

## **BRING 'EM BACK ALIVE**

### **Survival techniques for outdoor photographers.**

**by Bill Vanderpool**

Notice the articles and photographs in issues of Outdoor Photographer and you will see beautiful rock formations, stunning canyons and spectacular wildlife. Excepting those photographs taken in your own backyard, the location of these images is often rough and remote. Serious photographers go to great lengths to get the pictures. But what about getting back?

Consider this scenario. You are hurrying to catch that “wonder light” before the sun sets behind the canyon wall. Tripod on one shoulder and bag of camera gear over the other, you head the mile or so down the rocky path, no one else in sight. Then you step on that rock that shifts under your foot and you feel the sharp pain in your ankle, a sprain or worse. You have a half hour to dark and nighttime temperatures can hit the low to mid-twenties at this time of year.

How or if you survive this situation depends on many factors, your attitude, and what preparations you made, some well before you left your vehicle at the trailhead. To increase your chance of survival or quick rescue, it is critical that you let a responsible person know where you are going, and when you expect to return. That person should have instructions on who to contact if you fail to meet a deadline. There is a reason that park rangers require backcountry hikers and campers to check in (and out) for their trip. The rangers then know who is still out there, past due. Some trailheads have sign in sheets. Use them. This one step greatly increases your chance of survival or at least avoiding a very uncomfortable experience.

At that moment you realize you have a problem, feelings of panic, embarrassment and disbelief can take over. The best action at this time is none. Sit down, take a few deep breaths and analyze your situation. Stay calm and above all, even if you are mobile, don't immediately start moving. It is usually best to stay where you are. Searchers start at their best guess of your location and they are often correct. If you are at your vehicle, stay with it. It is easier to spot and offers shelter and other makeshift survival material.

Fortunately, most survival situations in the U.S. usually last less than 72 hours. Long term survival needs are rare. Keep this in mind in your preparations.

The next key to survival is what you have with you. This is another pre-trip preparation that is critical. There aren't many real life McGivers around who can make a signal flare from a memory card. You are meticulous in your equipment list for your photography needs. You should give your survival requirements at least as much thought. In general, you should include those needed for basic first aid, shelter, fire, rescue, safe water and food. Some of these items are probably already in your pockets and pack. I always carry a sharp pocketknife and/or sheath knife with me. Drinking water, a snack and in bear or lion country, I also carry a can of bear spray, not in my pack but on my belt where I can get to it in a hurry. Sadly enough, the bear spray can also be handy for two legged predators.

Let's consider what specific items you should have with you. Remember, the kit should only be as large and heavy as you are willing to carry, **every time**. You can buy a ready made survival kit such as those offered by Adventure Medical Kits ([www.adventuremedicalkits.com](http://www.adventuremedicalkits.com)). Many of the outdoor stores offer them or others. But you might be better off making your own.

Mine is in an aluminum can with lid that I bought from The Container Store ([www.containerstore.com](http://www.containerstore.com)). It is four inches in diameter and almost 2 ½ inches deep. I punch two holes in the can under the lid and include copper wire to make a mini cook pot. The can is sealed with electricians tape and has my contact information on one end and a list of the contents on the other.

Before I put anything in the container, I lay it out in some order of priority. **Don't put anything in the can that you don't know how to use.** If you are looking at the blood coming from a bad cut on your leg, that is not the time to read about compress bandages. Check that signal mirror before it goes in. It's not hard to use but you should know the tricks of getting it on target. Your kit should contain these items as the very basics:

**FIRE:** Being able to build a fire is critical. It is important for warmth, heating food, sterilizing water, signaling for help and finally, fire is a very good psychological boost. Wind proof and water proof matches (often called storm or lifeboat matches) with striker are your primary fire starter. Back-up can be a butane lighter or magnesium stick and steel. A small amount of fire paste or cubes can really help in damp weather. **Be sure to practice building a fire before you go out. If you don't know how, ask a Boy Scout or experienced camper.**

**FIRST AID:** Basic first aid gear should include butterfly strips, adhesive bandages, antibiotics such as Neosporin, aspirin and heavy duty pain killer. I obtain a prescription from my doctor for Codeine #3. You don't have to pack the whole prescription bottle. Move some to a smaller, well marked container. Be sure to include dosage. Anti-diarrheal medicine and, of course, any prescription medicine you must have on a daily basis is included. I also add a few antihistamines in mine. Include a single edge razor blade, handy for opening blisters or cutting line.

**WATER:** While we can live for many days without food, water is another matter. In hot, dry climates, your body starts shutting down after a relatively short time without water in some form. While fire can be used to boil untested water, I also carry purification tablets. Use one of those zip loc bags you keep in your camera pack as a makeshift canteen. Even rapidly moving stream water can be contaminated.

**RESCUE:** A fire is an excellent rescue resource. Green leaves or oil from an engine can produce white or black smoke. I also include a signal mirror and a miniature LED light. A whistle can be heard at a much greater distance than your yelling and with less effort. A compass should be considered as a last resort, when you are convinced you have to move from your original location.

**SHELTER:** In my kit is about ten feet of light nylon cord, useful for making a makeshift tent. A rescue blanket is carried separately. It is compactly folded, about the size of a deck of cards and is made of a very thin reflective plastic. It is excellent to help prevent heat loss and can be utilized as a tent. You will

want to try to locate some type of shelter, a downed tree or rock overhang. But don't waste too much energy on building an elaborate shelter unless the weather is extreme.

**FOOD:** I mentioned that the majority of emergency situations last less than 72 hours and a person can go without food for that period. But something warm can be very welcome. To that end, I always include two tea bags and four sugar packets in my kit. If space allows, an envelope of chicken soup mix is great.

In order to fit these critical items in a small container, you may have to take them out of their original packaging and put them into smaller, sealed containers with labels. You don't have to pack all 24 aspirin. Just a few should do. If you experiment you will be amazed at how much you can put into a small space. And hope you will never have to use it.

Don't be complacent just because you are in good weather. Conditions, particularly in the West, can change quickly and drastically. A friend of mine was conducting a wildlife survey in the Shirley Basin of Wyoming when he had to quickly break camp due to an approaching snow storm. In July!

Enjoy the outdoors. Get those wonderful pictures. But bring yourself back alive.

End

The author is a retired Special Agent of the FBI and an avid outdoorsman. He is a serious amateur photographer and active in the Northern Virginia Photographic Society.