

Livin' Off The Land (American Survival Guide...June 1996)

How to Spend the Night Outdoors Without a Sleeping Bag or Tent

By Christopher Nyerges

You can let a camper take all the gear they want, but I've learned that four items provide the strongest link to "civilization." Thus, the hiker who wants to be the most self-sufficient should learn how nature can provide these items:

food, matches, toilet paper, and a sleeping bag.

The availability of these four items provides a psychological link to our ordered, "regular" world we call civilization. Take away these four and you can start to develop genuine survival skills.

- 1) Food-The art of finding food in the outdoors requires specialized knowledge of both plants and animals. Although this could take a lifetime to truly master, one can begin to reduce the amount of food brought along on outings little by little as new skills are learned.
- 2) Fire-Making fire without matches isn't easy, but it can be done utilizing a variety of principles such as focusing or concentrating the sun's rays (magnifying glass, camera, binoculars, the lens of a flashlight, etc), or by friction (various bow and drill devices, flint and steel, etc.) or with any of several other unique methods which might involve a firearm or flaregun, your car, or flashlight batteries. Once you learn the principles involved in any of these, it's just a matter of time and practice before you can effectively produce a fire without matches.
- 3) Toilet paper-Of course, it's easy to find leaves to use as toilet paper. This is primarily a psychological hurdle for many people.
- 4) No sleeping bag?-Just what are the ways in which we can go without

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a sleeping bag? Several hiking companions once expressed surprise when I told them that I frequently go without a sleeping bag on overnight outings. To many, the idea of no sleeping bag is incomprehensible, impossible, and miserable.

The first time I went without a sleeping bag was simply because I didn't want the bulk and weight. It was August and I was on a week-long trip in the Angeles National Forest near Los Angeles. Although the days were hot and dry, the nights in the canyons were cold and windy. I hadn't realized how cold the nights would be when I left my bag behind. I slept in my hammock, my coat being my only cover. It was much colder than I would have preferred, but I did manage to sleep, more or less. My feet and toes were the coldest, so I wore three pairs of socks on subsequent nights that week. With the addition of a very light tarp and the extra socks I slept well for the remainder of the week. In part, I accomplished this by allowing my body to go into a shiver whenever I began to feel cold. I'd let my body shiver for about 30 minutes, and that action resulted in enough warmth to allow me to get back to sleep.

Although my hitchhiking days are over, I did discover many useful things during my wanderings up and down the California coast. I spent several nights sleeping in hollow trees in Northern California.

A tube tent is an excellent camping companion because it's light, non-bulky, inexpensive and you can also use it as a ground cover. I've spent many nights under the protection of a tube tent's cover, and have stayed dry even in downpours. Desiring to travel light, I simply would never carry a heavy tent, but the small tube tent works fine in most conditions.

I've also spent nights with an emergency blanket for shelter. Yes, it provides some small level of "shelter" and it does help you to retain some body heat. But let's not kid ourselves-the emergency space blanket is a notch better than nothing and that means you will still

be very cold during the winter.

The first truly primitive method of sleeping outdoors without a sleeping bag that I've practiced is the use of "body hollows" as taught at TWI Survival Training outings. These are body-sized holes, dug about three to four feet deep, and about a foot longer and wider than your body. The hollow is lined with as much soft grass and leaves that you can find. Then, once inside the hollow, you pull more material onto your body to provide even more insulation. There are numerous variations on the body hollow, such as digging the hollows outward from a central fire pit so the coals keep you warm at night.

In the summertime, you can often just sleep by the fire with no shelter at all. Even in the summer, it can get very cold at night. In general, three feet of insulating material will keep you warm even in freezing temperatures.

If rain is likely, the walls of your shelter should be more steeply pitched and matted down. You should mat down the layers of grass and other insulation from the bottom up, much like the rows of shingles are placed on a house roof in order to shed rain. It will take at least three feet of natural materials to shed rain.

Never cut live trees to make a shelter. The woods are full of dead material that is excellent for shelter making.

An emergency shelter should always be very small. They are the ones that keep you warm.

Get into the shelter regularly as you are making it. Make sure it fits you, but is not too big. The inside should be snug and up to three feet thick with branches and leaves and grass.

Two or three bodies together will stay warmer than one alone.

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A lean to generally begins with a tripod of poles. The front two poles are shorter and the third pole is a longer ridge pole. You lay poles on the ridge pole until you have nearly covered it and begin adding smaller material, such as branches, leaves, etc. The space between the two smaller poles of the tripod will be the opening.