

Man vs. Mother Nature

What to do if you get lost in the woods?
Put your survival skills to the test. BY MATTHEW GRAHAM

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ADAM EWING

Deep in the woods, I'm lying under a lean-to fashioned from a plastic bag and spooning my friend and coworker Christopher. Not what I anticipated when signing up for a weekend Wilderness Survival Course. But hey, when you're cold and without the comforts of home, you do what you have to.

I began the course the day before with my wife, Karen, two hiking friends, Sean and Julia, Chris and our instructor, Eliza Cava, from Go-AdventureSports. My friends and I each spend a great deal of time in the outdoors—hiking, climbing, biking. However, none of us has any training in survival skills. I was also motivated to take the class after becoming hooked on the *Man vs. Wild* show on the Discovery Channel. In each episode, the survival expert is thrown into some awful place (a rain forest or a desert) and left to fend for himself for a week. It makes for great TV, but I wondered how many of the experts' survival techniques were true.

To make our backcountry adventure more exciting, Eliza and I picked a section of Shenandoah National Park (SNP) that has the highest concentration of black bears. Our class began with a review of our backpacking gear on a stretch of grass near the head of the Overall Run Trail, near Matthew's Arm Campground in SNP. Eliza stressed that the most important survival tool is being prepared. We all had water, tents, sleeping bags, camping food and various methods of water purification.

In addition to water and shelter, said Eliza, it's equally important to know where you are. She distributed topographical maps and compasses. Topo maps have lines indicating changes in elevation along terrain. When hiking, I follow a trail map or use my Global Positioning System device. I also carry a compass, but I can't recall ever using it.

With Eliza's help, we aligned magnetic north with the north marker on the map. Then Eliza asked us to find a heading to the trailhead. Karen and I, Sean, Julia and Chris laid our maps on the grass and took our bearings. We stood up and each of us faced a different direction. Hmmmm?

Eliza explained the procedure again, and we started from scratch. Again, we all faced different directions. Eliza then checked our compasses. Each pointed a different direction for north. Turns out we



were right on top of a metal pipe, and it was causing the offset. We all marched over to another area and tried again—this time with success.

Encouraged, we packed our bags and headed up the trail. Eliza stopped randomly along the way and asked us to determine our location on the map by using indications of altitude change in relation to geographical features. One of the key features on a topo map is that a series of inverted V's on the altitude delineation lines indicate the presence of a ravine, often a source of running water. The opposite indicates high ground. Eliza explained that if you ever get lost in the woods, find a hill, go downhill until you find a ravine or creek, follow that to a river and follow the river to civilization.

We stopped at an overlook of the Overall Run Waterfalls. A thin stream of water plunged down into a narrow rocky canyon. The 93-foot-high single-cascade waterfall is the tallest **TK.** Above, on the trail. me wondering about other flows—the biological kind. Urine is sterile; however, you still need to relieve yourself away from any water source or campsite. For numero 2, Eliza emphasized the importance of digging a wide latrine hole in the ground, far away from ground water and streams, and only using small amounts of toilet paper. Leaves also work, but you run the risk of a rash. A large

stick works best. You find a straight branch and remove the bark. She rooted around for a branch, and then, like a beaver, nibbled off the little bumps to make the stick smooth. Standing, Eliza ran it back and forth between her legs.

"It's like flossing your butt," I commented.

"Exactly!" she replied. "The stick is your friend."

After that hygiene break, we descended countless switchbacks and arrived at our campsite near a swimming hole. We were hot, tired and sweaty. The original plan was to practice making shelters. Instead, we changed into swimming suits and jumped into the water. It was so cold it made my teeth chatter. Any significant time in the water would definitely cause hypothermia. Still, for a few moments, it felt great.

We set up our tents as daylight faded and then discussed food preparation. Eliza heated water over a camping stove and cooked up beans and rice. Over dinner, Eliza explained that food is actually not a priority when you're in a survival mode—the body can go for days without grub. Water, however, is a necessity. Chris asked about giardia, an intestinal parasite. Eliza noted that not everyone comes down with giardiasis, and it takes about five days to develop symptoms. The risk of dehydration far outweighs the risk of giardiasis in a survival situation.

