

Finding Your Way



Exploring a new location is an exciting experience. Even hiking a well-used trail gives a sense of adventure that can rarely be evoked by a city street. This is why people like to do so many activities in the great outdoors! But, for many people, the thought of getting lost is very scary. In fact, every year, people die from exposure to the elements after losing their sense of direction and becoming lost. Sadly, some are not very far from civilization, but they panic and become unable to orient themselves. In this publication, you will learn the basics of woodcraft to keep you on track and out of danger's way if you get lost.

Have a Plan

It is important to have a plan for your adventure. Some people like to plan every detail of their trips, while others are satisfied with simply selecting a general area to discover. Either approach is fine, as long as you enjoy your time in the great outdoors. However, you will want to note sunrise and sunset times, which will help you plan your daytime travel. Remember that the journey is not the destination; it is the steps that you take to get there.

A plan can be as simple as letting someone know your intended destination and how long you plan to be gone. This should be more than adequate, especially on day trips. If you're planning a longer trip, you should give your contact person more information, including where you plan to stay each evening, what popular sites you will be near, and how to contact you. On more dangerous adventures where limited emergency services exist, plan to call and check in at a specific time.

Leave a Note

Place a note in the windshield of your vehicle with your name, cell number, and time you plan to return to the vehicle. This may sound like an invitation for someone to break into your vehicle, but in emergency situations where time is of the essence, it could save your life. Just be sure to keep all valuables secure and/or out of sight. Don't put home addresses or names of spouses on these notes. Giving away too much information could result in criminal activity while you are out and about.

Know Your Physical Ability

Our bodies are sometimes not as young as our minds, and the stamina we had at 20 years old may not be the same as at 40. A daily or weekly walk on a paved road

requires much less exertion than walking up and down hills in the woods. Even if you are very young, it is a good idea to start off with small adventures and work your way up. The most experienced hikers know that, to build endurance, they need to start long journeys with short treks each day.

Set a Goal

Motivate yourself by setting a goal for the distance you want to travel in a day's time. Getting from Point A to Point C on a map is achievable if the distance is reasonable and you have a Point B in between. If you don't make the entire trip in one day, your next goal can be to work harder on your endurance, so you'll be prepared the next time you hit the trail.

Plan for Safety

First Aid Kit

Most of us live in a state of false security—we think that accidents really only happen to other people—that is, until something actually happens to us. Being prepared does not mean you need to stockpile bandages. However, a small first aid kit is a must. Many of these kits are light and compact and take up very little room in a day pack. It is a good idea to assess the riskiness of the trip and then pack your kit accordingly.

Fire-Starting Equipment

The glow of a warm fire can make a lost person feel secure and keep them warm. You can start a fire by many methods, from flint and steel to a simple cigarette lighter. You can also use a fire to signal your location to search parties. Just remember to take the proper precautions to avoid causing a forest fire! See MSU Extension Publication 3277 *How to Build a Campfire*.

Mirror

No, this is not to check your appearance! Instead, you can use a mirror to reflect your location through trees and other dense terrain to potential air rescue teams.

Learn to Use a Map and Compass

Knowing your direction of travel is very important. There is something very comforting in knowing, without a doubt, where you are and which direction you are traveling. Here are some tools you can use:

Cell Phone

Today's phones have internal maps that show you exactly where you're standing, along with any nearby roads or towns. However, phones are notorious for running out of power and/or signal at the most inopportune times. Be sure your phone is fully charged, and carry a portable charger with you. But remember that cell service could be limited, so it is probably not a good idea to count on your phone as your sole orientation device.

Global Positioning System (GPS) Device

GPS systems have gotten more compact throughout the years. And, unlike your cell phone, GPS devices use satellites instead of cell phone towers. A GPS is far more reliable and does not use as much battery life as a cell phone. Additionally, a GPS can be recharged instantly with fresh batteries.

Compass

The compass has been a source of reliable navigation for hundreds of years. Using a compass is not as complicated as you might imagine, but you do need to learn how to use it before you head out on your adventure. Any good compass has a needle that simply points toward magnetic north. Simply knowing what direction you are facing can be helpful if you become lost. If, for example, you know a town is to the east, then you can walk in that direction and more than likely find some type of civilization (road, house, stream) that can help you find your way. See MSU Extension Publication 3322 *Basic Compass Orienteering* to learn more about using a compass.

Maps

It is always helpful to have a map of the location where you will be exploring. Even if the map is not very detailed, at least you will have a better grasp of where roads and/or trails lead. A more detailed map may be needed if the terrain is more rugged and/or there are changes in elevation. A topographical map shows these changes and normally carries a good deal more detail of landmarks, as well. When combined with a compass, a map can be a powerful tool if you find yourself lost in the woods.

Remain Calm

If you find yourself completely turned around and without any of the aforementioned tools to find your way back, the number one rule is **DON'T PANIC!** Fear can cause your body to become immobile and/or irrational. Any stress may induce shock, which, combined with other environmental factors such as cold and heat, could lead to a potentially life-threatening situation.

Some people's reaction to being lost is to run in no apparent direction, which is not helpful and will waste their energy. At this point, their ability to think rationally is diminished, so they make further poor decisions.

Remember: survival is in your hands. The choices you make must be sound. Remember the acronym **STOP**:

S—Stay calm. You are more than likely just turned around and not as lost as you think. Again, even if you are deep in the wild, you have the ability to survive!

T—Think. Take a breath and determine your next move. Stay where you are for a moment while you calm yourself down.

O—Observe. What do your surroundings look like? Have you been in this area before? What landmarks do you remember on the walk in? What resources do you have at your disposal? Taking an inventory of what you have on hand allows you to better assess the situation.

P—Plan. What is your next move going to be? Once you have calmed down, you need to walk through a series of steps. If there is a possibility of staying overnight, you need to make preparations. Gathering materials for a fire, starting the fire, making a bed of dry pine straw, and making a simple lean-to shelter can be enough to get your mind off of the fact that you are lost and your focus back on solving the problem.

Keep It in Perspective

While it's important to plan for safety, don't be afraid to get outside and enjoy the great outdoors. Planning ahead can ensure that you have a fun, safe adventure.

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