

OUTDOORS

FRIDAY, JANUARY 22, 2021 A10



As night begins to close the envelope around you, proper preparation can make the difference between a miserable experience or a minor inconvenience. (Mark Rackay/Special to the Montrose Daily Press)

A night in the woods

This story is about an unplanned night I spent in the woods with my outdoor mentor, Mr. Caster. The tale shows that with a little planning and a few skills, an unexpected night can be nothing more than



Tips

armloads of pine boughs from other spruce trees and piled them up on the ground inside our little shelter. He said, "These pine boughs will insulate us from the cold ground and give us a nice place to

pillow. Our fire was doing a nice job of keeping the nighttime cold at bay. Before I knew it, I had drifted off to sleep.

When I awoke the following morning, Mr. Caster had the fire going

This story is about an unplanned night I spent in the woods with my outdoor mentor, Mr. Caster. The tale shows that with a little planning and a few skills, an unexpected night can be nothing more than a minor inconvenience.

I was 11 years old; too young to hunt in Colorado. My outdoor mentor, Mr. Caster, had agreed to allow me to tag along on his elk hunt, probably as a favor to my grandmother. Mr. Caster was an irascible and smelly old woodsman who hated whining, baths and city life, but loved Chesterfield cigarettes and always carried a tin flask full of medicine for his rheumatism. He knew all the swear words and used them liberally. In other words, he was a perfect mentor.

Camp was set up with tents, cots, sleeping bags and a whole bunch of food and horses that would help pack out any elk that were taken. Mr. Caster and I headed out from camp in the predawn hours of a cold and cloudy day on foot.

As the day wore on, the weather soured. By late afternoon, snow was just beginning to fall and Mr. Caster figured we should work our way back towards camp that was some 5 miles away. It was at that moment, a bull appeared at the bottom of a deep draw we were walking along. Mr. Caster immediately shot the bull and it dropped in his tracks.

We worked our way down the draw to find the bull, all the while the snow was increasing. By the time we reached the bull, we could no longer see out of the draw because of the falling snow and darkness. Mr. Caster announced that we would spend the night here, with the bull, rather than risk getting lost in the dark and snow trying to find camp.



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

I greeted those words with a tremendous lack of enthusiasm. At 11, I marched on my stomach. I could eat cookies like Nabisco wanted the box back. The problem was, all those cookies were back at camp, 5 miles away, with all the rest of the comforts of life.

Mr. Caster pointed to a thick stand of spruce trees, some 50 feet away, and said, "We will cut some branches out of there and make that our home for the night. You go and collect firewood, lots of it. Be sure you collect it from the trees and none of the wood lying on the ground. Dry wood is always up in the trees."

The old man did not carry a survival pack. Mr. Caster wore one of those old style-hunting coats with pockets everywhere. Each pocket was crammed full of stuff like knives, saws, first aid, matches, water, a flask of medicine, just about anything you could imagine. He reached in the pocket along the back and pulled out a small handsaw, and sent me to work with a flashlight while he field dressed the elk.

I cut up as much wood as I could find, accumulating a nice pile. I remembered him saying to always cut twice as much as you think you would need because you don't want to run out in the middle of the night.

When I got back to our little camp, I saw Mr. Caster had cut a couple

armloads of pine boughs from other spruce trees and piled them up on the ground inside our little shelter. He said, "These pine boughs will insulate us from the cold ground and give us a nice place to sleep."

I noticed that the snow had stopped and gently suggested that if we hurried, we could probably make it back to the main camp in time for supper. His crotchety response was, "We will have our supper right here boy. We don't want to be climbing up through this draw in the dark. Tomorrow morning will be fine."

Knowing how much the old man hated whining, I quietly sat and listened to my stomach growl, hoping that he would pull a couple sandwiches out of that big coat of his. Instead, he got a roaring blaze going, right in front of our little shelter.

Mr. Caster cut several green sticks and sharpened one end into a point. From a snowdrift near the elk, he brought out an entire tenderloin he had removed from the kill earlier. He sliced it up into inch thick pieces and threaded them onto his wood skewers, and handed me one.

Following his lead, I slowly rotated those tenderloin cutlets until he announced they looked done. In later years, I will have paid up to a hundred dollars for a hunk of steak, but I assure you, it never tasted as good as those tenderloins did on that particular evening in the Wyoming mountains.

The old man and I both ate our fill, and even had some left over. Mr. Caster took a few swigs of his special medicine from his flask and lit a Chesterfield up. I sprawled out on my little spruce bough bed, using my hunting coat as a

pillow. Our fire was doing a nice job of keeping the nighttime cold at bay. Before I knew it, I had drifted off to sleep.

When I awoke the following morning, Mr. Caster had the fire going and the sun was making an appearance. He said, "If we head out for main camp now, I bet we could still be in time for some hot cakes."

The two of us headed out the draw, back toward camp. Later in the day, we would return with horses to pack out the elk. Nobody at camp was particularly worried about us, knowing that Mr. Caster was at home in the woods. They had heard the shot and pretty much knew what was going on. If we had not come out by morning, they would have come looking for us.

It has been well over 50 years since that night in the woods. I learned that as long as you had some survival gear, and a bit of knowledge on how to use it, an unplanned night in the woods is no big deal.

Mr. Caster is long gone now. I have since spent many a night in the woods. Looking back on that particular night in the Wyoming Mountains, I realize that it was not an inconvenience, but one of the best experiences of my life.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press and avid hunter who travels across North and South America in search of adventure and serves as a director for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. For information about the posse call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org

For outdoors or survival related questions or comments, feel free to contact him directly at his email elkhunter77@icloud.com.