



HOME SWEET DEBRIS HUT: YOU TOO CAN FIND SHELTER IN PINE NEEDLES AND DEAD BRANCHES

## survival camp LIVE THROUGH THIS!

**THE WATER WAS ORANGE** and had wormy things on its surface. “Look at those wrigglers,” said our leader, Tony Nester, who runs a wilderness survival and primitive technology school in Arizona called Ancient Pathways. “Would any of you ever drink from this hole?”

The seven of us—me and six current and former students at Northern Arizona University, all out for a two-day crash course in how not to die, parched and alone, in the outback—

looked down. It’s not easy to imagine a scenario in which you’d be desperate enough to belly up to a rust-caked cattle trough full of unspeakable bacterial and viral critters. Unless, of course, you’ve been in that situation. If you ever have, then you know exactly what the answer is.

“If you were lost and your last drink of water had been two days ago,” Nester said, “you’d probably be fighting each other off to get at this stuff. As the old saying goes, ‘Just grit your teeth and filter out the big stuff.’” He was only half-joking; if at all possible, boil it.

There are many old sayings when it comes to wilderness survival, and Tony Nester knows most of them. “Ration your sweat, not your water!” he shouted out as we roamed the Coconino National Forest north of Flagstaff, gathering pine needles and dead branches to build our debris huts and learning just how hard it is to start a fire the old-fashioned way, using a hand or bow drill. (Answer: pretty damn hard.) He had other useful aphorisms. Like, “Grubs and insects are worth considering.” As good sources of protein, that is. But should you partake, always cook them first, to kill off the ectoparasites they carry inside.

We were safe with Nester. A 37-year-old survival expert who worked for the U.S. Forest Service before turning Ancient Pathways into a full-time venture in 1999, he knows the woods and desert intimately. Plus, we’d come prepared with enough water and basic foodstuffs (bagels and apples and canned tuna) to make it through the night. This wasn’t John Muir marching into the woods with little more than his pants pockets filled with beans. But the skills Nester taught us are worth knowing, and this knowledge became weirdly empowering—especially to someone like me, whose idea of primitive technology is the coin-operated toilet. I learned the six building blocks of survival: fire, shelter, water, food, sleep, and a positive mental attitude. I learned that pine-needle tea “tastes like it smells” and is a surprisingly good source of vitamin C. Who knew that the lowly Frito and its inbred cousin, the pork rind, can be used to start a fire even when they’re wet, due to their alarmingly high oil content? I didn’t. And I’ll never eat another one again.

Our weekend started at the forbidding orange water hole and ended—after a night under the northern Arizona sky, each of us snugly tucked into our debris huts—with one last story about what it takes, sometimes, to make it out alive. It seems there’s another well-known survival guru, Ron Hood, who once was leading a group on a hike through the Sierra when they came upon the bloated carcass of a dead cow. Hood got up close, pried the cow open, reached inside, and...“they filled their socks with maggots,” Nester said, which they boiled and ate later.

On the one hand, you think: BAAARRRF! On the other, you think: Take that, John Muir. — JAY STOWE

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Ancient Pathways’ courses in wilderness survival and primitive skills last from a half-day (\$85) to a week (\$595).

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