safe. Typically one minute at a rolling boil is sufficient unless you're a mile above sea-level, then boil for five minutes. Read and follow instructions carefully when using chemicals to purify water. While it has been said that water straight from a spring, or moving water is safer to drink than standing water. With that being said, I would still recommend boiling water taken from any water source.

Obtaining Food

While your stomach may tell you that food should be the number one priority in a survival situation, it should actually be one of the last things you should be concerned about. While it may not be pleasant, the human body can survive for several more days without food, than without water. Depending on the person and accessibility to water, one can be as long as two weeks without food.

When searching for food, avoid all mushrooms and berries, as many edible species resemble deadly ones. While small game such as rabbits and squirrels sound appealing, even the most seasoned at making traps can come up empty. Insects are the most plentiful and easiest to find food source. Grasshoppers, crickets, beetles and grubs are good sources of proteins, fats, and carbohydrates. Most insects you can eat raw, however, they may be easier for you to eat if they are cooked or roasted. This also will kill any bacteria in the insects.

Hiking Hazards

Besides getting lost, there are additional hazards that can happen when on the trail or in the backcountry. Visit www.yourhikeguide.com for more information regarding hazards that you may encounter while in the outdoors.

*Disclaimer and Warning – Use of these survival techniques and tips are at your own risk. Regardless of all the preparation, all survival situations are dangerous and life-threatening. Your Hike Guide cannot address all survival situations, nor guarantee your survival or prevent injuries. It is your responsibility to have the proper training, equipment, information, and experience when exploring the backcountry. Because survival situations can expose you to unexpected and unpredictable challenges, risks, and hazards. Adam Provance and Your Hike Guide are not responsible for any injury, death, or consequences of any actions taken on the basis of the information provided in this guide, and do not suggest or guarantee that the use of this guide will prevent these risks. The reader or user assumes all risks for any use or misuse of the instructions of this guide.