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Setting Out Into the Arizona Wilderness With Only a Knife

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The next imperative was the hunt for water and food. We hiked deep into a tree-lined canyon, where the rocks at the bottom held rust-brown rainwater. The oasis was used as a waterhole by local animals. Mr. Nestor pointed out footprints. "Those three-lobe prints would indicate a cougar," he said. Mr. Posner filled his water bottle with a wary eye on the canyon's rocky outcrops.

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Sinewy stalks of wild onions protruded from the boggy ground around the waterhole. Mr. Nestor instructed the group to dig out the marble-size onions using our blades. It took a good hour of hard labor to collect even a cupful.

MR. NESTOR regarded everything in the outdoors as having a utilitarian purpose. Don't have a toothbrush for the night? Cut a fresh twig from an oak tree and scrape your teeth with it; the tannin acts as a natural toothpaste. Don't have rope? Use the fibrous leaves of the yucca plant and braid them into a line which is strong enough to lash shelters or even to use as mountaineering rope.

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Rick Scibelli Jr. for The New York Times
Students build a fire.

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Rick Scibelli Jr. for The New York Times
The course included preparing food.

We foraged a few wild cranberries and spent a further hour collecting acorns in our bandanas. But soon hunger, a chilling drop in temperature and darkness descended on the group. Mr. Nestor could tell how many hours of daylight were left by measuring how many fists there were between the sun and the horizon. “We have an hour to get back to camp to light a fire,” he said.

Back at camp, we whittled wood to make fire-making implements. A bow drill consisted of a flexible piece of wood bent into a bow shape with some cord, a spindle made from yucca stalk and a flat piece of wood known as a fireboard. Mr. Spaulding pulled the bow back and forth, with a jerky, forceful momentum, spinning the spindle in the fireboard and producing a fine, hot dust. The friction eventually produced a little billowing cloud of smoke and then a few licks of flame in the withering light, just as the sun sank below a tree-lined ridge. The dust was used to light pitch from a pine tree. A blanket of complete darkness descended just as the fire gathered a roaring life of its own. “Natural fire that I made myself,” Mr. Spaulding said, grinning with his accomplishment.

The group, ravenous with hunger, began the laborious process of shelling acorns, which were dropped into a rusty can we had found. Then we boiled up an acorn-and-wild-onion broth and devoured it ravenously. But we were all still hungry. Despite laboring for much of the day collecting onions and acorns we still couldn't fill our bellies.

“I'm so hungry I could eat a squirrel,” Mr. Posner said morosely. Mr. Nestor explained that in an emergency situation hunting could burn up more calories, especially when there was a chance of not actually catching anything.

Mr. Nestor has regularly dined on pack rats, mice and squirrels on his long sojourns in the wild. “When it's winter and there is no food on the ground, you have to eat that to survive,” he said, shadows cast by the campfire flickering over his face. “You can't be squeamish about it. It's a good thing our ancestors weren't or we wouldn't be here today. Mice are too small to skin so you just throw them on the fire and eat them whole. Rats you throw on for

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30 seconds to burn off bubonic plague, lice and parasites and then skin them. If you're really hungry you just eat them straight down."

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The long night stretched out ahead of us. The temperature dropped to 36 degrees. The soaring darkness of the woods enclosed as the needling cold stabbed into our clothing. We lay on our beds of prickly pine needles, sticking some into our clothes for extra insulation. We fed the fire to stay warm. The smoke from the fire pit billowed into our eyes, turning them bloodshot and sooty. We either roasted in the shelter or froze when we fell asleep and the fire died.

A gray dawn woke us early. Despite lack of sleep and a gnawing hunger with little food for 24 hours, there was a sense of pride we had survived the night. "There are students and advanced students," Mr. Nestor said, "but no masters when it comes to outdoor survival."



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Our trip was only a taste, but it demonstrated the brutality of life without easily accessible food, heat, light and all the other features of modern living that we take for granted. "It's about a positive mental attitude and knowledge of the jungle," Mr. Posner said. "Just like Tarzan had."

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Mr. Nestor demonstrated signaling with a mirror to use in an emergency. The flash can be seen as far as 105 miles away by rescue workers. And with that lesson we made our escape from the wilderness.

Mr. Posner tucked his knife securely into the waistband of his pants and hiked back to civilization. "Right," he said, safely back at his car. "Where's a McDonald's? I want a quarter-pounder with cheese."

Details

FOR those who like the idea of learning to be real weekend Tarzans and Rambos, there are a number of instructors around the country who teach knife-only survival courses:

ARIZONA Ancient Pathways (928-526-2552; www.aphathways.com) offers a full range of courses from knife-only, starting at \$275, up to a nine-week bushcraft course for \$4,800.

MONTANA At the Wilderness Arts Institute (406-660-2204; www.wilderness-arts.com), David Cronenwett offers one- and five-day survival courses in the northern Rockies for around \$100 a person a day.

NEW HAMPSHIRE Tim Smith of the Jack Mountain Bushcraft and Guide Service(603-

569-6150; www.jackmtn.com) offers various bushcraft and survival outings for \$125 a day or \$250 for a two-day course.

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