

A Week in the Woods

Micah Dettweiler, August 2017

The Idea

I have vague memories of a childhood in a village in rural Nigeria. I remember playing in the rain outside our cement-block house, and I remember watching our neighbors thatch one of their huts. I remember the red hill sparkling with crystals at the end of the road, and the coolness of the mango grove near the well. Ever since my family left the village, I've spent most of my time in cities, and while that certainly has its perks, I miss the sort of wilderness I was fortunate enough to inhabit at a young age.

In the summer of 2017, when I had the opportunity to do research in the Yukon for a few months, the chance to live in the wilderness was a big pull. The camp we worked from was a gathering of wooden shacks in the middle of a forested valley backed by a line of stony hills that would have been more picturesque if they hadn't had to compare with the range of snow-capped mountains on the other side of the vale. It was certainly a different sort of wilderness than I had previously encountered, but it was great nonetheless. We worked six days a week, but even then we found time for hiking in the hills, foraging in the forest, and swimming in several of the extremely cold local lakes. It helped that the sun only set for a couple hours each night.

For me, the culmination of this wilderness experience happened in my final week in the Yukon. Each research technician was entitled to a one-week holiday, the only condition being that they weren't allowed to stay in camp (perhaps it would lower the morale of those still working). Some techs used their week for road trips, to see the rest of the territory and maybe Alaska too. Some techs flew back to their hometowns for a week back in civilization. For most of the summer, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. Backpacking along a trail in a nearby national park sounded appealing, but I didn't have a good tent to use. The idea occurred to me to take a tarp instead of a tent and just build a shelter for myself each night along the trail. After all, I've always enjoyed the idea of building shelters from natural materials. Upon more reflection, however, it sounded like a lot of work to walk all day and then spend a few hours gathering branches and tying them together before I could sleep.

Finally, the solution struck me: instead of backpacking down a trail (which is a sort of curated wilderness in many cases), I could have the experience I wanted by walking into the woods with a week's worth of supplies and building a shelter to keep my bones warm and dry while I spent the days doing whatever I liked. It would be just me, nature, and a bunch of gear because I'm not an experienced survivalist by any means. As I pitched this idea to my coworkers, logistical issues were raised and safety concerns were voiced (it was bear season, after all), but ultimately I got the impression that this was the first time in the camp's memory such a vacation had been attempted, and, being scientists, everyone was interested to see how it would play out.

Safety First

Once I had determined I would like to spend a week in a handmade shelter in the boreal forest, there were several safety issues to take into account. While I liked the idea of being out in the wilderness by myself, I didn't like it enough to risk injury, mortal or otherwise. Brainstorming with my coworkers and reading survival literature produced the following concerns:

Bears

In the weeks approaching my expedition, bear sightings had become relatively common, and several of us had encountered bears at a closer range than we would like. Being alone for this week exacerbated the issue; a single person may have more difficulty frightening off bears than a group, and nobody would be close by to call for help if an incident did occur. Bear risk reduction happened in a number of ways.

1. Food -- I didn't bring any meat in my food supply, and food was stored in a bear-proof canister about 20 meters away from my sleeping site. In general, I tried to avoid giving bears any reason to confront me.
2. Alarm system -- I chose a site for my camp surrounded by three squirrel territories; squirrels bark when large animals are nearby, so I hoped to get some warning of any intruders. For the first few days, however, the squirrels mostly just barked at me.
3. Defense -- I had a can of bear spray with me at all times, and when I went to sleep at night, I kept the bear spray propped up in a boot at the entrance of my shelter to be ready at a moment's notice.

Exposure

My week in the woods was planned for the middle of August, and things were beginning to get chilly in the Yukon. If it got too cold at night or if it rained, things could range from unpleasant to dangerous. Since I picked a spot in the forest just a few hours' hike from the main camp, the most important thing as far as exposure was concerned was for me to give up and go back to camp if things got too extreme. But to prevent this eventuality, I planned:

1. Shelter -- I brought four large garbage bags to line the roof of my shelter to ensure it would be waterproof. In theory, a roof of spruce boughs alone would have kept me dry, but I didn't want to take any chances.
2. Clothes -- in addition to my base of jeans and a t-shirt, I brought a sweater, a light jacket, a heavy jacket, a rain jacket, and rain pants. I wore all of it except the rain gear for the majority of the week, only getting down to the t-shirt once when it was the middle of the day and I was getting warm from manual labor.

