Wilderness Survival – Shelters

Most survival situations are from day-hikers and hunters that get lost. We focus first on tools you can use if you find yourself lost, to try and find your way back before you would be in a position to need a shelter.

- The first lesson that must be learned is not to panic if you ever find yourself in the position of being lost in the wilderness. You must fight the panic and take time to get your emotions under control so you can think clearly. Most often a person realizes they are lost quickly and they are often not far off the actual trail they were following. Once you realize you are lost, you do not want to move from that spot unless you have a good reason to do so. Any rescue personnel will be looking for the lost person(s) in the area of that trail and panic will only cause you to wander farther and farther from the correct trail.

- Once you have your emotions under control, you can use the following tools to try and find your way back: It is important to mark your current location with some kind of marker such as a glove, hat, scarf, etc. It is important to never lose sight of that marker. Begin moving out from that marker, then make circles around that marker while never losing sight of the marker. The idea is to try and find the trail again at which time you could retrieve your marker and return to the trail. If you have multiple people you can have one person move out from the marker whatever distance possible without losing sight of the marker and then have another person move out the distance from that person possible without losing sight of that person and so on….

- If you do not find the trail, go back to your marker and try and find a very tall tree within sight of your marker and climb the tree and listen for dogs barking, road noises, kids playing perhaps the sound of a train or anything that would sound like civilization. It is also important to look while in the tree for things such as houses, roads, farmer's fields or smoke from a campfire in populated areas and roads, power lines or train tracks in non-populated areas. Power lines and train tracks are important in non-populated areas because they will lead to civilization somewhere. If you don't know which direction to go, pick one, and follow it. It will lead you out. Another reason they are good is any rescue searching for you from above can spot you more easily because you are more in the open.
- If you are unable to find your original trail by climbing a tree or by moving out from your marker, plan on staying in your current location for at least two or three days. Usually

within 72 hrs. rescue personnel will find you; however until such time, you will need to build a survival shelter. The best survival shelter for cold weather is the debris hut. The debris hut will keep you warm even if you can't get a fire going.

DEBRIS HUT

This shelter is named a "debris hut" because it is constructed from debris found on the forest floor. A debris hut is basically creating a cocoon for your body. The body gives off about 400 BTUs of heat. If the debris hut is built too large, your body will not be able to heat it up. Keep this in mind when constructing the shelter.

The way to construct a debris hut is to start with a ridge pole that will be propped up either in the crotch of a tree or on an old stump. The ridge pole should be about two feet longer than you are tall. When you prop the ridge pole in the crotch of the tree or on a stump, you want it to be just high enough so that you can turn over when sleeping but not much higher than that.



Once your ridge pole is in place, the next step is to place ribs along the ridge pole.



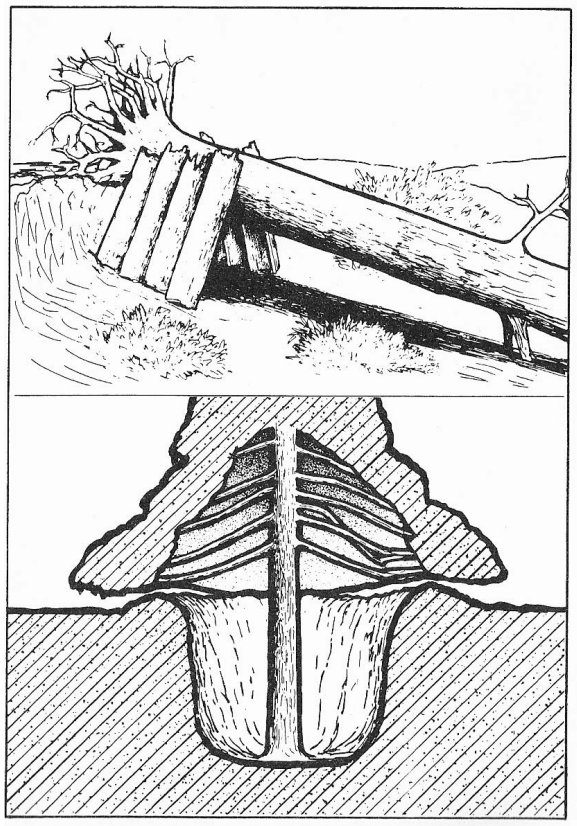
After the ribs are in place, place cross bars on the ribs.