After eating, we gathered our trash and placed it in a "bear bag." We then used parachute cord to suspend the bag from a tree limb 20 feet off the ground, in a ravine across from our campsite. Backpackers commonly do this, of course, to keep mice, deer and bears away from camp. I wanted to see a bear ... just not one in my tent in the middle of the night.

In the morning, we enjoyed a hearty breakfast of oatmeal, granola bars and tea. Then it was back into



the woods for more navigation practice. Our map and compass skills had drastically improved. I easily ascertained the direction to the nearest peak. If you are already high, it's smart to find a peak and look for signs of civilization. Eliza then gave us lots of tips—on first aid, knot tying and more. We learned how to squat to minimize a lightning strike, how to identify poison ivy, how to build shelters from tarps or, alternatively, sticks and leaves, and how to build a solar still to trap dew.

Eliza shooed us off toward the ravine and told us to make a shelter. Sean, Julia and I found a tree with a split about three feet up the trunk. Then we needed a long, sturdy branch to put between the ground and the gap in the trunk, to create a spine for a shelter "roof." No such branches seemed to exist. Julia suggested we use two thin branches side by side to form the apex of our roof. This worked and we set about piling sticks up on either side of the spine to form a sort of an A-frame structure that tapered from the nook in the tree down to the ground. We piled alternating layers of sticks and leaves until the roof seemed watertight.

"Okay, pile in," Eliza commanded.

Right, a view of the Shenandoah National Park. Bottom, taking a bearing with a compass.

"I don't think we'll all fit," Chris replied. Eliza assured us that we would. Feeling something like a clown act, all of us, except for Eliza, squeezed into the tiny shelter. It was tight, but we fit. And it was hot; leaves make great insulation.

For our final exam, Eliza broke us into two teams—Chris and me, Sean and Julia. Karen bowed out to take pictures. Each team was given a trash bag and told to make a shelter. I decided a lean-to would be easiest. Chris found a couple of trees about six feet apart. I split the bag down the middle, and we tied two corners of the bag to the trees and secured the other two corners to the ground with rocks. Meantime, Sean and Julia were still debating what to do. Ha!



They finally fashioned a flimsy lean-to using a few sticks while Chris and I climbed under our bag.

Covered in sweat and dirt, we jumped back into the river to cool off and then broke camp. Along the five-mile hike out, Eliza spotted a bear paw print, but no bears were to be found.

Back at the parking-area campground, Eliza showed us various ways to make fires. Open fires are only allowed at designated campgrounds in SNP. The survival experts on TV always stress the importance of making a fire, but Eliza said that isn't always true. For one thing, the wood in a wilderness area is often wet. Better to focus your energy on building a shelter—or getting out of the woods altogether.

To start a fire, she suggested dryer lint. Another good starter is a cotton ball coated with petroleum jelly.

After a demonstration, we built a little nest out of straw and dry leaves and then formed a teepee of small wet sticks over the nest. Using a flint, I could get the fire started, but it fizzled out every time, the wood too wet to ignite. "You could spend all day doing this," I said. Eliza

pointed out that you don't have all day when trying to survive. We all nodded as if this were some great revelation.

So while we failed to create a fire, we learned what is most crucial to surviving in the woods: common sense. With that in mind, Karen and I washed up in a restroom next to the campground, climbed back into our car and cranked up the air-conditioning. Ahh! Roughing it in the wilderness is amazing fun and always a great adventure. But how did people ever survive before air conditioning?

On the Trail

Go-AdventureSports.com or (240) 603-4150. A weekend course costs \$175 per person.

Mountain Shepherd offers a weekend Wilderness Survival Class 101 near Lynchburg for \$295 per person. Mountain-Shepherd.com or 434-238-3718.

Earth Connection runs weekend wilderness survival classes in Northern Virginia for \$180 per person. Earth-Connection.com or 540-270-2531.