Falling Trees

I was glad to have picked up a book on wilderness survival in the weeks before my expedition because I learned from it that an important danger to consider when one is sleeping in a forest is that of falling trees. There were a lot of dead trees in our valley thanks to an epidemic of beetles in the 1990s, and it doesn't pay to assume they won't fall at any given time. The solution for this was fairly straightforward -- I chose a spot for my shelter that would be untouched even if every tree in the area fell directly towards it. This took a good deal of time, but I was very happy with the location I eventually found.

Poisoning

Throughout the summer, I was one of the more adventurous members of the camp when it came to consuming the local flora. I always make sure to identify a plant and make sure it's edible before I go to town on it, and even then, I start with small morsels and wait to see if anything happens if it's a plant I haven't eaten before. There was much discussion in camp of *Into the Wild*, a book (and movie) telling the true story of an Emory graduate who went to live in the Alaskan wilderness and died there after eating a poisonous plant. In the end, I decided it wouldn't hurt to be extra safe on this one. Although originally, I had planned to not try any *new* plants during this week, ultimately I decided to not eat any wild plants at all -- I had had enough fun with that earlier in the summer and it made everyone feel better about this risk.

The final elements of my comprehensive safety plan were communication and transportation. For the whole summer, we had generally reliable radios that we used to communicate while in different study grids, and I brought a radio and two months' worth of batteries to ensure it kept running. I was too far away to radio the main camp, but I could talk to people who were on a nearby grid, so at least I could check in each day to say I was still alive and kicking.

As for transportation, the site I chose for my camp was close to the Old Alaska Highway, a dirt road that had been abandoned upon the construction of the new Alaska Highway and that was wide enough for one vehicle. My camp was out of sight of the road, but I marked a few trees with initialed flagging tape so people would be able to find it if need be. In short, if things did start to go wrong, I had a good chance of being able to let people know and they had a good chance of being able to get to me quickly.

A few other dangers were considered; apparently, moose are very unpleasant if they feel threatened. A coworker kindly lent me a water filter so I wouldn't have to risk disease from the local stream. Getting lost in the woods would be a downer, but with a compass and two ranges of mountains to navigate by, I couldn't go too far wrong, and in any case, I stayed around my camp for most of the week. There is, of course, no way to ensure complete safety in the wilderness, but after all this planning I felt the risks were both minimal and manageable.

Preparation

I've done a lot of packing in my life, but preparing for a one-week stay in the Yukon wilderness provided a relatively new experience. Most of what I needed was pretty basic: clothes, food, things to help me make a shelter, and several books to read in the free time I anticipated having. The generosity of my coworkers helped a lot -- I got a backpacking-sized backpack from a tech who was leaving and I borrowed a battery-powered lantern and a hand-pumped water filter from a grad student.

The main specialty item I needed to get for this trip was a bear canister to keep my food safe from bears and other interested parties. I decided to rent a bear canister from Parks Canada, a process that involved going to their nearest outpost and filling out some paperwork. Everything went smoothly until the ranger asked me where I was going to be using the bear canister (this is done mostly so Parks Canada knows where campers are in case an emergency situation arises). My first answer, "Oh, I'll just be in the woods north of here," apparently didn't cut it. I hadn't considered my rescuability by Parks Canada as a factor in choosing a random section of forest rather than a designated backpacking trail for my expedition, but in hindsight it makes sense. As far as the bear canister rental was concerned, I realized I could be more specific, and I wrote "in the woods near the Old Alaska Highway, people at Squirrel Camp will know where I am," and the ranger was happy with that.

A trip to Whitehorse, the city boasting two thirds of the Yukon's population and most of its grocery stores, allowed me to fill the rented bear canister with all the food I would need. The canister was small enough to be carried comfortably under one arm, but since I went for fairly dense foods, I ended up packing about 20,000 calories into it. As in other areas, I erred on the side of over preparation.

I made an inventory of all the supplies I brought with me for the week; this was inspired in part by the highly-organized lists my mom makes when packing for important trips, and in part by *Robinson Crusoe*, one of my favorite books and a source of my interest in wilderness survival and building shelters and other such stuff. When I finally set out, I had a full backpack on my back, the bear canister under my arm, my neatly packed sleeping bag in one hand, and a stout stick in the other. Here is what I took with me for my week in the woods:

Apparel

Two sets of clothes
Two jackets
Boots
Sweater
Bandana
Bug net*
Raincoat
Rain pants
Gloves
Two warm hats
Backpack
Sunglasses

Tools

Belt knife
Multi-tool
Two whistles
Compass
Flashlight
Two pens
Sharpie
Flagging tape
Mechanical pencil
Binoculars

