

## Sheltering up when you need to



### Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

There is always discussion in the outdoor survival community as to which concern should be first on the priority list. Topics include drinking water, food, first aid for injuries, signaling, and the list goes on. I think there is no set answer, in that each situation has its own unique problems to be addressed.

Depending on whether my buddy Murphy, or Murph as I call him, has taken part in the proceedings, and you have suffered an injury, obviously tending to your wounds would be of immediate concern. However, if the situation gets further complicated because old Mother Nature has come to play along with Murph, different needs arise.

I remember as a kid building a “fort” and playing inside it. In the fort, I always felt perfectly safe, warm and secure. Wild Indians or marauding outlaws could never get me once inside the fort. The fort was nothing elaborate, just some old blankets or the cushions from the sofa. I have built far more sophisticated survival shelters than any of those forts of my youth, but I doubt I ever felt as safe as I was in that old fort.

One very important skill to master is that of building a shelter. I am not talking about a five-room log cabin, as I have seen suggested in the hundreds of survival books. Such elaborate shelters require carpenter skills, and a four-man framing crew. This is overkill for something that just needs to get you through the night. I am thinking of something along the lines of a “fort.”

Consider your outdoor day is beginning to unravel because of something turning bad. Let’s say weather has moved in. You have made the decision that you will not make it back to the truck before dark with the new falling snow. This is the perfect time to seek some shelter.

Once secure in a shelter of some type, you can calmly address the other concerns such as something to drink and perhaps, something to silence your growling stomach. Hopefully, these last two things are in your pack.

Once you are safe from the elements, the shelter should relax you enough so that you can clearly assess your situation and make a plan of action.

If space in your pack allows, you can carry some things with you to whip up a quickie shelter. A shelter does not have to be complicated. You just need some protection from the elements. A shelter can also give you a place to build a fire that is protected from wind and precipitation.

A small tarp of a lightweight

material, with a piece of parachute cord or light rope will make a fine shelter. You can run the cord between a couple trees; drape the tarp over the rope. Then anchor the corners of the tarp, and you have a tent.

You can do pretty close to the same thing with a couple space blankets, but these are very fragile. Once a small tear appears, the rest of the blanket goes south rather quickly. They are also very noisy, and if you are like me, that will drive you crazy with any type of wind.

A quickie shelter can be made with a rain poncho. Place some tall branches in a circle or a tipi shape. Then wrap the poncho around the teepee and climb in. If your stay is to be of short duration, you may want to just wear the poncho.

If you don’t have any shelter material with you, have no fear. You can make a natural shelter quite easily, and the woods are full of materials.

The easiest and quickest is called the squirrel nest. It is simply made from a pile of leaves. You can also use branches from spruce and pine trees. Make a mound out of a large pile of dry leaves, the bigger the better.

Dig out a trench in the center of the pile and climb in. Then you cover yourself with the pile of leaves. A couple feet of leaves on top of you is surprisingly warm and will resist snow or rain for several hours. Building the nest between a couple fallen logs will add a lot of stability to your shelter.

Another option is to scout around your location for a natural shelter. A rock overhang or a small cave can provide great protection. Avoid ridges, as they tend to be windy.

My favorite emergency shelter is inside a tree well. We have many tall spruce trees, with low overhanging branches, on the western slope. These work especially well when they have snow on them, as snow is a great insulator.

The depression in the snow around a tree trunk formed by the protective canopy of the hanging branches above it is called the tree well. Reinforce this natural enclosure by propping up additional branches around the lowest ones. Dig out the accumulated snow from



(Above) This is a spruce tree growth I found last summer that would make an excellent survival shelter. It is so thick you can barely see my wife Carol in the center. (Right) Your survival pack should include something to use or to construct an emergency shelter. (Photos by Mark Rackay)

around the trunk of the tree.

Fill the floor area of your tree well with additional evergreen boughs. Pile them up at least eight inches, as this will insulate you from the cold ground. It will also make a comfortable sleeping place. The temperature inside your finished tree well can be as much as forty degrees warmer than it is outside.

You can build a tree shelter without tools, but a knife or a small hatchet really helps. Sure, I would prefer a 24-inch Husquavarna chainsaw, compressor and nail gun, but a small hand tool will work.

A small hatchet would make the chore of removing branches an easy one, but even a hatchet takes up a lot of pack space. Better would be a folding bow saw. These weigh very little and can easily fit in a pack. You can also consider a cable saw. These are about the size of a wallet when coiled and weigh just a few ounces, but they are murder on your fingers. Try one out at home



before you decide to rely on one in your pack.

A final option I will leave you with is a survival bivy. This is nothing more than a small sleeping bag made out of the same material as a survival blanket.

The bivy is about the size of a baseball and weighs just a few ounces. These sell for around 20 bucks and fit nicely in a pack. The downside is they are very fragile and noisy, just like a space blanket, but they will work in a pinch.

Next time you are up in the mountains, stop and look around. Pretend that you need to find an emergency shelter and see what is around you. Study some spruce tree wells and maybe build a shelter, just for practice. It will make it much easier in an emergency if you practiced it beforehand.

And if you ever decide to shelter up somewhere, just be sure


you don’t give Murph your address. You don’t need him showing up complicating matters. In the meantime, I am going to go watch a ballgame in my fort. It is a great place to hideout when my wife is looking for me, probably to do some chore.

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Untouched snow sits atop Grand Mesa. (Submitted photo/Debra OBrien)








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