

SURVIVAL

By Oliver Cameron
with Ole Wik

I am seldom out very far away from home without a day pack. One of the things I carry in that day pack is some birch bark for starting fires. Also some light rope, some pemmican, a couple of tea bags, and a small cook kit—or at least a can with a bail on it that I can boil water in to make tea.

Depending on what I'm doing and what I'm going for, there is usually an assortment of knives in there, each in its holster. When I'm butchering, I don't want to have to stop to clean up my knife in order to sharpen it.

But quite often, before I have to use that apparatus, there will be an axe sticking into something there or another handy,

When I do sharpen, I may just strop the knife on the back of another knife or the edge of an axe or a kettle. You can do that only a few times before you have to bring your edge back with a whetstone. I also have a diamond stone. You unscrew it, take it out of its cover, and screw into the handle the other way, and use it as a sharpening steel.



Example of a diamond sharpening stone. Image:

http://www.bladematrix.com/EZL-M-EZLM-Eze-Lap-Sportsmans-Diamond-Hone-knife-sharpener_p_6280.html

I remember seeing my mom strop her butcher knife on the edge of the sheet of steel on the inside of the oven door before she'd carve a roast.¹

Crockery of any kind makes a good hone. If you look at the bottom of a bowl or mush dish or something, quite often there's a little ring that it sits on, and there is no glaze on it. That's a good place to touch up your knife on. Even a broken plate, when you look at it, you can see that it's made up of a clay that's abrasive.

What else do you carry in your day pack?

I was trying to think. At various times it changes, of course. One thing I have in there for sure is a pair of dry gloves.

How about a compass?

No. I have another little kit that I carry in my hip pocket, and a compass is a part of it.

Tell me more about that kit.

At various times it's had various things. It has a Marble's screw-together match safe. "Marbles" is a company that used to make knife and hatchet, and other things for campers. I also had a plastic match safe that had a compass built in the top of it.



Marble's Match Safe waterproof matchbox.

Image: <http://www.pinterest.com/pin/154389093449567657/>

Anything else in that kit?

Usually a sewing kit, with a lot of extra nylon thread. The thread is wound on a small net needle, because that fine thread is hard to do anything with if you don't have it on a net needle or something similar.



Handmade net needle with twine.

Image: Molly Rettig, Cold Climate Housing Research Center, UAF

You can't break that stuff without cutting it. You've got a lot of line there, but it's not taking up a lot of space. If you have to build a shelter, you've got something there you can tie it together with.

Do you carry water?

Very seldom. Usually around home I know where I can find water, but I usually have something to strain it through too.

One time I was out with my dog. It was kind of a swampy area, not real swampy, but the ground was soft and the moss was deep. I stopped to have a little bite to eat. Pretty soon the dog started sniffing around some moose prints, and stuck his nose down in and started drinking.

In a place like that, a fellow can soon have a hole with some water in it. It will taste like tundra tea, but won't have any Giardia in it. I would drink some of that rather than lake water where I knew there were beaver and other animals.

But I usually carry a metal cup that if there's a little sip or trickle of water, I can dip it up and put it in my kettle. It's nice to drink your tea out of a cup, because your kettle is all black.

Another thing that's usually in my day pack is several folds of paper towel for wiping my hands. I have used grass, but some of that grass, especially when it's dry, is pretty scratchy.

If you've been working with game and your hands are bloody and you wipe them off with that grass, you can scratch the skin and then pretty soon you've got a serious infection. Wherever the pathogen comes from originally, from blood or something that you've been handling or your dogs or whatever, I've sometimes had a hard time clearing that kind of infection.

I guess that's about all about the day pack.

Do you practice orienteering?

Well, people better learn to use their compass I guess, but that doesn't help you much if you don't know where you are and aren't familiar with a country. One of the first things I do before going into an area is to fix in my mind the lakes and the mountains that I can see. Then I always have a little compass with me.

A lot of it is just paying attention. One time, when I was out after a wounded caribou, I wasn't paying attention. I didn't really need to, but just the same, when you're out among those little knolls and they all covered with poplar and the sky is overcast and it's starting to get dark, you better have a good idea where you are in relation to the lake or something else so that you know where you are.

My first fall in the Ambler area down at Three Mile, I started out for the village so that I could send my order for Visqueen². Mike Jones had mentioned how pretty the country was back from the river a ways, so I headed inland first.