Walkie-talkie
18 AA batteries
Bear spray
Chapstick
Water bottle
Water filter
Toothbrush
Kleenex
Toilet paper
First-aid kit

Campsite Materials

Four large garbage bags

Thick rope
Thin rope
Wire
Duct tape
Lantern (battery powered)
Sleeping bag
Small Canadian flag

Food

1 kg granola

1 kg peanut butter
1 kg raisins
1 kg dried apricots
750 g dried cranberries
400 g chocolate
Bear canister
Ziploc bags
Spoon

Media

The Bible
Robinson Crusoe
Wildflowers Along the
Alaska Highway
Journal
Kindle
Smartphone
iPod
Rechargeable battery
Charging cables

*a mesh hood that rendered my face and neck inaccessible to insects

Day One

So there I was, standing in a forest clearing with my backpack, my wits, and a generous 10 hours of sunlight in which to build my shelter. It was August 16, 2017, and my fellow researchers had taken me by truck a ways up the dirt path of the Old Alaska Highway, to a place where a stream crossed the track. There, I said my goodbyes and continued on foot. A short hike later, I saw a clearing just off the path, a sort of depression that looked like it might once have been a pond. Reaching the other side of the depression, I crested a small hill and came upon another clearing, about twice as long as it was wide, and well out of sight of the Old Alaska Highway. This seemed to be as good a site as any to set up my camp; I put down my backpack and began to look around.



I discovered my immediate surroundings weren't at all unpleasant. Dense patches of young spruce trees sheltered my clearing to the east and west, and several formations of fallen logs provided a barrier on the north. To the south, back towards the path, there were a few low hills; I designated one of these hills, about twenty meters away from the clearing, as my kitchen area and I left the bear canister containing all my food there so that I might be undisturbed even if a bear did direct its interest towards my edibles.

The next order of business was to start building my shelter. I had done some light research on boreal survival and the main thing I picked up about shelters was that it is important not only to have a roof, but also a bed to elevate myself so I would not lose huge amounts of body heat to the cold ground at night. Fortunately, dead wood is easy to find in the Yukon, and I soon had myself a rough rectangle of logs about eight feet long, four feet wide, and six

inches high. I covered this surface with spruce branches for padding, and it was surprisingly springy and comfortable. I decided the easiest shelter to make in this situation was a sort of A-frame, and I found a fallen poplar sapling that was about twenty feet long that would make a perfect main beam. With the help of the two trees at the foot of my bed and a few forked branches, I soon made my vision a reality.

Getting to this point took more time than I thought it would; I wasn't in a hurry, but I also began to appreciate the 'infinite labor' Robinson Crusoe cites whenever he talks about the things he built with minimal tools. I placed several branches to make the frame of the roof, put my garbage bag waterproofing layer on, and then added several more branches overtop the plastic before tying it all together and calling it a day. The shelter wasn't quite finished, but it kept the wind out and it didn't look like there was any more serious weather on the way.

I hung my battery-powered lantern just inside the entrance of my shelter, rolled out my sleeping bag on top of the spruce mattress, and laid down to read a bit and then sleep. I had all my sweaters and jackets on in the sleeping bag and my winter hat pulled over my ears, and I was just about able to stay warm.

Day Two

I slept for eight and a half hours the first night, which is about as much as I've ever slept while camping. A warm sleeping bag over several layers of spruce branches and needles was just slightly worse than my mattress at home; the thin branches form a springy frame and the needles flatten under your weight into some sort of prehistoric memory foam. Even better, as you crush the mattress beneath you a pleasant spruce aroma is released.

My first task of the day was to fill up my 1-liter water bottle from the nearby stream. I had done this a couple times the day before, but I decided to record how long it



took this time around. Walking to the stream took 4 minutes, then filtering took another 14. A fellow researcher had kindly lent me a hand-pumped water filter. My system was to fill the bottle at the stream, drink as much as I felt like on the spot, then refill it to take back to camp. Factoring the 4-minute walk back, my final result for a water trip was 22 minutes. I made this trip roughly 3 or 4 times a day throughout the week.

The next big job of the day was to finish roofing my shelter. I thought I had cut a lot of spruce boughs to make my mattress, but the local defoliation required for covering the shelter was on another level. I determined to cut just 5 boughs from any one tree so as not to injure their health unnecessarily, but there was no shortage of spruce in the area so I still didn't need to walk very far. I used the saw blade on my multi-tool extensively in the collection and it is stained with spruce sap to this day.

