

HOW TO

What is a Comprehensive Wilderness Survival Kit and Why Should You Have One?

We all carry survival kits whether we realize it or not. The contents of a man's pockets or those of a woman's purse are nothing more than survival kits for a populated technological society. You have all the things you'll likely need to fill your needs throughout your day. Keys, cash, identification, credit cards, membership cards and other items all serve to fill your needs as they arise. Luckily for us, most of our human needs are filled by technology and the remainder can be filled as you go with cash or credit.

So how does a 'wilderness survival kit' differ from the items we carry every day? In a wilderness setting, we don't have quick access to emergency medical care. We don't have a roof over our head or a climate controlled environment. We don't have sinks and water fountains bubbling with potable water or edible food everywhere we look. Therefore, we'll need to carry most or all of these things with us. The 'best' wilderness survival kit is probably a backpack full of quality camping gear. However, most of us aren't willing to carry that load when day hiking, mountain biking, snowmobiling, cross-country skiing, riding ATV's, hunting, horseback riding or any of the myriad other activities that carry us away from civilization.

The goal of a *practical* wilderness survival kit is therefore to address as many of our needs as possible and to do it in a format that we don't mind carrying on our person while conducting outdoor activities. For some, this might be a small tin carried in a pocket, but these micro-kits don't really address a lot of the most critical needs. For me, a belt pouch based kit is unobtrusive enough that I'm likely to carry it during outdoor activities. It is also big enough to really address human needs in the wild. I have several types of kits that I carry. Some are rudimentary, while some are very comprehensive. It really depends on where I'm headed. All of them are simple belt pouch based kits.

Belt pouch based kits

At this point, let's define what your critical needs really are and why. The easiest way to do this (and to prioritize the order in which you should address them) is by using a simple maxim known as the "rule of threes".

The rule of threes says:

- It takes as little as 3 minutes to die of severe injury.
- It takes as little as 3 hours to die of exposure.
- It takes as little as 3 days to die of thirst.
- It takes at least 3 weeks to die of hunger.

Your very first priority in a survival situation is to address immediate first aid needs. If you or a companion cannot breathe, or are bleeding profusely, death can come in as little as three minutes. You aren't likely to carry a comprehensive medical kit everywhere you go, but a wilderness survival kit should have at least the basics of first aid such as bandages and the ability to make a tourniquet. If you travel far and wide on a regular basis, it's a very good idea to learn the basics of first aid (establishing an airway, dealing with profuse bleeding, CPR, etc).

Next, we have to deal with the *number one killer* in wilderness survival situations: exposure. When people become lost, stuck or injured in wilderness settings, they might have been well dressed for a leisurely day in the woods, but when night falls or unexpected weather blows in, they find themselves in a very dangerous situation.

Television shows about survival like to show people building rudimentary brush shelters and other forms of shelter using materials at hand. However, building a weatherproof shelter from scratch is incredibly time consuming. It takes 18-24 inches of brush overhead to effectively shed rain. This means it might take many hours (and a lot of energy) to build a decent shelter. If you're lost, night is fast approaching and a freezing rain starts to fall, you don't have that many hours!

This is why my survival kits include a tarp made of very thin plastic. This can be draped over a line strung between trees to form a small tent or simply draped over a

bush in a pinch. That means that you can build a waterproof, windproof shelter in minutes, not hours! As mentioned, it's incredibly thin plastic, so I can fold a 9' by 6' tarp into a packet about half the size of a deck of cards.

Beyond simple shelter, you'll likely need a fire. Those same survival shows often portray various methods of primitive fire starting (bow drills, hand drills, ploughs, etc). However, if the weather has come in hard and things are becoming 'wet 'n' wild', you're NOT going to get a fire going using primitive methods. These may be fun skills to practice as an educational exercise in your back yard, but relying on these methods to make fire in an actual emergency is a great way to wind up dead.

A good survival kit should have *multiple* means to *quickly* build a fire. There should be a lighter, not matches. There should be easily-lit tinder that burns for a long time. In essence, if you can't use a kit's fire starting materials when it's cold, wet and windy, it's a useless kit!

Once you're settled into a shelter and have a sustainable fire going, you're going to eventually need water. In a desert environment, death from dehydration can come in a few days. In most environments, it takes nearly a week. Again, you don't want to rely on a single source or method here. A good kit should have multiple means of gathering water, and multiple means of purifying it for drinking. My kits are packed in metal cook pots which can be used for boiling water. They also contain a water purification kit that can treat many gallons of water even if you can't boil it. Finally, they have re-sealable water bags to transport water should you need to bring it with you.

We will come to food procurement, but there's something else that falls outside the rule of threes. It's not really a survival 'need', and doesn't fit neatly into the rule, but it is at least as important. This is *signaling*. If you've been a responsible adult when it comes to your outdoor activities, you've informed responsible people of exactly where you were headed, and exactly when you should return. This means there will be people looking for you!

Signaling means making your profile in the woods into something bigger, louder, brighter, and the more obnoxious the better! A good survival kit contains whistles, flashlights, strobe markers, bright and/or reflective items, mirrors, etc. If you were

smart and told people where you were going, your survival situation will likely last a matter of hours, or maybe an uncomfortable overnight stay before you are found.

Forget about the survival shows on television where they portray wilderness survival as some kind of bug-eating contest. As I've pointed out, food is really your last priority. For most of us, skipping a few meals might not be a bad thing when all is said and done! I make this the last priority when constructing a wilderness kit. I have some fish hooks and line, some snare wire and some slingshot bands that can be used to quickly construct a variety of small game hunting tools (you can make a slingshot, a propelled fishing spear, or use as the 'spring' for a trap/snare). Some kits even contain a spearhead that can be quickly and securely mounted on a shaft and used for fishing and/or small to mid sized game.

In conclusion, I hope I've imparted some common sense into this subject. That means informing folks of your intentions. It means having at least a basic fundamental understanding of wilderness survival and how to prioritize and fulfill your needs should you find yourself in trouble. Finally, it means maintaining at least a basic level of preparedness when heading into untamed regions. When buying or building your own kit, make sure it fills your needs and that it's something you'll actually carry. As with other essential day to day 'carry' items... it's better to have it and not need it, than to need it and not have it!

Written by Mike Forti . Mike is the owner and webmaster of one of the top ranked wilderness survival websites. His practical approach to wilderness survival demystifies the subject and imparts common sense into a topic that is often filled with misleading or sensationalized information.