

A pocket knife, a spark rod and a cotton ball with Vaseline can be used to start fires in wet weather.

Survival Mode

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Photos by Greg Bryan

Tony Nester is always looking, always assessing the possibilities. He sees a spiky yucca plant as a potential source of cord for lashing together a shelter. A downed tree is a valuable font of pine resin for starting a fire in wintry conditions. The impression of a boot in the mud serves as a great collector of water. Tony Nester is always in survival mode.

Flagstaff man teaches a forgotten art

We've forgotten our wilderness heritage. The skills our ancestors used to survive in a world that often seemed like it had it out for them have vanished like an elk slipping into the twilight woods. That's putting us in increasing danger as we venture further and more frequently into the outdoors. Nester, the 38-year-old owner of Ancient Pathways, a Flagstaff-based educational company that teaches programs in outdoor survival skills and bushcraft, aims to change that.

Survival Situations Can Happen Anywhere

Survival situations don't just occur in the frigid expanses of the Arctic, the lofty mountain passes of the Himalaya or the blistering barrens of the Sonoran Desert. They can happen on a favorite trail or a well-tracked Forest Service road right outside of Flagstaff. All it takes is one misstep or stroke of misfortune to turn a day hike with the dog or a Sunday drive in the car into a life or death situation.

"Life-threatening situations have happened right near Flagstaff," Nester says. He tells the story of a hypothermic German tourist stranded atop Mount Elden, within sight of his car parked below and the steady flow of cars and trucks traveling along Highway 89, yet helpless to get down.

Many people tend to think dangerous situations can only happen in wilderness settings, Nester says, and that's where real danger starts. He's dressed in utilitarian cargo pants, a simple, yet strong, jacket, wears a wide-brimmed hat and carries a diminutive backpack filled with all he needs to survive for days in the wilderness. He walks the woods with the grace and understated confidence you'd expect from an experienced outdoorsman.

"The day-hiker mentality is what gets people in trouble," Nester says. "Murphy's Law is out here. It's out here like it is in the city. You can have a life-threatening situation and you're not even in the wilderness."

The key to surviving those situations, whether it's in the wilderness or just outside town, is something the Boy Scouts have known all along: Be prepared.

A Little Preparation Goes a Long Way

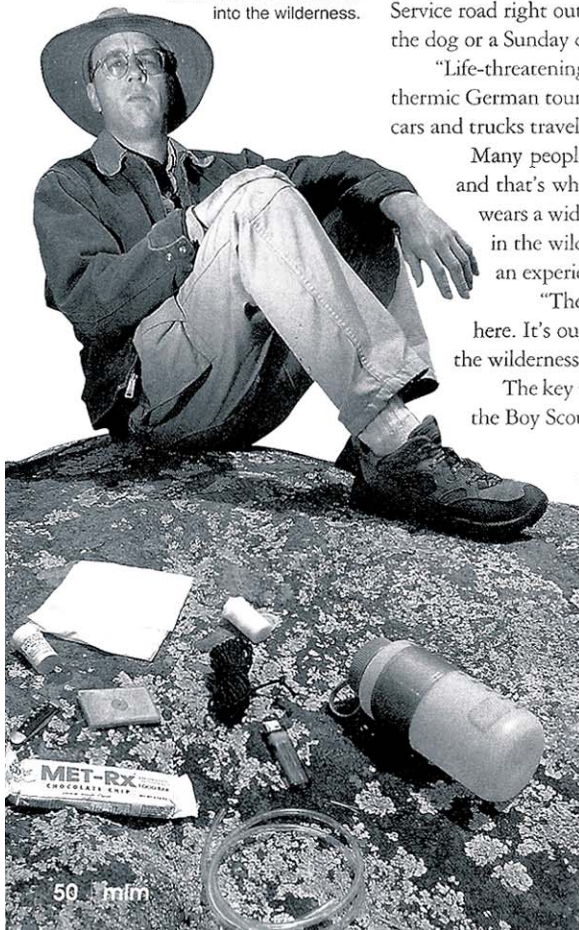
Nester is a case study in preparedness. Before he heads out for a trip, whether it's a day hike through the neighborwoods or a multi-day expedition into the far reaches of the desert, he always packs a few key items.

"Don't venture out unless you have some basic stuff on you," Nester says. He carries a light daypack stocked with simple but useful items like a garbage bag for shelter or insulation, a multipurpose bandanna, a pocket knife, water bottle, whistle and three sources of fire (a lighter, waterproof matches and a spark rod). Nester also leaves a travel plan to alert searchers to his general whereabouts.

"The wilderness doesn't know you're an experienced hiker, survival expert or veteran guide, and she can be mighty unforgiving if you're stranded and not prepared," Nester says.

There are more people venturing into the backcountry these days—many without an understanding of the environment they're entering. Modern technology has increased

Tony Nester sits on a rock above a selection of items he carries into the wilderness.



safety, but it's also given people a level of confidence that can be dangerous.

"Certainly GPS, cell phones and other modern gear have increased backcountry safety and even been crucial in saving lives," Nester says. "At the same time, people need to remember that such technology has limitations and should not be a substitute for common sense and being prepared."

Cars break down; cell phones don't get a signal. It's best to prepare for the possibilities, Nester says. On average, people are lost from 36–72 hours and need to have the basic skills to survive that time. The ability to build a shelter, find water and start a fire using natural methods puts the odds in your favor.

"These are time-tested methods that have been used for generations upon generations, and for a reason," he says. "They work."

He collects pitch from the trunk of a nearby pine tree, gathers a fistful of twigs and smears the pitch on them. He sparks a lighter under the bundle in his hand. The wood flares up immediately.

