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What is it like to survive the wilderness?

Why?

In the last couple of years there has been a rising popularity in such survival television programs as *Man vs. Wild* and *Survivor Man*. In these TV shows rugged tough guys Bear Grylls and Les Stroud document themselves confronting the wilderness in various survival scenarios. Prior to each episode, a disclaimer appears warning viewers, these men are trained professionals and to not attempt these actions, unless in an emergency survival situation. I began to wonder if it is even possible for the average person, like myself, to walk away unscathed after becoming stranded in the wild. Can I survive if I am ever in that situation?

What I already know (and don't know) about needing to survive

Each year thousands of hikers, hunters, and outdoorsmen become stranded in the wilderness. Some people live. Some people die. People may become disoriented, and begin to panic. When people panic the real danger sets in. When someone begins to panic they lose sight of their goals and may ultimately lose the fight between life and death. For

most, surviving the elements may prove to be the toughest part of the challenge. In almost every survival situation hypothermia is like a looming spirit that may claim its victim in less than an hour. In order to brave the wild I will need to research the effects and symptoms of hypothermia, as well as find ways to ward it off. I already know staying warm and dry play a very important role, so I will need to do additional research on ways to build shelters and fires. I also know staying hydrated is a key factor in staying alive, which means I will need to find ways to obtain healthy drinking water. Some believe finding food may be a problem, but I know it's not an issue, since the human body can sustain itself for weeks without food.

The Story of Survival:

At this point, I decide I will spend seventy-two hours in the woods with only the clothes on my back and a few survival tools. Ron Hood, an outdoor enthusiast and survival expert, claims in most cases, either in survival or death, a body is found within seventy-two hours. Before I even begin to imagine the experience of being alone in the wild for three days I need to do some research. In order to properly start this off an important question must be raised, "how do people get lost?" According to research at the Max Plank Institute for Biological Cybernetics in Tuebingen, Germany, people tend to walk in circles when their sense of direction is lost. This is natural human behavior, but marking foreground and background landmarks is a helpful remedy. Before leaving on any outdoor adventure, one must always study the topography of all surrounding areas, and know multiple means of finding direction. I begin to find, through the stories of others, becoming panicked or scared may lead a person even more astray and cause their ultimate demise. Surprisingly enough, panic can cause a person to lose all form of

rational thought. After panicking in a survival situation, some victims have been known to disrobe completely and run in random directions, only to be found dead.s

As I continue my research, I turn to www.youtube.com. Here I find several helpful videos on outdoor survival. I watch short clips and videos on everything from building a fire in wet conditions to celestial navigation. After a while, I begin to feel pretty confident in my ability to overcome the elements. Once I combine my research with my survival instincts and background knowledge my biggest challenge will be overcoming boredom. At a survival website, www.wilderness-survival.com, I enhance my knowledge of survival, and I even take a quiz that tells me whether or not I can make it. I discover that my priorities for basic survival should be in the order of air (of course!), shelter, water, and finally food. The foundation of my research concludes that my brain is my most important tool.

On October 22, 2009 I am confident enough in research and my will to survive to brave the Iowa wilderness. I leave from Black Hawk County Park at 4:00 p.m. and I will kayak to Deadman's Island, where I will remain until around 4:00 p.m. October 25. I am wearing thermal long john underwear, thermal socks, blue jeans, a hooded sweatshirt, "waterproof" boots, a "waterproof" coat, and a stocking cap. I strap a hatchet and knife to my belt and wear a backpack consisting of a water canteen, a tin cup, a flashlight, a whistle, water purifying tablets, a garbage bag, and a few avocados. The day before I leave the rain begins to fall, and even as I climb into my kayak it shows no signs of relenting. Throughout the week the weather constantly changes, but today it teeters around forty degrees, not including wind chill. I decide to be stubborn and not bring any extra rain gear because I want to "rough it." After taking a quick photo of me in the rain,

my good friend Benny kicks my kayak into the Cedar River. It is a good thing my enthusiasm trumps my nervousness as I realize there is no turning back now.

As I continue to paddle down the river, the wind starts to pick up speed. The growing waves turn my kayak sideways and my abs and back strain to keep my body from turning into the frigid water. I am glad I wore a life jacket. I have only been on the river for an hour, but conditions are getting rough and I know the light will quickly fade. My small vessel washes up on the west shore of the Cedar River well before I reach Deadman's Island. With the worsening weather conditions I know I need to stop, and I realize I am stranded at least for the night. After gathering my thoughts for a moment I begin to set up camp and look for a way to build a shelter. After about an hour of collecting and building, I form a solid shelter from three fallen tree limbs and tall river grass, which I lay across the top for a roof. I lay more grass and a trash bag below my shelter for added protection against the cold wet ground. By the time I place my tin cup in a tree to collect rain water; most of the light is gone from the sky. Although my clothes are already drenched and heavy from the rain I decide now is a good time to crawl in my new home for the night.

