



# Help Me Make it Through the Night

## —surviving a wilderness emergency

By Kelly Stang

### *"I am just..."*

...going for a day hike/ going to run ahead/ going to scout for deer sign/ going to do some fishing at the lake. These simple words can quickly lead to trouble, landing you in a dangerous situation where Mother Nature tests you and

even threatens your life. There may be an unexpected change in the weather, or you might lose your paddles or capsize your canoe and be miles from your vehicle. Or you could get lost or sick or injured; a simple twisted ankle could prevent

you from getting back before dark. The bottom line is when pursuing outdoor activities, expect the unexpected, because if you're not properly prepared, the end result can be disastrous.

According to wilderness safety expert Peter Kummerfeldt, those three words "I am just..." are the most dangerous words uttered in the outdoors. Peter, an experienced wilderness survival trainer, has instructed thousands of outdoor enthusiasts to gain an understanding of the physical, mental and spiritual preparation needed for those unexpected events that knock on our outdoor experiences. His instructions provide practical advice on what to do when you find yourself in trouble because of the "I am just..."

I recently had the opportunity to take Peter's "Surviving a Wilderness Emergency" class in which he cites many examples of individuals who ended up in survival situations; several succumbed



Lower Ausable Lake

John Bulmer

as a result of their unpreparedness. Peter states that “It is easy to convince yourself that nothing life-threatening will happen—after all, you are ‘just...’”

According to Kummerfeldt, “Survival is the ability and desire to stay alive, all alone, under adverse conditions, until rescued. Those who are prepared will usually survive an emergency, while those who are not, probably won’t.” Preparation and the ability to save yourself are two of the most important topics taught in Peter’s class.

The class stresses practical, not primitive survival skills. Many of the “reality” survival shows on TV today demonstrate starting fires by rubbing sticks together, building debris shelters out of sticks and evergreen boughs, and getting water by digging solar stills (a low-tech way to distill water that uses natural evaporation and condensation). While these skills could help you, they require many, many hours of practice to master and are not practical for a lost or injured person to do while the sun is setting and a cold rain begins to fall.

It may seem obvious, but Peter emphasizes that you have a much better chance of survival if you simply prepare beforehand. He explains how a few simple rules and essential pieces of survival gear can turn a life-threatening situation into a survivable (and even somewhat comfortable) night in the woods.

Rule number one is to carry a survival kit with you at all times. A survival kit does no good if it is in your vehicle at the trailhead or in your pack back at your campsite while you are exploring. You should also make sure your kit is lightweight and compact (see pg. 23 for survival kit contents.). If it is heavy and bulky, you are more likely to leave it behind. If you don’t always carry a pack, buy or make a carry case for the survival kit to attach to your belt.

Darren McGee



Another important tip is to always let someone know about your plans. No one is going to look for you unless they know you are missing, so leave a detailed trip plan with someone reliable every time you head out to hike, hunt, camp, fish, bike, etc. The trip plan should include detailed information on your planned route (give GPS coordinates if you know them), possible side trips you might take, date and time you

Susan Shafer



will be returning, who is going with you, the make, color and plate number of your vehicle, the color of your tent, and your cell phone number. Ask that person to check that you got home safely when you said you would. And by all means, if you do get into trouble, stay put! Search and rescue becomes much more difficult if you stray from your planned itinerary.

Also, keep in mind that today’s technology is great, but do not rely on it to save you. Cell phones, GPS units and satellite trackers can be fantastic when they work, but batteries die, and signals can be sporadic (especially in mountainous terrain). Plus, what happens if you drop them or they get wet? Even if you do manage to contact someone, it can take awhile for them to reach you, and in the meantime you need to try to keep dry and warm.

I recommend that you check out Peter’s website [www.outdoorsafe.com](http://www.outdoorsafe.com) where you can purchase the survival items he swears by (large brightly-colored bags, metal match and others). He also has a terrific book called *Surviving a Wilderness Emergency* that should be required reading for everyone who ventures into the outdoors.

In the end, it’s always good to “Hope for the best, but plan for the worst.” And, of course, make sure to never say “I am just...”

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**Editor’s note:** Peter Kummerfeldt is one of a number of wilderness safety experts who offer classes. For a list of others, you can contact your local DEC forest ranger.

# Basic Survival Kit



When exploring the outdoors, you should always carry a basic survival kit. If things go wrong, having a kit can literally make the difference between life and death. Wilderness safety expert Peter Kummerfeldt teaches participants in his “Surviving a Wilderness Emergency” class that a minimal survival kit (see photo) must contain the basics of survival: shelter, fire and signaling.

## Shelter

A windproof and waterproof shelter is most important in a survival situation. It is practically impossible to make this kind of shelter out of natural materials, and the amount of effort needed to do this is an energy waster. Peter recommends carrying at least one large, contractor grade, 55-gallon garbage bag in your survival kit. With only a small hole cut out for your face (avoid arm holes), you can be in a windproof and waterproof shelter within minutes. Bags in bright colors (royal blue, yellow, red or orange) increase your visibility to rescuers. These bags can also be used as a ground cloth, a tarp, or to collect or hold water. Peter prefers this to the mylar space blankets as they do not provide head-to-toe windproof and waterproof cover, and they shred easily.

Kelly Stang



James Clayton

## Fire

Carrying a fire starter is another crucial item in a survival kit. Having a fire provides both physical and emotional comfort, and can also help signal your location to rescuers. Peter recommends carrying a metal match (matchless fire-starter comprised of magnesium and a striker) and some cotton balls saturated with petroleum jelly in a waterproof container. The soaked cotton balls will burn for minutes even in wet and windy conditions, more than enough to fuel the beginnings of a wood fire. Burning green materials (evergreen boughs) creates a lot of smoke which is great for signaling.

## Signaling

Place both a loud whistle and a signal mirror in your survival kit. A whistle can be heard up to several miles away and is much easier than yelling for help. A signal mirror can be seen more than 40 miles away in open terrain and can be used to signal to aircraft flying overhead if they are looking for you.

James Clayton



Editor’s note: In addition to the items listed above, DEC rangers suggest you also include several other items (such as a simple first aid kit, any medications you are on, a knife or multi-use tool with a cutting edge, small flashlight with extra batteries, and a compass) in your survival kit. For more information, visit [www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/28708.html](http://www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/28708.html) or check out “Lost in the Woods” in the June 2007 *Conservationist*.