Sure enough, the country was beautiful, with lots of knolls and small lakes. But it was overcast, and I'd lost sight of the Jade Mountains. Long story short, I walked for three or

four hours straight until I came to a place where I'd dug a little test pit to check the thickness of the moss. I was within a few hundred feet of my proposed iglu site.

You have lots of company. I did that one time. It was in sort of the same situation, in poplars. I was hunting, just small game, rabbits or birds or whatever. I knew within a certain big picture where I was, but I started to walk out of there and pretty quick I came across somebody's tracks—you can guess whose they were. I have a tendency to walk in circles. One leg is shorter than the other.

What are your thoughts on respect and humbleness for nature?

If you've been out, especially alone, and seen the power of nature in situations where you're at a disadvantage, when the wind is howling and the air is full of snow, it's hard to keep yourself oriented or even see across the river. It can be a big problem.

It's experiences like that... there have been a few times when I've overextended myself. I wasn't really prepared to stay out overnight. But it happened that way anyhow, especially when I was hunting. So it's a good idea to have some idea what you have to do.

You know about that as much as I do, I guess.

I doubt it.

Anyway, it's obvious. If you can find some shelter and you've got a sled, a sled cover, and a caribou skin with you, usually you've got it made. But if you're walking and just carrying a rifle—especially following up on some crippled animals—and it gets late, it's real easy to get disoriented.

As long as you're close to the river or where you can hear the village dogs, or the weather is such that you can see the stars or see the mountains, you're usually OK. But there are times when you don't have any of those things to go by. That's when it's really important to have a compass.

There is a common bit of advice that is given to greenhorns or people without much experience: If you're lost, stay put until somebody comes to find you. If you've got ammunition, after a time when you expect somebody's out to find you, then you fire three shots. That's the usual call for help. You wait a little while and fire three more shots, hoping that pretty quick you'll hear a couple of shots in response.

Sasha and I were out with the dogs one day, on the tundra across from Ambler, when we heard just that—three shots. We spotted a snow machine, and made our way over there.

It was Arthur Douglas. He hadn't been able to get his engine started. With my longer arms, I got it going, and then we followed him back to the village.

If you stop and build a fire and eat some lunch, that sometimes makes a lot of difference in your perspective. You can more or less figure out a reasonable course to take then. But if it happens to be late in the day, you're going to have to do whatever you can to make yourself comfortable and secure for the night.

I've only had to do that once or twice. I was never without a piece of canvas or a couple of those flimsy little space blankets that fold up into a bundle a little bigger than a pack of cigarettes. They were part of my emergency kit, the usual things that I had with me.

One night it was kind of cold and I didn't have enough stuff with me to keep warm, so I built a fire. Before it got too dark I cut a pile of firewood. I would doze off, and when I'd get chilly I'd fix the fire up and made it through.

You can build a long fire to heat the ground, then rake the ashes off to one side and put some branches or something down on that hot ground, and lay down there. If you have a little cover to pull over you, that'll help a lot. You can be quite warm and comfortable, they say, but I've never done it.

I've talked to a couple of fellows that have done it, and they said it works out very well. But one of them had heated some rocks that he placed in that bed. During the night, when he was twisting around trying to get comfortable, he got too close to one of those rocks, and it was uncomfortably hot.

Can you give me more details on that occasion when you got caught out?

It was late in the day. I was out looking for a pile of meat down toward Hunt River someplace. I didn't want to go, but some hunters from Kiana had left some animals there, and I wanted them for dog feed. I had gotten some of my own meat and taken it home, and was going back to get some of that dog meat.

Anyway, I didn't find it right off. The weather was bum, so I went into the trees and found a big bushy spruce tree. I scraped away the snow, broke off a few branches, put them down, and put the sled on the branches. Of course the sled was pretty narrow to sleep in, but I had my sleeping bag and pulled the sled cover over me. It was a lot better to be out of the wind, and I was quite comfortable.

I think those kind of experiences give you a lot of humility as far as dealing with Nature. You don't get cocky with Nature.

The ocean will do the same thing.

1) This essay stems from a series of telephone conversations that Ole Wik had with Oliver between December 2007 and February 2008. Highlighted text indicates remarks made by Ole.

2) "Visqueen" is a brand of polyethylene plastic sheeting, and has become a generic description for any plastic sheeting. It is commonly between 4 and 10 mils thick and is available in clear, opaque, and black. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Visqueen>)