

Lost and Found!

By Karen Berger. Illustration by Patrick Faricy

People get lost in the wilderness more often than you might think. The keys to being found include preparing well, responding correctly, and carrying a well-stocked survival kit.



It starts with a fleeting notion that something is wrong, but you ignore it.

That's your first mistake.

You continue, thinking you're on the right path. Slowly you realize that you haven't seen any trail markers lately, and your map shows nothing in common with the landscape. What seemed like an easy hike has suddenly turned into a survival emergency.

You are lost in the wilderness.

"People don't believe it, but it happens all the time," says Laurence Gonzales, author of *Deep Survival: Who Lives, Dies, and Why* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2003). "Spatial awareness is not an instinct; it is something we have to learn."

We don't acquire this skill living in urban areas, he adds. In cities "we learn memorized routes that take us from A to B. [But] these routes don't give us a sense of where we actually are in a landscape."

The ABC's of preparation

Proper preparation can greatly reduce or eliminate the possibility of becoming lost in the wilderness, notes Randy Servis, president of the National Association for Search and Rescue (NASAR). Servis recommends hikers use the "ABC's of preparation."

"A is '**Always tell** someone exactly where you're going and exactly when you'll be back.' Be specific: Outline your precise route, right down to your intended campsites. Leave information with someone at home and also check in with ranger stations and fill out wilderness permits. Most important: Don't deviate from your plan.

"B is '**Be prepared.**' This means educating yourself about local conditions and carrying appropriate gear.

"C is '**Carry a survival kit.**' The contents should meet three needs: shelter, fire, and signaling."

Gonzales carries a fanny pack containing a large heavy-duty plastic garbage bag, which can be used as both shelter and rain gear, and a medium-weight plastic drop cloth with 25 to 50 feet of parachute cord, which can be used to rig a tent.

Other items include a knife, fire starter, folding saw, titanium tent stakes, chemical light-sticks, notebook and pen, signaling mirror, aluminized emergency rescue blanket, bandanna, orange surveyor's tape, metal cup, water-repellent matches and lighter, and small first-aid kit.

Add to this a **whistle**. Three shrill blasts are an internationally recognized distress signal. A

whistle can be heard farther than someone yelling, and it takes less effort.

Global positioning system (GPS) units may be useful for land navigation, but nothing substitutes for basic map and compass skills.

“I can’t emphasize enough how foolhardy it is to walk in the wilderness without a map,” Gonzales warns.

Vigilance can be as important as navigation skills, he adds. Maintain a constant awareness of where you are and how to get back to where you started.

STOP if lost

“You are less likely to get lost if you understand it can happen to you,” Gonzales says. “A little humility is a good thing.”

And if it does happen to you, he recommends relying on the acronym **STOP: “Stop, Think, Observe, and Plan.”** This is the same method taught to Scouts as a requirement for their Tenderfoot rank.

“The most important thing is to stop and stay calm. Eat and drink something. Make a fire. It provides warmth and psychological support, and it can be seen from the air by rescuers.”

Then start to think, observe, and plan: Consider how you got where you are and where you went wrong. Go back in your mind to your last known point. Could you have missed a turn on the trail and wandered onto a game path? When was the last time you remember seeing a feature you could identify?

If this process doesn’t help you to successfully backtrack, you probably should not try to hike out blindly on your own.

“If you’ve told people your plans and haven’t intentionally deviated, stay put,” Gonzales advises. “If you’ve followed the ABC’s of preparation, there is no reason why, inside the continental United States, you wouldn’t be found within 12 hours. Make yourself big and visible, especially from the air. Use clothes, fire, sticks, signaling devices.”

(Both Gonzales and Servis, however, agree that some cases, such as a medical emergency, may require walking out.)

One final piece of advice (which probably should be first): Always hike with at least one other person.

“Buddies can help each other stay calm and make better decisions,” says Randy Servis.

Karen Berger is the author of Backpacking and Hiking (DK Publishing Inc., 2005).

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The 10 Scout Essentials

1. Pocketknife or multipurpose tool
 2. First aid kit
 3. Extra clothing
 4. Headlamp or flashlight
 5. Rain gear
 6. Water bottle
 7. Map and compass
 8. Matches and fire starter
 9. Sun protection, sunglasses
 10. Trail food
- + plus a whistle

Stay with your buddy