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# Seven Steps to Surviving in the Wilderness by Billy Burkins

## Step 1: Find Water

When you're stranded in the woods, the very first thing you have to do is S.T.O.P. Stop, Think, Observe, and Plan, preferably in that order. You don't technically learn this until you get promoted to the rank of Tenderfoot in Boy Scouts, which I'm still pretty far from reaching, but I read ahead in the manual in my free time, so I know a lot. I honestly think it should be one of the first things they teach you when you join in first grade, along with all of the brotherhood and God stuff, but when you're small like that Boy Scouts is more of an activity your parents force you to do to get you out of the house. All Troop Leader David has said so far about survival is that if you get separated from the group while out on an adventure, which is the technical term for our outings, you need to stay put. That's stopping. Think about where you came from, how you got there, and where you went wrong (if you did. You probably did). Next, observe your surroundings and calculate if you're in any immediate danger. If you're not, you plan. Plan how to get your troop leader to notice you and what to do if you don't recognize anything nearby and all

that. That's what you do if you're a baby and don't actually know what to do to survive. That's what to do if you're lost.

But I'm not lost.

So, when you're not lost in the woods, and when Charlie T. from Mrs. Barranick's fifth grade class made it a point to share with everyone how far ahead the rest of the Boy Scouts are compared to you now that promotions are based on merit rather than age, you set out into the woods behind the playground to prove that just because you're not getting badges as fast as them, it doesn't mean you're not a true boy scout. You CAN survive in the wild despite missing troop meetings a lot. But if you get far enough away so that you don't remember which way you came from, you find water. Water is pretty easy to find in the woods, especially if you get lucky and it rained a couple hours ago and your mom sleeps a lot during the day, so she won't be looking for you for a while. After walking for about an hour—or maybe a lot longer—in the woods and scoffing at every trail you come across, you hear water up ahead.

Now, just because you hear water, it doesn't mean it's going to be drinkable. Usually, it won't be. And, I know this because Tessa M. dared me to drink from a pothole puddle once, and I got sick for like a week. That's why I bring a water purifier with me whenever I leave the house. It's inconvenient most days, and takes up a lot of room in my backpack, but when you're a survivalist like me, it's second nature, and it can save your life. If you don't have a water purifier, running water is still helpful. Animals usually stay close to a stream, which is what you figure out it is when you get closer and narrowly avoid tripping over a branch or something, and animals equal food. I don't really like hurting animals if I don't have to, so, best case scenario, I'll just follow them around and see what they eat. They know edible plants probably more than I do, and I know a lot. Mom says I have a great memory, the best one there is maybe, which is why I was my elementary school's spelling bee champion in third grade (Charlie beat me in fourth grade, but that doesn't matter. Someone called him an overachiever once; I don't remember who.) Anyway, the stream is small and peters out quickly down a cliff some yards away, so you don't bother investigating because it's probably a little steep, but water is better than nothing. If you're smart like me, you should have had some juice before you left the house, so you're not super thirsty, but you still should sludge through the mud to the stream and set your adventuring backpack down on a rock to get started. The metal clasps on your backpack are always a little hard to open because it's cheap and you've had the same one since second grade, and you probably struggle with them for a second but it's okay because no one's looking, before it springs open and you dig your hands into the camouflage pouch. Without even peeking you pull out exactly what you needed—your life straw. It was like a bajillion dollars, which Mom

probably couldn't afford, but luckily Dad, who lives in a different state now, sent it in the mail as a late birthday present. You clasp the bag up and get as close to the water as you can without getting your clothes or shoes wet. I read the instructions on the straw a bunch before, but I never actually used it. You should get it right, though. And when you go to open it, and maybe tug on it a little too hard, you hear a popping sound and the cap rockets off, making a clacking sound as it smacks against a tree and disappears in the grass past the water somewhere. Then the straw cracks. They're not supposed to crack, you don't think. They never broke in the videos, so you're going to be mad for a moment because you've been really excited to use it, but hey, stuff happens. You can't just rely on your tools, no matter how expensive they are—you have to rely on yourself. A true Boy Scout is always prepared, and preparation means knowledge. Since it rained, you can collect droplets from leaves using a baggie you saved from lunch.

## Step 2: Build a Shelter

Troop Leader David said that shelter can be made out of nearly anything as long as you insulate it. Caves aren't a good idea because they're naturally cold and often home to big creatures. Plus, the draft is super bad if you don't cover up the hole. That's why a lot of people look towards sticks and mud when they know what they're doing (but most people don't). One of the major reasons why people die in the woods is because they don't correctly protect themselves from the environment, especially when it's colder out. It's the middle of March now and it still snows sometimes. I brought my big coat with me, so I'm fine. Plus, I was always the best one at building shelters in the Cub Scouts before we moved up to Boy Scouts and things got way more complicated than they needed to be and Mom got sicker. I had to take a lot of days off to help her get around the house. Mom said I shouldn't worry, though, because I could survive off anything if I'm determined enough because I'm really strong. Strongest guy she knows, actually, which is impressive because she knows a lot of people. People come by the house a lot to drop off food when she doesn't have the energy to cook or to donate some clothes here and there. That's where I get a lot of my stuff from, so I can go to school and the boys won't look at me weird because we don't have a lot. Charlie still looks at me weird, but he's weird, so it doesn't count.