"Pine pitch is a great resource," he says, noting it can help start a fire in adverse conditions. Nester also carries a small plastic film canister filled with cotton balls smeared in Vaseline. Using a spark rod and his pocketknife, he demonstrates how the friction of the knife along the rough metal rod creates a spark that lights the oily cotton on fire easily.

"A lot of survival stuff you find in your household," he says.

But survival is as much mental preparation as it is physical. Nester cites a positive mental attitude as a key factor in surviving backcountry misadventure.

"Most people make their situation worse in the first one to two hours," he says. "The first thing to do is sit down. Sitting down will calm you."

The next step is to provide for basic needs: water, shelter and fire.

Nester's favorite backcountry shelter is a wickiup, a simple yet durable construction of branches and pine needles. The premise is simple. Take three dead tree limbs and form a steeple. Continue to add branches and full pine branches to insulate and lock the structure in place. Make a fire pit directly in front of the opening and place pine needles, bark, moss or other debris on the floor for insulation.

The simple fire/shelter combination can be built in an hour, and provides protection from harsh conditions.

"That concentrated heat will get you through a night if that's all you have," Nester says. He claims to have spent several comfortable nights tucked cozily into a wickiup during the dead of winter.

Learning to Live Again

Nester's survival skills and training have come from his own wilderness experiences. He remembers one solo backpacking trip in the woods of northern Michigan when, lugging a giant backpackful of gear, he wandered off the trail to follow the tracks of a black bear.

"As I wandered off trail, I really felt like a foreigner out there," Nester says. That experience led him to develop the skills needed to be more self-sufficient and less intrusive in the natural world.

"I got to the point where it wasn't surviving—it was wilderness living," he says.

Nester isn't satisfied with providing for his own needs in the wilderness. He wants to bring those skills to the population at large.

He teaches courses for the general public, ranging from one-day outdoor survival skill classes to extended courses like the two-day knife-only survival outing and the five or seven day bushcraft course. He also teaches classes for Northern Arizona University, and provides corporate classes for utility workers and military personnel. (Full course descriptions are available online at www.apatbways.com or by calling 774-7522.)

His expertise and skill have garnered national media attention. Nester was featured on the Travel Channel and NBC News, and recently filmed a desert survival episode with the Discovery Channel. He


has also been featured in *Outside* magazine and, later this year, in *Arizona Highways*. He has written one book, "Desert Survival: Tips, Tricks and Skills," and is working on a second.

Nester cuts a leaf from a yucca plant and, using only a small pocketknife and his nimble fingers, in a matter of minutes works the plant's tough fibers into a sturdy cord that can be used to string up a shelter or make a splint.

He finds value in teaching people skills like that, which give them the confidence and knowledge to survive in the wilderness. But his passion for bushcraft and outdoor skills goes beyond merely imparting knowledge. Learning to live in the backcountry is about getting back to our roots.

"It reconnects people with an ancient timeline and heritage that is quickly fading from our upbringing," Nester says.

"These skills have declined in recent years and I see a real interest and resurgence in relearning them in my courses," he continues. Backcountry skills are part of our legacy as human beings.

"Survival is hard-wired," he says. "It's just a matter of getting reacquainted with that." 

Survival Tips for Fire Season

Last summer's Chediski Fire could have been avoided if only a lost hiker had been better prepared. Valinda Jo Elliot of Phoenix admitted to authorities she used a lighter to start a fire to get the attention of a passing television news helicopter.

While Elliot was rescued, the fire she started remained, eventually merging with the Rodeo Fire, charring 469,000 acres of forest, forcing the evacuation of 30,000 people and costing more than \$43 million to contain.


With a few simple preparations, things could have been different.

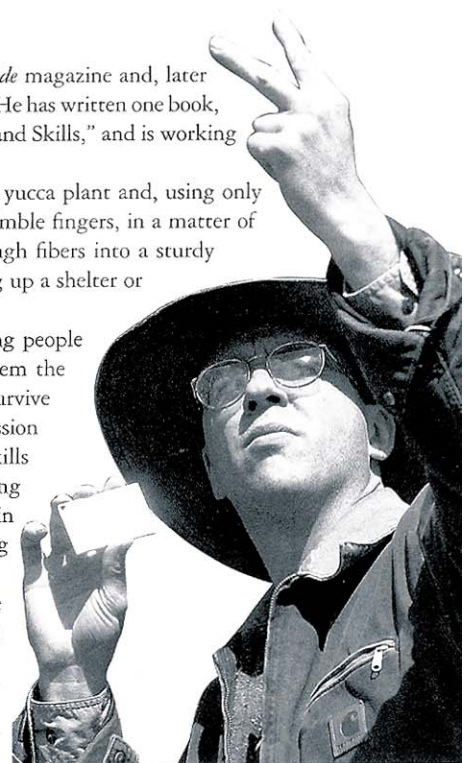
"Survival isn't simply about applying certain skills when things go terribly askew in the wilderness," says outdoor survival instructor Tony Nester. "Survival is an attitude involving planning and preparation, and ultimately it is about a mindset that needs to be in place before you even leave the front door of your house."

Nester recommends hikers and others venturing into the forest in the summer months carry a signal mirror.

"I'm a real believer in these amazing tools and there are plenty of real-life episodes, especially from the Grand Canyon search and rescue teams, that demonstrate the reliability of mirrors in the wilderness," Nester says.

There are several means of signaling for rescue that don't require a signal fire, Nester says. They include a signal mirror, whistle, spelling out "help" with logs and rocks, a car horn, headlights, a shiny hubcap, camera flash, flashlight and even one of the throwaway America Online CDs many people receive in the mail.

"Signal fires have their place as a survival tool but should be used with caution—only as a last resort, and then properly extinguished after rescue," Nester says. 



Nester shows how to use a signal mirror to attract attention. Signal mirrors are an essential piece of gear on any fire season outing.