I built the roof up in layers, starting at the bottom with one ring of boughs, then laying another ring above but overlapping, and so on to the top. Growing up in the village, I had seen people thatch huts in a

similar manner, and in both cases it worked pretty well to make rainwater run off the roof instead of dripping through.

In the evening, two of my coworkers from camp came to visit my site, which was pleasant. They brought a container of fried rice and a thermos of hot chocolate as housewarming gifts; it tasted practically gourmet even though I had just been on my diet of granola, raisins, and peanut butter for one day. It was a good end to a productive day, and I lay down to sleep happily that night with spruce above me and below me.

Day Three

Friday morning dawned and the newly foliated roof of my shelter was still in place, so I celebrated by staying in bed and reading until I ran out of water and had to make the day's first trip to the stream. Breakfast was enjoyed on my kitchen hill, just out of sight of the shelter, and it was the same as every other meal I had that week. I sat at the top of the hill next to a flat stone that I arranged my bags of granola and dried fruit on, and I alternated between these and spoonfuls of peanut butter, eating slowly



until I wasn't hungry anymore. At the end of each meal, I had four squares of chocolate to round things off. I listened to audiobooks during most meals, and now I'm sure that eating dried apricots will forever remind me of East of Eden and vice versa.

With my shelter finished, there was no big project to

fill my time, so I began some of the most undisturbed relaxation I've ever experienced. I made a reading chair from an upturned tree stump not far from the mouth of my clearing, padding the ground with moss and the stump with spruce branches. I sat and read without marking the time, switching between books when I felt like something different. The mosquitoes weren't as bad as they had been earlier in the summer, but I still wore a bug net sometimes while reading because sitting in one place gives them plenty of time to find you.

Later that afternoon, I explored some of the surrounding area. For the most part, there were just more trees. I was a bit disturbed to find some bear droppings about a minute's walk to the west, but they didn't look particularly fresh, so I had some comfort. Still, for some reason, it felt risky to be away from my camp and I kept looking over my shoulder until I was back in the clearing. Even when I was home again, I still felt very alert to noises that could be large animals approaching, and I decided to make a door for my shelter by tying together thick branches to make a sort

of large grille. It wouldn't necessarily stop a curious bear, but it could at least give me time to grab my bear spray.

Combined with the other safety precautions I had taken, this barrier was enough to give me peace of mind while in my clearing. Another (mostly psychological) aid to this was the old moose bone I found, about two feet long but surprisingly heavy and just the right thickness to grip comfortably. I read most of Robinson Crusoe at my reading chair with this club held in one hand. A larger wooden club stored next to my shelter completed the primitive but comforting arsenal I had against the wild.

Looking back, it does seem strange that the most restful week of my life featured a constant background of mild primal dread. Perhaps I was unintentionally practicing mindfulness.

Day Four

Whenever I'm free from the constraints of a tight schedule, I like to take my time waking up in the morning. Sleep is great, but hard to enjoy in itself since you're asleep the whole time, so it's the dreamy period between first awareness and finally getting out of bed that I like to appreciate. On day four in the woods, I woke up at 8 AM and marinated under wraps for an hour or so before being brave enough to poke



my entire head out of the hole in my sleeping bag that had been previously occupied only by my nose, periscope-like, for breathing purposes. Having thus greeted the dawn, I played some music on my phone and sang along for another couple hours until I finally emerged entirely for breakfast and a trip to the stream.

In the afternoon, I did some light construction work. One of my coworkers had let me know via walkie-talkie that she would try and visit my camp that evening, so I built a bench from fallen poplars and spruce branches in anticipation of the event. My clearing was getting fairly civilized by this point, and I wanted for nothing -- at least nothing that could be made of tied-together branches.

That evening, an expected halloo sounded over the hill from the trail and I had company. We had a nice meal of spring rolls brought from Squirrel Camp, and a thermos of hot chocolate for dessert. Now, hot chocolate is nice just about anywhere, and it's pretty great in a wood-heated shack in the Yukon, but for a temporary inhabitant of an unheated hovel in the woods, it's just about sublime.

After dinner, we adjourned to the parlor and made a small campfire in an improvised firepit (many precautions were taken). It was late August, so the unending brightness of earlier summer nights was replaced with a slow twilight. We sat on the spruce-scented bench and watched the fire, and then we told stories. She told the Greek myth of Arachne, the weaver who challenged Athena and was turned into a spider, and I rehearsed the story from the Champagne and Aishihik First Nations of how the raven got blue eyes. It was almost dark when we finally put the fire out.