For a shelter, all you need to find are some trees about six feet apart. Lodge a log between them that's like three feet off the ground, get some big sticks and moss, and go from there. If there isn't any moss—and there isn't, which is weird—dirt is fine. Mud from the stream—probably about sixty yards away from where you're going to build your shelter—will keep the sticks together. I wouldn't recommend building super close to a stream because the dirt there isn't super stable, and you need stable ground to build a shelter or else things

may start slipping and sliding and you'll get crushed. Danny with brown hair, who is a year ahead of me in the scouts and has a phone that's really cool, told me that he saw someone get crushed by a rotting tree after they built their shelter near it and a strong wind came. You wouldn't want to be just another guy getting whacked by a tree because you're waiting on a card from your dad that has some money in it for new Boy Scout stuff, so you should push on the trees nearby to make sure they're stable.

You spend like a whole hour finding suitable sticks for your A-Frame, which is when you lodge that log between trees and then rest sticks against it on either side. I built one before with my troop, even though I mostly helped with the finishing touches since Mom was feeling bad that night and I wanted to make sure she was okay before heading out. Now, you have to break some branches off trees to get sticks long enough and sturdy enough. Make sure to take a lot of breaks while working to prevent your asthma from flaring up and sing a song in your head to entertain yourself. Your hands are only a little sore, and it's only a little dark and cold outside now, so you work only a little faster, gathering up mud and grass to plaster against the sticks with the oven mitts you threw in your bag. While gathering mud, your foot might slip into the stream, and your shoe and sock might get wet, but you can't worry about that right now. You have to build your shelter before it gets dark, and you have so much more to do if you're going to prove Charlie wrong. The look on his face when you tell him you went camping all by yourself is going to be well worth your minor slip-ups. Maybe you'll even get promoted if you tell Troop Leader David. It's getting cold quickly though, so maybe you'll only stay out in the woods for one night instead of two. Your hands will feel a bit raw after scooping mud, but at least your shelter is complete. That's more than good enough.

### Step 3: Collect Food

You're going to be hungry by now, and you haven't actually had to collect food by yourself before because you're eleven and that would be ridiculous. I would usually prioritize building a fire, but it rained earlier in the day, so most of the fire wood is damp and unusable, and you wouldn't have brought a match or a lighter because that's cheating (also I don't know where Mom keeps them), so, food. You're going to want to walk back to the stream and consider going past it, and begin to step on a rock to head over and see if you can find any edible berries or fungi on the other side since you haven't had any luck so far, but you don't want to chance getting any more wet, so you don't. And then you step forward and cross anyway. A real Boy Scout wouldn't get scared of some water. No, he'd persevere, and besides, Charlie would totally tell Emma L. from Mr. Otis' class that you're a pussy if he were here. Anyone would be embarrassed by that since Emma is the prettiest girl in the fifth grade, which I'd swear my life on. Charlie and I both have a crush on

her, which is why I think he's mean to me sometimes even though he already has a better chance with her than me because he's in school more and farther ahead in Boy Scouts. He doesn't take days off to spend time with his mom. I doubt he even knows what cancer is. That's why people like us are going to have to work hard in the wilderness, so we can show them how good we are. That's why you go deep in the woods, but not too far from where you left your adventuring backpack: so you can show them that you can survive despite not having the merits or the recognition or the support. Despite being the slacker, you're really good at surviving.

If you find rotten logs, you're in luck. When you look up survival stuff at the library in your spare time like I do, you're going to learn that bugs like hiding where things are rotten, close to the surface, and dark. Most bugs can be eaten raw as long as they don't have a hard shell, you think—those guys tend to carry parasites that need to be cooked out. As mentioned earlier, firewood isn't in great supply right now, so beetles and grasshoppers are out of the question. On the brighter side, the more wet the ground is, the more bugs you can find. If you're like me, you've only eaten a couple of bugs before, and mostly on dares during recess when the teacher wasn't looking. The last time your dad called, you told him how many times you've eaten bugs because you thought it was funny. He doesn't call much anymore, but that's probably just because he doesn't like eating bugs. Not that you do, but you're a survivor. You'll do what you must.

The first log you come across is going to be prime bug real estate, so you have to dive right in. It's late. Underneath, you find mostly ants, and they scatter pretty quickly, but you're determined. You have to break the log open to find the fun stuff—termites. You kick the log open with your sneakers, so you can keep your hands in your pockets for as long as possible, and you see there are plenty of termites to go around. You scoop them quickly into the second baggie you brought, and move onto the next. You're quick. It's colder. It's almost completely dark now, and that's why you don't notice how close you've gotten to the cliff.

Earlier it was just another landmark, something you barely registered. You were too caught up in the stream.

You've never been the best at keeping your balance.

You fall.