The cross pieces need to be thick enough to hold the leaf debris without falling through. Once the cross pieces are in place, you need to add leaf debris at least an arm's length deep. If your debris is this thick, it will hold up to a weekend's long rain and you will not get wet and will also keep you warm in below 0 temperatures.

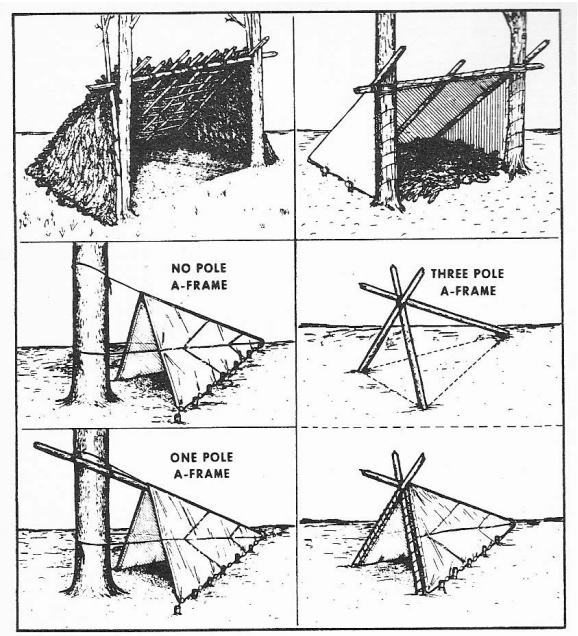






To finish the debris hut, you will want to have a pile of dry leaves that you can use to cover the ground inside the debris hut to insulate you from the cold ground and a pile to pull into the door to cover it so cold air will be blocked outside. The above pictures show you an example of a well-built debris hut.

Although the debris hut is the best shelter in colder non-rain forest locations, here are some examples of some other types of shelter's you can make.



SNOW SHELTERS

For snow shelters, the best is the snow cave shown as follows:

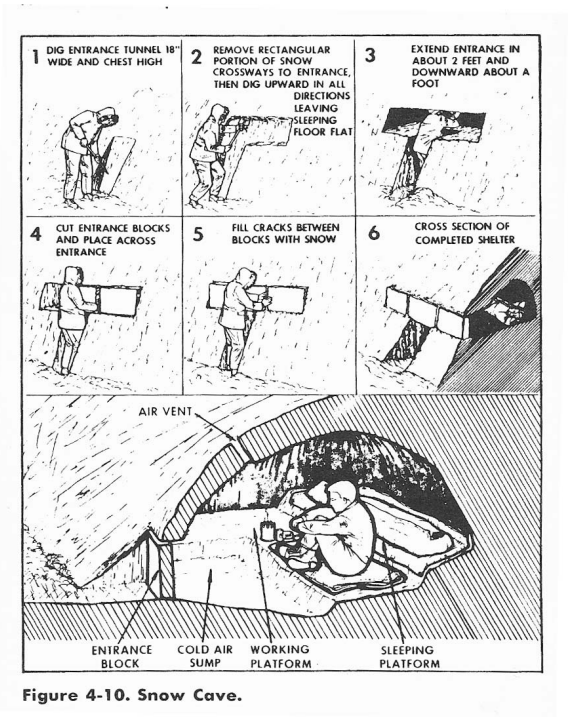
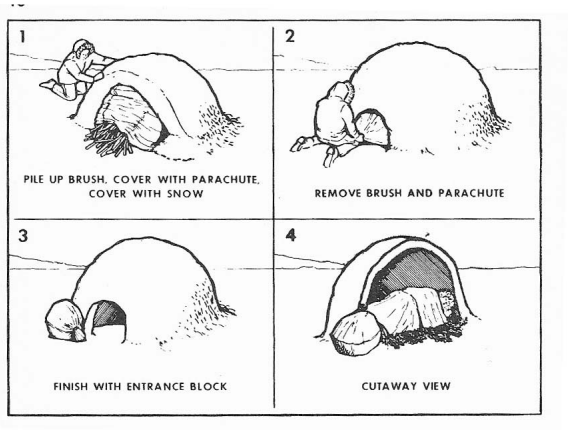
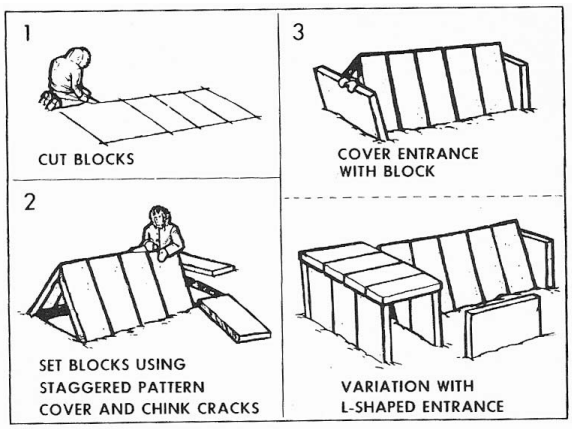


Figure 4-10. Snow Cave.

Please note in the picture above that the air vent in the roof of the cave should be at least the size of a soup can and the cold air sump is important because the cold air will sink down there and away from you.



This shelter can also be constructed by making a mound of snow. Then cut or brake off sticks about nine or ten inches long and pushing them into the mound so that each stick points to the center of the mound. These sticks need to be about a foot to a foot and a half apart from each other. Then start digging out the center cavity. When you hit the tip of a stick you stop digging in that direction. When you have all the tips showing you have your snow hut complete. To make snow shelters like this you need snow that will pack. Snow that packs does not let much air through it so you need to keep a vent open for air to come in.



WET CLIMATE SHELTERS

In wet climate and jungle conditions, it is important to stay off the ground away from the snakes, bugs, etc. Wet climate shelters will always have a raised bed area to sleep on. The following are some examples of wet climate shelters.

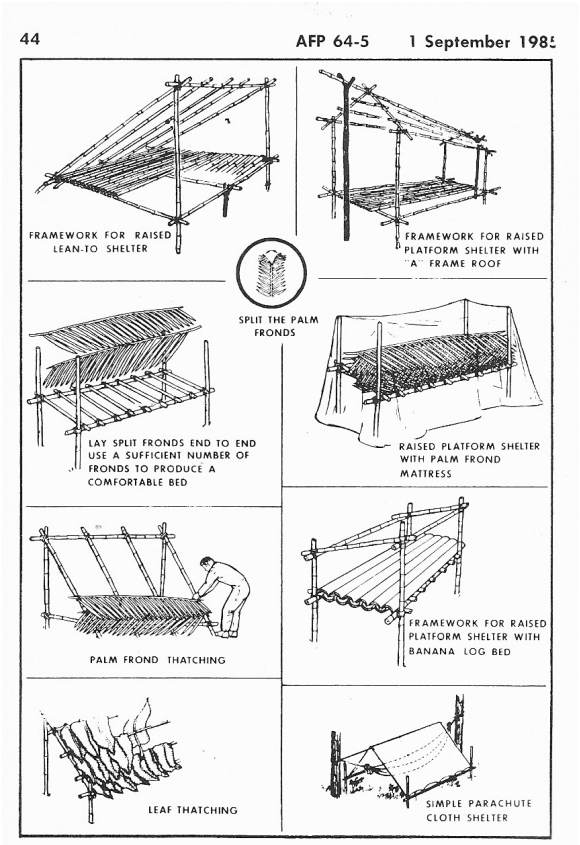


Figure 4-14. Wet Climate Shelters.

