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Survival

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& STAY ALIVE

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Outdoor Survival

SKILLS TO SURVIVE AND
STAY ALIVE

Molly Absolon

Photographs by Dave Anderson

FALCON GUIDES

GUILFORD, CONNECTICUT
HELENA, MONTANA

AN IMPRINT OF GLOBE PEQUOT PRESS

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Text design by Sheryl P. Kober

Page layout by Melissa Evarts

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Absolon, Molly.

Backpacker magazine's outdoor survival : skills to survive and stay alive / Molly Absolon.

p. cm. — (Falconguides)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-7627-5652-0 (alk. paper)

1. Wilderness survival. 2. Outdoor life. I. Backpacker. II. Title. III. Title: Outdoor survival.

GV200.5.A29 2010

613.6'9—dc22

2009046679

Printed in China

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Planning ahead is one way to avoid survival situations.

Introduction

Outdoor Survival

I stared at the dead tree in disbelief. How had I ended up back here? Maybe it was a different tree. But I knew I was deluding myself. There was no mistaking the fingerlike grey branches of this particular tree. Somehow I'd circled back on myself. I tried to retrace my steps, to get back onto the ridge that led north toward our cabin, but I kept finding myself homing in on the tree. It was as if it had some pull on me, some siren song that kept luring me back. By now I was so confused I had no idea which way was which.

The sky was overcast, obscuring the sun. I knew that the mountains trended north-south, but I did not know if I was facing one way or the other. I knew that roads paralleled the ridge on both sides, so if I went down, I would hit one regardless of which side of the mountain I descended. That seemed like my only alternative. Time to go down. I started moving quickly, fighting to stay calm. I was fine and could spend the night out if necessary, but it was hard to still my racing heart. I wanted to figure out where I was immediately. I wanted to be found.

WHEN THINGS GO WRONG

I was a professional outdoor educator at the time I found myself disoriented on top of North Fork Mountain in eastern West Virginia. I'd spent years leading groups in the wilderness and was pretty cocky about my skill and sense of direction, so it was humbling to find myself so completely and utterly confused on what had started as a short afternoon walk. Unfortunately, most backcountry incidents start out just like mine: A casual stroll or easy trip turns into an epic when you make a wrong turn, fall and get hurt, or are trapped in a storm.

My personal experience that afternoon did not escalate to a level where I'd call it a survival situation, but it might easily have led me to spend the night out. I was assisted by knowing a few tricks that helped me get out of the predicament with little more than a wounded ego. This book is about helping you put together your own bag of tricks, so when the unexpected happens, you can take care of yourself and stay healthy and safe—or at least survive—until help arrives.

WHAT DOES OUTDOOR SURVIVAL MEAN?

Wilderness or outdoor survival conjures up images of building fires using bow drills and shelters from pine boughs, of collecting water drop by drop in a solar

still, and gathering food by harvesting wild edible plants or killing small rodents in deadfall traps. These skills—also called primitive-living skills—are interesting to know and challenging to perfect but have little real relevance for most backcountry travelers, even those facing a so-called survival situation.

According to the dictionary, survival simply means “to live through something.” The word “something” is vague, but when associated with survival, it usually means an ordeal that tests one’s fortitude and knowledge. You survive trials and tribulations, emergencies, tragedies, scary situations. So outdoor survival means living through some difficult challenge in the wilderness, where you cannot call 911 for help and you may be forced to fend for yourself for hours, even days.

Most modern outdoor survival situations result from human errors: You get lost, injured, or in over your head. The focus of this book is on understanding how to avoid these errors and how to minimize their negative effects when avoidance fails. Using a bow drill to light a fire is a cool trick, but when you are stuck out overnight, you are really better off having a lighter safely bagged in plastic and stored in your pocket to get a blaze going quickly. Likewise, knowing that you can eat cattails can be fun and may add some variety and flavor to your backcountry meals, but when you are tired, hungry, and lost in the wilderness, your tummy rumblings will be satiated more

readily by pulling an energy bar or chunk of cheese out of your pack rather than by trying to locate a wild plant to eat.

The best possible way to survive an outdoor emergency is to avoid one, and you can avoid many by being prepared and knowledgeable. Before you leave home, you begin the process by packing the appropriate gear, writing a travel plan, anticipating potential hazards or obstacles, making sure you are properly trained, and devising contingency plans. Once you are on your trip, you are constantly on the alert for hazards and take care to make sure your entire team is rested and well cared for to prevent making errors in judgment due to fatigue or injury.

That said, no one is perfect, and it is likely that you may run into trouble at some point if you spend a lot of time in the wilderness. For those times it helps to be ready both mentally and physically.

In this book we outline the steps you should take before you go on your trip so you are prepared; we also identify tricks you can use during your trip to avoid preventable mistakes. Finally, for when things do go awry, we provide you with techniques to help you stay comfortable, calm, and healthy until help arrives.

Chapter One

Preparation

BEFORE YOU GO: PLANNING AHEAD

The first step to avoiding a survival situation is choosing a trip that is appropriate for your skill level. Too often people get into trouble because they underestimate the challenge of their route or overestimate their individual capabilities. Be honest with yourself and with your teammates. If you have never tied into a rope before, you should not have your first experience doing so on a 12,000-foot mountain deep in the wilderness. If you haven't hiked more than a mile in your life, planning to cover 20 in two days on your first trip out is unrealistic.

Take time in town to evaluate your team's abilities so you can choose a trip that will be appropriate for all.

