

Lost in the Wilderness

Staying “found” and what to do if lost.

Ever have a feeling of being lost in life? Well, taking a long hike may be of some help there, but you can’t “find yourself” very well if you get lost on the trail. Here are some general tips to help you stay found:

- **Bring a map and compass, even on short day hikes.** Don’t tempt fate. Even if you know this trail like the back of your hand, snow, fog and darkness may obscure familiar features. A high quality topographic map is worth every penny – this is not the area to save a few cents.
- **Know how to use your map and compass.** Purchase a basic navigation book, join the local orienteering club, or consult a local outfitter. Know how to find north, to orient your map to the terrain and how to take a heading. Make practicing fun by taking a hike with a more experienced navigator and learning some “tricks of the trade.”
- **Don’t rely solely on GPS.** Global Positioning Systems, electronic devices that pinpoint your position by satellite signals, can be hugely helpful, but are vulnerable to mechanical shock and battery failure. Learn to use a map and compass before you decide to rely on GPS. Even then, always bring a compass and map as backup.
- **Pay attention!** Which side of the trail does the stream run on? Where is the sun in the sky? Did you see that big rock on the way in? Details like this can make navigating a simple matter, leaving you to just enjoy your hike. Also, if you are returning on the same trail you used on the way in, turn around periodically and look at the trail, especially where it intersects with another trail or a decommissioned trail. It looks different in reverse!

Despite even the best preparations, sometimes we still get lost. If this happens to you, keep these thoughts in mind:

Don’t panic. The worst possible thing you can do upon realizing you are lost is to panic. Having stated that, it’s also a very natural reaction – so **be prepared to consciously overcome it.** If you’ve brought your 10 Essentials and somebody is expecting you to check in, you’re in a very good place.

Stay calm and take some deep breaths. Odds are that you haven’t strayed too far from the path, and by staying calm, you might be able to hear other hikers nearby. Running around in a panicked frenzy looking for the trail will likely



only lead you further from the trail than you are and cause you to become more disoriented and frustrated.

If you're unable to locate yourself on your map and you've calmly attempted to retrace your steps a little, and you are genuinely lost, **stay put. Rescuers will be looking for you where they know you've been hiking.** Don't put yourself in more danger by wandering further from a known location. If you do so, you will also be putting rescuers in greater danger as they will have to cover more ground and use more time to locate you. The only time to *not* stay put, would be if there is a safety issue staying where you are, perhaps due to flooding or avalanche potential.

While it's nothing you should ever rely on, check for a cell phone signal if you have a cell phone. Periodically blow your emergency whistle in bursts of three. Be visible to rescuers – wear or display bright clothing, use a signal mirror, etc. Even your camera's flash can be used to signal your presence.

If you can do so safely, making a small campfire can not only keep you warm overnight, but can also be good for your morale.