Day Five

Nights in the Yukon were fairly cold. Even in the peak of summer temperatures frequently dropped below zero, and by mid August when I spent my week in the woods, the first chills of autumn were already being felt. As a result, my sleeping bag alone was not enough and I wore all my clothes to bed, five layers all told. This had been alright for the first few days, but on the morning of day five I woke up with my feet hurting from the cold, even with two pairs of my thickest socks on. It was an unpleasantly new feeling, but I suppose it was better than them being completely numb. For the first time, I considered returning to the relative warmth of Squirrel Camp, at least to get extra blankets or something. I would like to think I wasn't too proud for such an option, but I ultimately decided to try wearing my boots to bed instead. This ended up working well; it was perhaps not the cleanest option for my sleeping bag, but was tolerably warm at least for the rest of my nights in the woods.



Once my feet were safe, I had another slow morning. It was Sunday, so I sang a few hymns and read from my Bible with the spirituality evoked by being in nature and the formality gathered by the habit of doing that sort of thing on Sundays. In the afternoon, I went on another exploratory walk through the forest, but the increasingly cloudy skies combined with the general unease of being away from my shelter drove me back after half an hour or so. As evening began, it started to rain -- not too hard, but enough to be the first real test of how waterproof my shelter was. I retreated inside with my books and was pleased to find I stayed dry and, in my sleeping bag boots and all, relatively toasty. Wanting to stay dry while it rains isn't a uniquely human urge, but being under a roof and hearing the rain outside did give me a feeling of primal satisfaction.

I read in bed until I was tired, then I snuggled in for another night of spruce-smelling sleep.

Day Six

Day Six was hard to distinguish from my other days in the woods. The rain from the previous night continued on and off, but my shelter stayed dry and I stayed warm. My reading went on at a rapid pace; I finished Robinson Crusoe and was left with whatever I could find of interest on my Kindle. Trips to the stream for water were a polished routine at this point, as were meals of peanut butter, granola, and fruit on my kitchen hill.



In the evening, I was visited again by a representative from Squirrel Camp, and we decided to do a bit of exploring -- after all, there is safety in numbers. When we had gone along the nearby trail for a bit and taken a few turns, we were surprised to see a clearing full of rusted cans. Other scraps of metal and wooden planks were scattered around, as

well as a few glass bottles and other old 20th century objects. There were even a few 55-gallon drums lying around, just as rusted as everything else.

Our best guess for the origin of the can graveyard was some early road-building activities undertaken by the US army when the modern Alaska highway hadn't yet been completed. It was strange to see such a heap of human activity in the middle of nowhere, but it was a good reminder that while it's possible to go places where human's aren't very often, there's not too many places (on land, at least) humans have never been. Following this line of thought can be useful when thinking about conservation and the role of humans in nature, but that's another blog post.

After poking at the abandoned cans for a bit, we headed back to my camp and tried to make another campfire, but it started drizzling again so we just sat beneath a well-leafed tree, nature's umbrella. The clearing was really starting to feel like home.

Day Seven

It was still drizzling when I woke up on day seven. I packed up what I could while still inside my shelter, then braced myself and stepped out. It was a bleak morning -- which felt fitting for my departure from a spot in the woods that was comfortably

familiar, if not actually comfortable. My aim when leaving was to carry back all the equipment I had brought in, so I needed to dismantle my shelter to get back the rope and plastic lining. The bed, which was just a pile of spruce boughs on top of some logs, was left intact and is still there for all I know, but the full shelter only exists in memory and this rare photograph.



I had arranged for a pickup near the local stream, and by mid afternoon I had rejoined civilization at Squirrel Camp. We had a celebratory Thanksgiving-style meal that evening, with mashed potatoes and cranberry sauce and stuffing. The week in the woods had been fulfilling in many ways, but perhaps the most gratifying thing was realizing I had been missed.

In the following two days, I rejoined civilization to an even greater extent as we drove to Whitehorse and I boarded a plane back to the USA. Again, I took with me mostly the same things I had brought in at the beginning of the summer. I had a few new shirts and some gear I had picked up in the course of work, but no real mementos. It is the stories themselves that have stuck with me, from staring at bears to swimming in glacial lakes, so I've tried to record some of them here before they fade too much. I don't know if I'm any more rugged than I was before my time in the Yukon, but I might be a bit more adventurous. I'm grateful to have had such a great opportunity, and if I can help it, this won't be the last time I spend a week in the woods.