#### Step 4: Stay Warm

It's late when I wake up. The house smells of hot cocoa and iodine, and Dad is mumbling something to himself in the other room. The floorboards of the apartment creak as he paces back and forth, and it sounds like he's outside my door. He has always been really restless. That's a trait I got from him, he said, so he suggested I join Cub Scouts. Get my energy out. Do something useful.

I wonder why he's anxious so late in the night. He should be asleep. It's Monday, so he has work in the morning. Mom has an appointment with a new doctor in the afternoon, and they're going to make her lungs better. He shouldn't worry. I'll go back to school when she's better. We're going to be fine.

I hear the knob slowly twist and warmth creeps in past the opening door and slips under my blanket. The fireplace is roaring outside. I close my eyes. I don't like seeing him while he's anxious. Slipped feet shuffle slowly towards my bed, then past, and the window that I left open clasps firmly shut. It's hot.

The floor doesn't creak when he stops by my bed. His clothes whisper faintly together as he sits on the ground.

He's quiet for so long I begin to think he's fallen asleep.

"I'm leaving, bud."

You're supposed to be asleep. Don't answer, even though you don't understand.

"I'm not strong, Billy." Silence. "You need to be strong for her. You need to help her survive."

He gets up, the floor creaks, the door closes.

I'm not strong. When I finally get the courage to go after him, he's gone. Mom's asleep on the couch.

## Step 5: If Injured, Conduct First Aid

It's late when you wake up. You're cold. All you can register is the biting of the air on your cheeks and the faint smell of iron. You can't think of anything. You're tired.

Then comes the pain.

When you were five, you fell off your bike and broke your arm. You cried for hours because it hurt so much, even though it was closer to a sprain than anything. This is worse.

Your head, my head, is on fire. It feels like fire ants are crawling in your nose and over your eyes and ears. The hot on the back of your head might be blood, must be, because the ground is supposed to be cold. I go to reach to pull my jacket tighter, but my arms don't move. I try my legs. They don't move either. Nothing moves.

Don't panic.

If you panic, you're dead.

I saw that in a video once.

Think.

First thing you have to do is try everything. Despite the burning of your head and the blurring of your vision you manage to look around. Sort of.

My head doesn't move with my eyes, but it's okay, all you need to do is see. It doesn't look like the fall was that far—I can hear the water draining

into a small pool a couple yards away—but it was enough. You don't know how long you've been unconscious, but your mouth is dry and you can smell blood. Blood is common in your house. You know how to deal with blood there. You clean it up. But you can't move. Your arms and legs and stomach and chest are nothing. Something must be bleeding, though, and you have to patch it up.

Your backpack is a million miles away back at the shelter. You should've brought it with you when you went searching for food. Why didn't I bring it with me? Rule number one is to be prepared.

Even if I had my backpack, it wouldn't matter, though. I can't move.

You think about what would happen to your mom if you couldn't move.

You panic.

### Step 6: S.T.O.P.

I stop panicking.

I think about Charlie taunting me during lunch a couple days ago. I think about how we were friends, once, when we first joined up and I was a good scout and had time to study our mottos. We studied the concept of brotherhood a lot. Supporting your fellow man, trusting in each other like you'd trust in a parent or God. Keeping up hope. We were friends. I don't know when that changed. I miss sleeping over at his house and practicing knots together.

I observe my surroundings. I landed on some dirt, and the forest floor around me is covered in leaves and foliage that I barely recognize. There are a bunch of plants that have medicinal properties, but in the dark I can't tell the difference between poison and immunity boosters. The trees down here are tall. The sky is dark; I can barely see it through the trees. No signs of any animals or people nearby. I observe myself. I try to. I'm scared. I'll be fine.

I plan how to get out.

It begins to snow.

I can't tell if I feel it on my skin.

### Step 7:

Your lips are chapped and you don't know how long you've been stranded in the woods. You don't feel so good. You should have brought a flare. Or a flashlight. Maybe the Band-Aids Mom keeps in the bottom of the medicine cabinet. Band-Aids would stop the bleeding that you're sure is coming from your head now.

You're slipping in and out of consciousness and your body is hot, one of the first signs of severe hypothermia.

Kids lost in the woods don't survive hypothermia.

Maybe you're not as strong as you thought.



You can't be.

You'd make it home if you were.

Your mom is going to wake up around seven. She's an early riser because she sleeps the rest of the day. She's going to call to wake you up, and of course you're not going to answer. She'll shrug it off and force herself to the kitchen to make breakfast. It will take her a while, trudging in her orthopedic slippers and clinging to the walls. She's weaker by the day, but she'll get it done because you have to eat. She'll notice that you're low on groceries and mentally note that she'll have to order some more. She'll make you an omelet because it's your favorite and she can tell you've been having a rough time at school. She'll pour herself a steaming cup of coffee, breathe it in, and cough it out. She'll say, "Baby, it's time to get up."

It'll mostly be a whisper, but she'll say it with a smile. She's strong. You should be there to hear it.

She's not going to worry too much that you don't get out of bed. She knows you stay up late reading a lot of the time. She'll let you sleep in. You need your rest. She won't notice you're missing until lunchtime.

But, for now, she'll sit on the couch and watch the sunrise through the windows.