Figure 4-15. Entrance of Shelter.

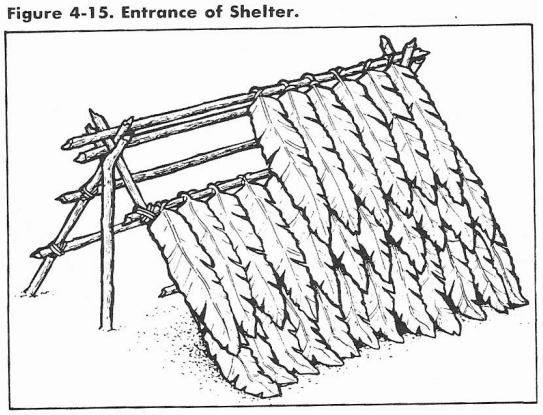


Figure 4-16. Shingle Method.

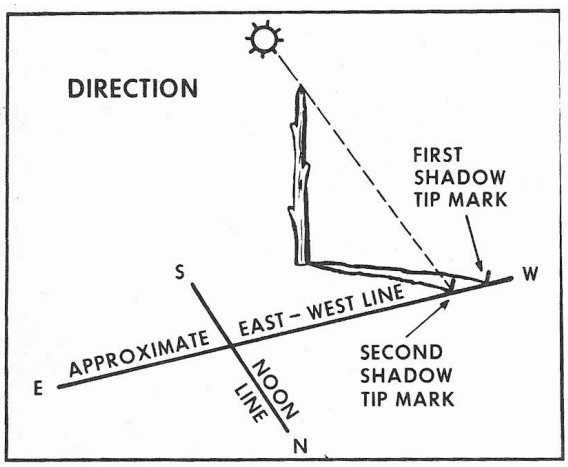
Shingling can be done in non-jungle areas by bundling tall grasses together and laying them in the same way that you would the large leaves. Cattails and reeds are good for this. Go to the cordage honor to see how to make your rope for your bindings.

At this point, if you have not been rescued you may want to strike out to try and find your way to civilization. If you decide to leave it is a good idea to leave something behind so the dogs can get a new sniff of what you smell like. It is well worth leaving something for that purpose.

Normally a river, if you follow it downstream, will lead you to civilization. People like to live alongside water. Also water will find the easiest way down.

- If you have some idea of what direction you want to head, there are some ways to figure out direction without a compass. The most general ways are - moss likes to grow in the shade so it will normally be on the north side of trees. Trees like to grow toward the sun so the heavy limbs will primarily grow toward the south.

  A more accurate way to find east and west is to take four sticks, one being a tall one, and stick the taller one in the ground and then at the tip of its shadow put another stick in the ground and then wait a little bit and repeat this several times. The smaller sticks will form an exact east/west line. The first shadow tip you mark will be the west end and the last one you mark will be the east end. Note at 12:00 noon standard time 1:00 daylight savings time your shadow will point a north/south line.



Here is a way to find south and north. If you have a watch with an hour hand, point the hour hand directly toward the sun. In the northern hemisphere South will be exactly between the hour hand and 12 o'clock. When daylight savings time is on you use the 1 o'clock like you do the 12.

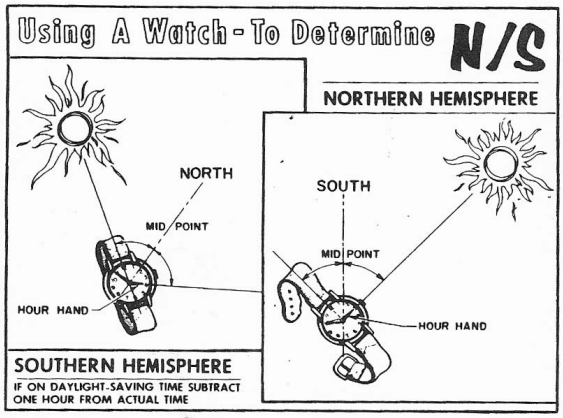


Figure 6-3. Direction Using a Watch.

