

## TARPAULIN LEAN-TO

By Oliver Cameron  
with Ole Wik<sup>1</sup>

At times I've come to a camping place when I was tired. All I wanted to do was get in a shelter, away from wind and cold, and go to sleep. I just put the tarp down on the ground, put my sleeping bag on top of one edge, and pulled the rest of it over me, without a fire.

There have also been a few times when I got caught out and wasn't intending to camp. In those cases I make a brush shelter. I cut a tree off partway so that it falls over but is still attached to the tree, chest high. I cut the limbs out on the underside so that I can get out of the weather. I find little trees or whatever to lean against it, and cover them with branches, with the stems up. If you make those sides quite steep and put enough branches on them, they'll shed a lot of water.

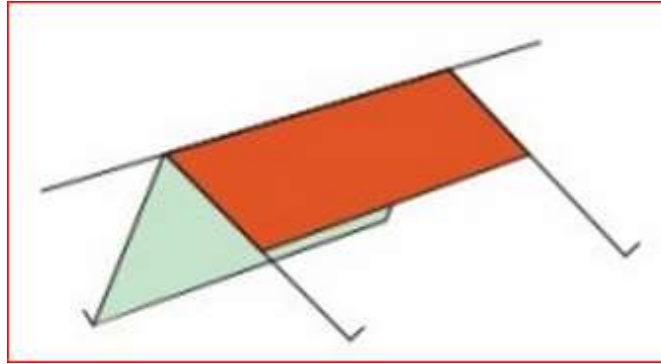
If I get into that kind of a situation, it's usually because I underestimated the amount of time I'd be out. If it looks like it will be too late or I am getting too tired and am about to be out of my limits, I'll stop early enough and camp even though I'm not too far from home.

It's only six or seven miles as the crow flies from my place to a good hunting area. If I get a moose out there, I like to camp near the kill until I get it taken care of. As you can well imagine, that's a lot of work, especially for one man. That's the kind of situation where I might have to build a temporary shelter.

When you're out, little by little you learn that there are a lot of things you don't have to do. You don't have to set up a typical lean-to out of brush and whatever. You could use a tarp to put up a typical lean-to, but they're difficult to set up.

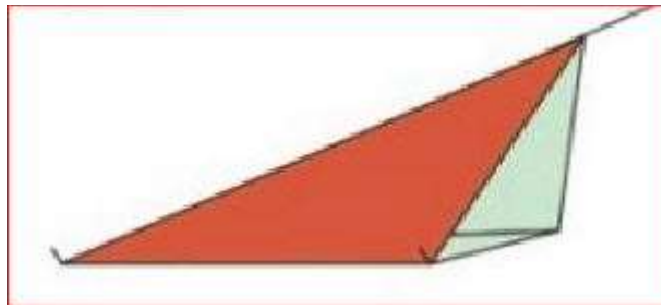
In a conventional setup, you secure one long edge of the tarp at ground level, and support the other long side at the front of the structure. You have to find a crosspiece and a couple of trees to support the front of it. The tarp is a good heat reflector alright, but there's no shelter for a fire underneath the edge of it.

I have come to appreciate a different type of setup for a temporary shelter, and I use it whenever it is practical. I've seen conventional lean-tos covered in a lot of different books, but I haven't seen this type of system covered. It's easy to carry and to set up, it's waterproof, and it gives you a protected fire. I've used it a number of times.



Example rectangular lean-to setup

I secure one corner at ground level, and support the diagonally opposite corner at the front of the structure. The two edges of the tarp at ground level surround the living space, and offer protection from wind, rain and snow. The other two edges form a peak that projects out over the opening.



Example of a diagonal lean-to setup

Images: <http://www.wnd.com/2013/02/cruise-ship-learns-survival-the-hard-way/>

I have a coated nylon tarp that is 10' square, and have also used a 10' x12' poly tarp at various times. Poly tarps are waterproof and light, though not indestructible. If nothing else, you can just use 6 mil Visqueen.<sup>2</sup>

Start by folding your tarp so that two opposite corners are together and form a triangle. Then sew two or three sets of ties along the diagonal fold.

To set it up, sharpen the small end of a pole that is 2-1/2 or 3' longer than the length of the fold, and lay it on the ground. Tie one end of the fold to the big end of the pole, stretch out the tarp, and fasten the rest of the ties along the pole. If you don't use ties and just lay the tarp over the pole, you'll have to take time to smooth the pole so that it doesn't wear holes in the tarp.

Hook the sharp end of the pole into the bark of the tree at such a height that when you spread the two front parts of the tarp apart, the two front corners are at least 8' apart. Work the big end of the pole into the earth so it won't slide down. Put a stake against it if you need to.

If no suitable tree is available, you can set up a shear pole by tying two poles together in an "X" shape, with the intersection point near their tops. Place the small end of the pole in the crotch of the shear pole and lash it down. In that case you'll need to put a line back

along the top, on the outside, to brace the shear pole forward and aft. Or, you could instead make a tripod that is self-supporting.

Your shelter now has a little peak that is leaning out toward the tree. You can build a little fire under that peak. It's out of the rain, and you can feed it and use it however you want. It doesn't take much of a fire to reflect heat back into the shelter.

Usually for that type of an improvised camp, you go into a stand of close-set trees or the thickest brush you can find, in order to get out of the wind. Set up your lean-to so that the wind is opposite the opening. Smoke doesn't ordinarily eddy back into the living area.

Put little stakes at the corners. You can use the eyes along the edge of the tarp, or if you make your own, you can add loops.

If you're making up a tarp, the two sides that you have against the ground could have a sod cloth sewn onto them, so that you won't have any problem making the edge come down tight against the ground.

You can use this setup for either winter or summer camping. If the ground is frozen, you do the best you can—tie to a little bush or whatever. Can always put the edge down and shovel a little snow on it.

I also sew ties for guy lines on each side of the tarp. If they're up maybe 3' from the bottom edge, that is a convenient way to hold the main part of the tarp out a ways, and gives you a place to tie things to.

If nothing else, you can cut a little tree, cut the branches off bottom side, and bury it in the snow. Leave the remaining branches sticking up as guy posts, and tie to them. It's surprising how much that will hold up.

Ordinarily I have a ground cloth, usually made out of a blue poly tarp. I'm usually traveling with a boat or a dog and a sled, so it's not strictly a backpack situation, though it works well enough for that too.

After you've used this setup for a while, you'll find all kinds of ways to accomplish your purpose of making a space there. It's one thing to have everything laid out perfectly, and another to have a shelter. With a 10' x 12' tarp, just fold the extra fabric into the tent. Stick your feet in that end, and they'll hold that part of the tarp up.

In the summertime you need to have a bed net for mosquitoes. I usually have a couple of ties on the inside of the tarp to tie the net to, at least the part over the head. It will be leaning in over my head, but the edge of the net is tucked under the bedding, leaving enough room to move.

For a bed, I don't usually put down logs or boughs. I typically have caribou skins for bedding. Foam is fine, but hide is a lot better. Since the hide wants to creep around under you, I fasten two together so that the hair on one flows toward the foot, and toward the head on the other. That stabilizes them.

I put my bed down crossways, so that there is a space behind it for a pack or gear. The dog usually finds a comfortable place on his sleeping pad. A person's got no purpose being out like that if he hasn't got a dog.

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

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>)