Staying Found

Maintaining Your Sense of Direction? . . . Naturally

While no one can honestly claim to have an infallible sense of direction, the key to staying found and knowing where you are most of the time is simply this: Stay alert to your surroundings. The best navigators stay on course by using their eyes, their ears, their noses, and their wits (as well as their knowledge of map and compass skills)—all in relationship with each other. My daughter Nicole often jokes that while I never seem to get lost when I’m outdoors, inside a mall I’m absolutely hopeless, and she’s basically right. In a mall I tend to tune out and consequently remove myself from the changing pictures as I walk, setting myself up time and again to wonder, Where in the @#$% is the main entrance and where did I leave the car? If I would just take a lesson from my own words—stay alert—I might not face such urban challenges.

Accurate navigation begins with 360-degree awareness 100 percent of the time. Your eyes should always be searching, seeking clues to the course you’re on. Pay close attention to trees, logs, rocks, hills, ridges, streams, and even man-made landmarks as you pass them. Make mental notes as you go. Look over your shoulder so that you can view how the features may change as you move along. When I taught advanced map and compass courses, most students worked on cruise control finding their way from point A to point B. Yet, if asked to try to head back the way they came and return to point A, they would invariably question themselves and the route. Why? Because what may seem intimately familiar going one way takes on an entirely different face from the other side. Get into the habit of looking forward, from side-to-side, and over your shoulder as you walk along.

Take note of your directional changes and associate them with the terrain surrounding you. Keep putting together, rather like assembling a puzzle, all the different features of the various landmarks you’re passing. Continually ask yourself, If I had to return to where I started right now, how would I go? Although you may not be using a compass, try to think directionally. The hill you’re going around right now lies to the east, while that tall pine standing out in the middle of the meadow ahead marks north. Keep track of all trail intersections, stream crossings, major elevation changes, and other significant features. Each piece you observe becomes a critical part of the entire picture you must assemble in order for you, and perhaps your group, to stay the course.

Don’t forget to take the sky into account as well. Although the sun moves across the sky (as does the moon) as the earth spins, learning to associate times of day with the sun’s position in relation to landmarks you’re passing can be immensely helpful in determining where you are should you need to retrace your steps. Using the sun and a watch or even a stick in the ground to determine direction is also useful.

Navigation relies strongly on your ears and nose, too. You may not be able to see the stream, but if you can hear it, make a note where it lies and estimate how far away it is. If you drop into a valley and it feels far cooler than other valleys you’ve passed through that day, make a note. Perhaps you’re walking through a grove of trees or across a meadow and notice a unique odor—the pungent aroma of wild onion or the scent of cedar. Make a mental note.
Using eyes, ears, and nose to stay on course is how pioneers and Native Americans successfully navigated terrain much wilder than it is now—all without the aid of a compass or map. You can do it, too, with a lot of practice.

**On Staying Found When You Suspect You’re Lost**

It has been rumored that famed outdoorsman Daniel Boone was never lost, although he did admit to being “mighty disoriented for a week or two.” In this day and age of search and rescue teams, maps, compasses, and high technology, lost most often means that you will be late for dinner. At worst it generally means that someone else will find you. The following are some tips aimed at helping you and your loved ones stay found:

- Always tell a family member or close friend where you’re going, when you’ll be leaving, and when you plan on returning—and then stick to your plan.
- Be prepared for the worst. Just because you’re heading out for a day hike under sunny skies doesn’t mean you won’t be forced to spend a night out in adverse weather conditions. Extra food and clothing are a minimum must. Carry a lightweight survival kit with a space blanket, a plastic tarp, nylon cord, waterproof matches, a fire starter, a whistle, a signal mirror, water purification tablets, a metal cup in which to heat water, a small flashlight, and a knife.
- Don’t just carry a map and compass; become proficient at using these tools. You must get out and practice, practice, practice. Joining an orienteering club near you or starting a map and compass club is a great way to gain experience and have a lot of fun.
- Pay attention to your surroundings. Staying on the correct path and then being able to find your way back again requires 360-degree observation. Make mental notes of landmarks as you’re walking toward them and then as you’re walking away from them.
- Should you get lost, don’t panic. Recognize the problem and then rationally work your way through it. Most often, if you sit down and calmly reflect for a few minutes, mentally retracing your steps, the solution becomes clear.
- If you come to the conclusion that you’re definitely lost, stay put! Although it’s tempting to wander, there are numerous tales of lost individuals being found dead weeks or months after a search was begun, simply because they wandered out of the area where the search and rescue crew expected them to be.
- Drink plenty of water. Your body can do without food for a few days, but it cannot function without water.
- Signal your position by building a smoky fire.
- If you run out of food, don’t eat anything unless you’re sure you can identify it as edible.
- Shelter yourself from the elements as best you can. Use the tarp in your survival kit to fashion a lean-to. Use dry leaves and other dry plant debris (not poison oak or stinging nettles) to insulate yourself from the cold ground.