

# Call of the wild

Follow in Ray Mears's footsteps and learn the ancient art of bushcraft



'This is the sort of book that children planning their next Duke of Edinburgh survival award should read,' said one reviewer of Michelle Paver's *Spirit Walker*, the recent follow-up to the hugely successful *Wolf Brother*. Torak, the intrepid 11-year-old hero of both books, never goes anywhere without his hunting knife and fur-lined sleeping sack. He can track, hunt, skin a wild boar and make poultices from coltsfoot and cobweb – life skills learnt from his father and clan leader. He can also talk to wolves. Fast-forward several thousand years to southern England where someone even younger was just starting out on a lifetime's journey. Ray Mears is now a leading expert on bushcraft and survival, but back then, in the 1970s, he was a boy of seven or eight beginning to discover the countryside and its wildlife. 'I've always loved trees and forests,' he says, 'I can't live without them. It was tracking foxes, deer, badgers and stoats through the woods of the North Downs that sparked and then fuelled my fascination with bushcraft.'



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Making a fire



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## Ancient skills

Digesting every scrap of information on survival he could find in his local library, Ray soon began to relearn skills that had not been used on the North Downs for maybe 10,000 years. Since then he has travelled to some of the world's most remote and beautiful wildernesses, experiencing at first hand the survival techniques of different cultures, from the Yekuana of Venezuela to the Hadza of Tanzania. 'Without realising it, those days spent exploring the woods of Surrey and Sussex were perfect preparation for journeys into other forests,' he says, 'some so large that they seem to be living entities in their own right.'

## Positive thinking

If you were stranded in the wild with no immediate prospect of rescue, the first thing to do is STOP: Stop, Think, Orientate, Plan. 'That process prevents you from panicking,' says Chris. 'It slows you down, gets you thinking straight. You can know all the survival skills in the book but your mental

state is crucial. It's vital to keep positive.' You'll need to build a fire – that'll enable you to keep warm, cook food, sterilise water and stay cheerful (fire is a great comforter). 'We teach the many different ways of lighting fires,' says Chris, 'as well as how to manage it to prevent accidents.'

## Working with wood

Woodcraft is another of our ancestors' skills that we've forgotten how to use in the 21st century. 'We might teach people how to whittle a spoon or bowl, or use a knife to strip bark off a willow tree and make cord,' says Chris. 'At the very least, you want a fixed-blade knife, and a folding saw makes life that bit easier. You have to be careful, obviously. I never get any sharp tools out until I've spent time with youngsters first and seen how responsive they are to instructions.'

## Guide and mentor

While Ray gathers knowledge from and is inspired by the indigenous peoples of the Amazon rainforest or the African desert, others in turn

look to him for guidance. 'Ray is my mentor,' says Chris Salisbury, who runs bushcraft courses for people of all ages from his base in Devon. 'I first got hooked on the subject about 10 years ago, when I was looking for a way of getting teenagers interested in the countryside. When I went into the woods with Ray and learnt how to depend on my own resources, it was the most incredible experience. When you start to feel that kind of self-reliance, it gives you no end of confidence.'

## Bare essentials

Next you need a shelter, somewhere that'll protect you from the weather. 'With younger children we teach den building but shelter building is more serious because it needs to be thatched, and that takes time,' says Chris. 'You don't need any tools or special materials, just plenty of deadwood that's easily found in a woodland environment.' The other essentials are water and food. 'In the UK, you're never going to be far from water,' says Chris, 'but we teach people how to look for the signs.

Willow or alder can point you there, for instance, and if there's a bee going past you know it must be close by. We go digging for water too, to show people that although groundwater can be very muddy, we can filter it and bring it to the boil to sterilise it ready for drinking.'

## Respect for nature

Both Ray and Chris believe that a knowledge of bushcraft can help our natural world. 'The more you learn about trees and plants, the more you respect them,' says Ray. 'And the more you respect them, the more you cherish, nurture and look after them. You start to respect yourself too. If I have one piece of advice it's this: get to know trees from root to twig, learn their different personalities and uses. Trees can give you everything you need.'

## Living off the land

Bushcraft is essentially the art of living off the land using whatever natural resources are available. 'But it's about much more than just survival,' says

Chris. 'It teaches you how to read the landscape and be more confident outdoors so that you can enjoy it more. You carry less by knowing more is one of Ray's sayings. On our courses people gradually increase their reliance on nature and decrease the man-made things they bring with them.'

## Food for free

Food always tastes better outside – and it tastes better still when you've gathered it yourself. 'Obviously the plants we collect depends on what's available at different times of year,' says Chris. 'In autumn, for instance, we might pick blackberries, dig up roots or look for mushrooms. But our campfire cookery often extends beyond what nature provides. We use flour and water to make a bannock that can be wrapped round a long stick and toasted, or we plank it – put the bread dough on a split log close to the fire.'

**Go wild!**

Have fun in the countryside but follow the country code. In particular, guard against all risk of fire, fasten all gates and take your litter home. Don't eat berries or mushrooms unless you're sure what they are. If you want to learn more, try Chris Salisbury's bushcraft courses for children and families (visit [www.wildwise.co.uk](http://www.wildwise.co.uk), email [events@wildwise.co.uk](mailto:events@wildwise.co.uk) or ring 01803 868269).



All photographs taken by Andrey Zvoznikov