

# LOST

## SURVIVING A NIGHT IN THE WOODS

BY CHARLES CHALK

**W**hen asked if he had ever been lost, Daniel Boone replied, “No, never lost, just powerful confused for a while.” This saying applies to most of us every now and then. Getting turned around on a hike, leaving home for a hunting trip without a map, or just staying out too late in the dark, all can easily leave you ‘powerful confused.’

There are hundreds of books, thousands of websites and several top-notch schools on wilderness survival. What most of us need, though, is basic information. Every summer, people get lost in our mountains, and in the fall, rescue crews search for hunters overdue in camp. While true emergencies require assis-

tance, many times you can keep yourself out of trouble with the right tools and a little know-how. A night in the woods can be survived.



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*Stay calm and STOP when you don't know where you are.*

### THE BRAIN – THE ORIGINAL SURVIVAL TOOL

First, let's talk about that feeling. You know, the ominous feeling that you don't know where you are and you have no idea what to do. The first thing to do is STOP; a little acronym that means “Sit Think Observe and Plan.” Above all, stay calm.

I was once hunting in northern Vermont and had forgotten to turn on my GPS and didn't have a compass (see, we all do things we shouldn't).



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*Survival priority number 1: Always be ready to build a fire and a shelter.*

Suddenly, that panic feeling started, and my reason began to fade. I headed off in a direction I thought was toward my truck. The sun angle seemed wrong, though, so I stopped and reasoned it through. I was going completely the wrong way, toward some vast wilderness and on to Canada. Thirty minutes of travel in that direction would have put me there for the night! So, if you find yourself in that situation, just STOP.

New Hampshire has abundant forests and wild places, but most of the time, you are never really too far from a road, house or other form of civilization. Even in Coos County, the vast tracts of land are criss-crossed with logging roads and snowmobile trails that eventually lead to some form of help. Taking maps with you – and arming yourself with a simple understanding of the area by studying maps before you head out – is critical. Never take old or outdated maps as primary travel tools.

Some people rely on GPS (Global Positioning System) units. While the better models have maps installed and have saved many lost people, do not rely on technology alone! A fall can destroy the electronics, and night use requires extra battery

*Anytime you head into the woods, you should carry a good folding knife, basic survival kit, compass and fire-starting material. Are you carrying the ten survival essentials? Check the list – and find more tips on safe hiking – at [www.hikeSafe.com](http://www.hikeSafe.com).*

power to light the screen. Rely on the compass as a back-up means of navigation. Always travel with both and know how to use them.

## SURVIVAL BASICS

Whenever you head out, even if just for a short trip in familiar territory, you should always have a few basic items with you. Fish and Game’s hikeSafe Program ([www.hikesafe.com](http://www.hikesafe.com)) outlines an excellent list of the ten essentials to take, plus more tips for “staying found.” As an experienced woodsman, I’d like to add my thoughts on some of the best items to take and how to carry them.

I suggest the pockets for carrying some items and a pack for others. What you carry in your pockets goes every time, regardless of the length of trip. Make it a habit to pick them up – you should feel “naked” without them. Other items can be put in a pack that you use for longer trips. These items will be needed if you cannot travel or have an injury that prevents you from getting out of the woods on your own.

The pockets should carry a good folding knife, a basic survival kit, compass and fire-starting material. The knife is an indispensable tool. Choose a knife that is first quality and has a fairly thick blade, clips to the pocket and securely locks open. I like the CRKT “M-4,” because it meets these criteria, and the blade can be opened easily using one hand. This is useful if one of your hands is injured. Knives are the most versatile tool and can be used to fashion other tools, make shelter, build a fire, prepare food and more.

Add to that a basic survival kit. You can make your own, or buy a good kit. The best I have ever found – and highly rated by survivalists – is the Adventure Medical Kits “Pocket Survival Pak.” A fire starter,



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signaling device, fishhooks, whistle and small compass are all packed in a rugged plastic bag that weighs just 3.9 ounces and is about the size of a wallet.

You should still have room for a quality folding orienteering compass that can be used with maps. Skip the cheap models found in the camping section of most stores. Remember, this little tool is your ticket for travel, but only if you know how to use it.

Finally, fire-starting materials. Do you take matches, a lighter or a survival fire starter? My preference is the common old Zippo® lighter. True, you have to check the fuel often, but it is windproof, works without holding down a locking lever, can be lit and set down so you can light tinder from the flame and, as many GI's from World War II can attest, it can be used as a hand warmer by simply partially closing the lid over an open flame. It works at the coldest temperatures, unlike butane disposables.

By keeping these items in your pocket, you are always ready to build a shelter and fire. These two capabilities are priority #1. Practice your skills, so you're ready to use them, and test your gear to make sure it's in working order.

In your pack, you'll take equipment needed for a long-term situation – food, small axe, sleeping comfort, flashlight, first aid and water purification. These are just too big for pockets and, if they reside in a plastic zippered bag in your pack, they are there when you need them. I won't elaborate much on these items, because they should be based on your specific needs. For sleeping comfort, the Mylar silver blanket is a poor choice. Instead, choose one of the new sleeping bag-style products. Also, if you travel with others, teach them to carry their own survival kit, or make one for them. But just in case, carry extras.

### **I'M LOST!**

Finally, if the day comes and you must face the reality that you are not going to get home, here are the basics. First, before you left home or camp, you should have told someone about your trip plan. That would include time of departure/return, the number in the party, vehicle type, mode of travel, campsite location and trail names. You should have left a folded copy of your trip plan, with your name on the outside,



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in plain view on the dashboard of your vehicle.

Rather than risk injury traveling in the dark, STOP and spend time building a shelter from whatever material is available. Don't waste time looking for the perfect shelter, just build up brush and limbs to block the wind. Gather as much wood as possible for a fire. You can never get too much. Don't build a fire where it may spread to the surrounding forest; look for clear ground with little tree cover above. This will allow smoke to travel upward and be noticed.

Watch for danger signs. Dehydration is common, as you may not remember to drink often while exerting energy. Hypothermia is also a serious concern. Even in mild weather, wind chill can lower body temperature. To keep dry, remove heavy clothes while working. Use your emergency sleeping gear to stay warm. As darkness falls, don't let panic and fear take over. You may sense that danger lurks just outside the light of the fire, but few animals in New Hampshire present any real threat.

When daylight comes, build up the fire again and create smoke by using wet, rotten logs on a hot bed of coals. Avoid pine boughs, as they create sparks and little smoke. Above all, stay put. Rescuers may have already seen your fire and be on the way. Plus, any move in the wrong direction could put you into further trouble. N.H. Fish and Game and partner rescue services come to the aid of many lost souls each year. For most, the outcome is good. For you, the outcome should be better, now that you know the basics of spending a night in the woods. **W**

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*Outdoor writer Charles Chalk has been published in regional and national magazines. He is skilled in primitive survival and familiar with the life of the mountain men of the 1800s. He lives in Coos County.*

*New Hampshire has abundant wilderness areas to explore, like Franconia Notch, above. Whether you're hiking a mountaintop or taking a walk in your local woods, always be prepared by taking the right gear.*