- The way to mark your trail to allow rescue personnel to know which way you headed, use the following techniques:

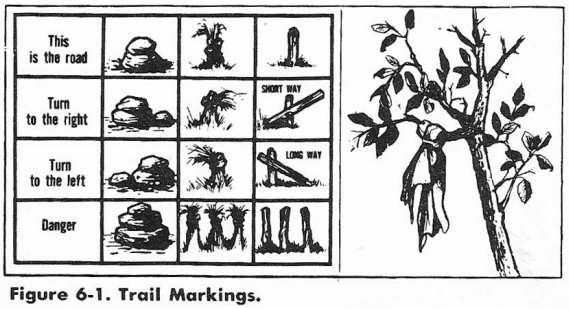


Figure 6-1. Trail Markings.

When you use rocks make sure you use three of them. This will allow the searchers to know the direction you went without having to guess. Place one rock on top of another and the third to point the direction you are going. You will need to make markers as you go. Yes it will slow you down but it will speed up the searchers. Most people will understand a Y stick and a pointer more than they would three rocks. So try to use sticks more than rocks. If you are in a field with no trees than you can use rocks.

- To signal overhead rescue personnel or to signal over a great expanse use the following:

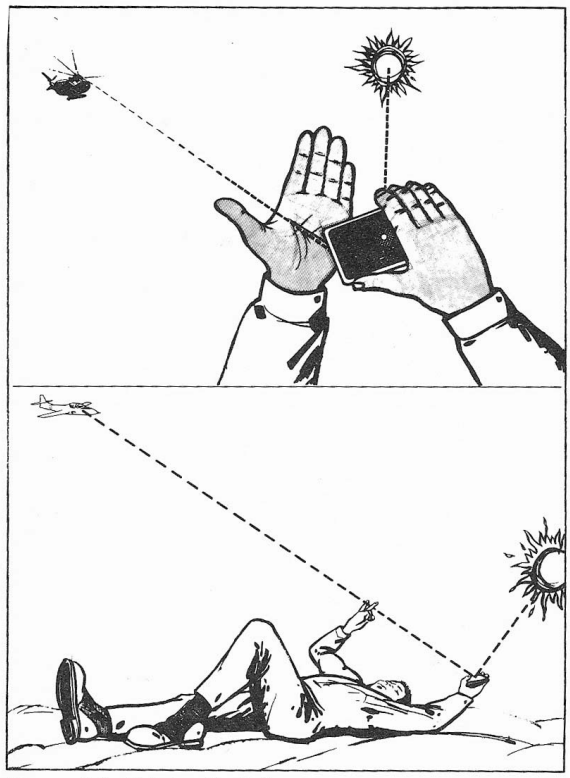


Figure 5-2. Sighting Techniques.

When aiming the sun's rays it is best to have your reflector by your temple. This will keep the beam pointing along your line of sight. Make the beam shine on your hand and then off your hand into the vee you are making. Keep the plane or helicopter in the vee of your hand. Make the beam shine on your hand and off your hand, on off, on off. The rescuers will see flash, flash, flash and will come over to find you. This can be seen over ten miles away. It gets very hard to see a person when they are just a mile or more. If a plane finds you the pilot will tip the wings back on forth this will tell you they see you. It is best to stay right where you are because the pilot is going to radio your GPS numbers to the search team. Now they know right where you are and will come and get you.

Three fires is a universal distress signal. When using fires you want contrast. So use green leave branches on a fire to create lots and lots of smoke.

Also a huge X on the ground denotes a HELP signal. You need to make it LARGE so pilots can see it from way up there.