By now the air temperature has dropped significantly, and since my eyes adjusted to the dark I try to build a fire. I gather wet sticks around my shelter. I use my hatchet and knife hoping to carve dry wood from the center. I now have sufficient kindling and I remember the notebook in my bag could be used as tinder. Even though I am under my shelter, the damp air immediately ruins my dry tinder and any hope of me building a fire tonight. I lay down in defeat. By 10:00 p.m. I am already curled into the fetal position. I am cold and I begin to shiver. This means my core body temperature has already dropped

two degrees, which may lead to more serious problems. Each moment passes more and more slowly, making a minute feel like an hour. I realize now I am in for more than I bargained for. By now my body is going into periods of violent and uncontrollable fits of shaking and shivering, each fit lasting about ten seconds. Doctors recognize this as an early sign of hypothermia, so I check for other signs. The medical website www.webmd.com recognizes signs of hypothermia: “shivering, cold or pale skin, poor judgment, slurred speech, unsteadiness in walking, confusion, muscles become stiff, breathing becomes shallow, and tiredness followed by lack of consciousness” (webmd.com). As I lay shivering in the cold night, I can hear the wind howling above my shelter. The rain continues to fall and I can feel the ground below me slowly turn to mud as the water creeps around me.

Although I am miserable and shaking, I pass the time by singing. I also do basic math problems aloud. By doing this I am hoping to check for confusion and slurred speech, two signs of hypothermia. I decide to get out of my shelter to get some blood flowing and hopefully warm up. I want to be careful not to expound too much energy, since this may cause me to lose valuable body heat. As I begin to stand, my feet become entwined and I stumble. I pull myself up by a tree branch, and I realize that I have lost feeling in my feet and my calves. I begin to panic and I can feel my heart beating faster. All I can think about now is climbing back in my kayak and floating back down the river. Each time this idea pops in my head I try to quickly chase it out because it is still storming out and I will surely die in the black river. I know I am safer in my shelter, but still the thought creeps into my head, will I make it through the night? I am truly scared.

I realize I cannot make it through the weekend in my condition. I take my emergency cell phone out of my saturated coat pocket. I consider myself fortunate it still works. I dial Benny's number hoping he can meet me in the morning if I float down to town. Benny is surely drunk and does not answer his phone after several attempts. After a long wait Benny calls me back at 2:00 a.m. I am very ashamed of my failure, but Benny cannot aid me in his condition. Thankfully a mutual friend, Ryan, grabs the phone. Ryan has training in these situations, and although he offers his help he cannot get to me until day break. Stuck in the fetal position, I am still shaking. I suddenly remember an important survival technique to stay warm. I pull my coat over my mouth, blowing hot air out heating the cloth, and when I breathe in hopefully the air will be slightly warmer. Small tips such as these help keep me through the night.

Although it is far too cloudy and rainy to see the sun, it grows light outside my humble shelter. Although my night was filled with misery, I feel excited that Ryan will meet me when I float down the river. I call him to confirm our plan and he informs me the park where we will meet does not open for three more hours. It would be an understatement to say I am deeply saddened by this news. I sit upright now, still in a ball. My back is tired and stiff from shivering through the night. The numbness is creeping up my leg, and I can no longer feel my thighs. I call Ryan once more to inform him of my worsening condition. Ryan informs me that he and my friend Robert will drive their flat-bottom boat to my campsite, where they will rescue me. Relieved, but still miserable, I remain curled in a ball. Time drags by even more and painfully now. I drift asleep every now and then, but I know I need to stay awake. I keep thinking I can hear a boat that is not there. I call Ryan once more. He did not answer. I know he is doing his best, but still I

am frustrated. Now I am sure I hear Robert's booming laugh in the distance. I do my best to stumble to my feet, and I can see my friends wearing blaze orange on the horizon. I am so happy and overcome with emotion. I quickly signal them with my flashlight, and Robert notices the bright LED bulb instantly. "There he is!" they shout as they steer the boat my way.

Ryan truly is my friend. He brings me warm water, a dry coat, and even a new life jacket. My friends immediately notice my skin has become gray and cold. Ryan stares at the hut I built and nods in approval. This makes me feel as though my efforts did not fail completely. After gathering my things, Robert and I step into the boat. While I still have one foot on the higher bank, Ryan announces he needs us to step back out for a moment. Robert sees I am staring down, unable to lift my deadened leg. In disbelief Robert says, "What the fuck, Matt?!" I will never forget how Robert helped pick my leg up because I couldn't move it.

What I learned

Survival truly is a state of mind. A steady brain is the most important tool. If I didn't have the sense to come home when I had the chance I would have surely died the following night. It is important to always be prepared for the worst and know what needs to be done to survive. The tin cup I set out holds one liter. By the morning it was three fourths full with rain water, and I didn't have rain gear. When a company says something is waterproof, it does not always mean waterproof. Always keep thinking and never give up hope. The obvious lesson from this is fire is the essence of life. Without fire a person cannot stay warm, boil clean drinking water, or cook food. I know I will take the value of

friendship away from this. Always tell people where you will be when in the wilderness,
so a loved one may find you. Always do what it takes to survive.

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