



PHOTOS BY KEVIN JACKSON

TIPS FOR SURVIVING IN THE OUTDOORS

By Kevin Jackson



On a recent backpacking trip to Tasmania, a remote island off the coast of southern Australia, we were required to use our survival skills to build a shelter due to high winds, excessive rain and heavy sleet. This backpackers dream — known as The Overland Track — offers diverse vegetation, unique wildlife and the chance encounter of several wallabies and wombats. However, it is certainly prone to unpredictable weather changes and dense fog that has caused hikers to get off track and hunker down.

This moderate five-day walk can challenge your physical, as well as your technical, backcountry skills. Therefore, it is essential to know how to survive when confronted with a difficult situation.

There are five main areas of survival that will enable you to ride out the situation and drastically increase your chances of rescue: water, shelter, fire, food and signaling. Before going out on your next backpacking expedition, please consider these five areas and plan ahead for the terrain you will be exploring.

Water:

Most classic backpacking destinations have water that is readily available, especially in wet climates like Tasmania. However, regardless of how prevalent the water, it is imperative to treat or boil all water before using since most contaminants will be removed after one to two minutes. If you find yourself stranded, there are several techniques and things to look for in the backcountry that could lead you to potential water sources. For example, look for hills (water might be at their base) as well as animal trails and birds (they often indicate water sources in the area). Also, watch the animals that you come across. They will scratch at the surface of the ground if water is just below the surface. Green vibrant plant life is also a good indicator as well as insects that congregate on the ground as they will typically find areas that are moist and where ground water may be available.

Shelter:

It is imperative not to make the shelter too big, especially in colder climates since you will have to warm it yourself — and possibly with your own body heat. To do this, use the materials at hand and dig out a pit. Then line it with something to insulate you from the ground, such as your sleeping pad or tarp. You can lose body heat very quickly by lying on the bare ground. Use leaves, grass or pine bows for this insulation. Create a frame with two V-shaped sticks and a cross support. Cover this frame with materials at hand. Overlap them or place them in layers to make your shelter resistant to water and wind.

Fire:

When starting a fire, find dry wood and look for the dead branches at the very bottom of various species of trees. These are dead because they were denied sunlight by the branches above them and have protected them from getting wet. Start your fire small and gradually increase its size. Tinder will greatly enhance your chance for success. Take small branches and shred them with a knife or your fingers. You can use dead grass, wasp nests, inner bark from dead trees or a strip of cloth from the tail of your shirt. Use anything that will ignite quickly and place this in the center of the fire. Around this, build a teepee of small dry twigs. Once this is burning, slowly feed your fire with larger and larger pieces of wood. Make sure your fire is burning freely before you progress to a larger piece of wood and keep it going as long as possible.

Food:

Whether you are going out for a short day hike or pushing on towards your next hut or camp site, always carry extra food either in bar form or trail mix. For example, peanuts, raisins and chocolate all provide a good source of energy. The less preparation required, the better. I recommend a dense bar such as a PROBAR® or Clif Bar® since it provides enough nutrients to keep your energy levels high. Always try to ration your food in case your rescue time is extended.

Signaling:

Your best signal is obviously any fire you can create — especially at night. Keep in mind that when building your fire, put it in a place that can be seen. For example, build it in a clearing, hill-top or on a lakeshore. During the daytime, the smoke from your fire can be seen for many miles and in most wilderness areas there are firewatchers and rangers that investigate smoke sightings. Aircraft can also spot a fire as a distress signal by placing three fires arranged in a triangle 100 feet apart.

Another great technique is to use various reflecting signals to attract attention — such as mirrors, lids from cans or broken glass with one side coated with mud. You can also wave a brightly colored jacket or shirt tied to a long stick. 🏃

For more information on outdoor survival training, look into a National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) or oftentimes your local outfitter, such as REI or A16, will run courses on wilderness survival.

Kevin Jackson is the owner of TST Adventures, an adventure guiding and training company in San Diego, California. To learn more about any of their global adventures call (858) 309-2311 or e-mail at info@tstadventures.com.

Hi-Tech Devices for Added Safety

Technology has also provided outdoor enthusiasts with the means to ensure a rapid rescue with satellite phones, more powerful GPS Systems and, most recently, the SPOT messaging system. This consumer-friendly product enables users to send messages to family or emergency responders based on varying levels of need. All these technical devices increase your ability to communicate in remote situations and further your chances of survival.

A note of caution: These technical devices should never take the place of your basic survival items.

10 Survival Items to Pack on Your Next Trip

1. Waterproof Matches
2. Fire Starter
3. Leatherman Tool
4. Compass
5. Signal Mirror
6. Plastic Tarp
7. Fifty Feet of Nylon Cord (1/8 Inch)
8. Water Purification Tablets
9. Fish Hooks & Line
10. Whistle