

Each year, New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) Forest Rangers search for about 200 lost or stranded people. Many people can avoid this potentially life-threatening situation if they prepare for their trip in the woods.

Learn to use a topographic map, GPS and compass and always carry them

Trust your compass. Many people get lost because they don't believe their compass. Global Positioning Systems (GPS) units have become very affordable and can be extremely useful. However, they are only an aid to navigation and must be used along with a compass and map. Knowing your GPS coordinates may be of little help if you cannot figure out which way and how far you need to walk to reach safety.

Pick out landmarks that are easy to find at the end of the day

If you hunt or hike south of a road that runs east-west, for example, then you know that by walking north, you will eventually come to the road. Keep these kinds of landmarks in mind before your trip and during it, especially when light wanes at the end of the day.

Carry a small flashlight, extra batteries and bulb

Few things are more frustrating than being stuck in the dark. If you do have to spend the night in the woods, even a small flashlight will be a great help in finding shelter or gathering firewood.

Bring a watch and know what time it gets dark

Many people leave too little time to get out of the woods before dark. Cloudy days keep you from telling time by the sun.

Carry a cell phone

If you will be in an area where coverage is available, then a cell phone with a fully charged battery can be a lifesaver. Leaving word with a contact person, however, is still highly recommended.

Bring waterproof matches and fire starter material

If you do have to spend a night in the woods, a fire can make the difference between a tolerable experience and a nightmare. Waterproof matches work better than cigarette lighters when wet, and some lighters can be hard to operate with cold hands. A candle and strips of paper can be used to help light a fire.

Wear a pack to carry clothing, food and water

For a short trip, you will need at least a fanny pack, but a knapsack is better for cold weather use. Remember, it's easy to stay warm when you're moving, but if you have to spend the night out, you will want all the clothing you can get. Hypothermia can kill even when temperatures are above freezing. A tiny emergency "space blanket" can save your life.

Prepare for the weather

Check the forecast before your trip, and assume the worst. If the forecast calls for a chance of showers, assume it will pour. Rain gear is a must. If the forecast predicts flurries, expect a snowstorm. In cold, wet weather, wear wool or synthetics. Do not wear cotton (including blue jeans), as it absorbs water and drains your body heat.

A hat that covers the ears is also very important in cold weather. Without one, your head and neck can radiate up to 40 percent of your body heat.

Bring extra food and water

Your body can't function unless you keep it fueled. Becoming dehydrated or not eating enough can cause hypothermia, which can lead to physical debilitation or mental confusion and poor decision-making. If you plan on using drinking water from streams in the woods, filter or treat it to avoid intestinal distress or disease.

Leave word with someone about your whereabouts and expected time of return

Make sure your contact person has the phone numbers of the local Forest Ranger, DEC emergency dispatch (518-891-0235) and the county emergency dispatch.



LOST IN THE WOODS

- ◆ *How to avoid it*
- ◆ *What to do if you can't*

If You Are Lost or Injured

If, despite your best efforts, you become lost or injured while in the woods, it is important to stay calm and keep from taking rash actions that might cause your situation to worsen. Remember “STOP”:

S is for **Sit Down**: This is the first and most important step in staying calm.

T is for **Think**: Ask yourself the most important questions, such as “How did I get here?” “How much time is left before it gets dark?”

O is for **Observe**: Try to identify landmarks, such as mountains that can help you figure out your position. Listen for sounds, like traffic, running water or even gunshots, which can help you find your way back to safety. Ask yourself the most likely places to look for firewood and shelter.

P is for **Plan**: Decide if you should try to make it out of the woods or stay put until morning. In making this all-important decision, consider how much easier it is to gather firewood during daylight. The rule of thumb is to make a pile as large as you think will last the night, then make 10 more just like it. People who have been forced to spend the night in the woods have been surprised by how much wood they need to keep their fire going.

Whatever you do, try not to panic. Most people don’t think it will happen to them, but it does...and often. Panic leads to wasted time, poor decisions, and often, an unnecessary worsening of your predicament.

By taking a few precautions before entering the woods, you can make your trip safer and more enjoyable. It will also make it easier on your friends and family who await your return.

Depending on the length of stay in the woods and the weather conditions, consider the size of pack you should take and what gear to carry.

Basic Survival Kit (right)

- ✓Matches in waterproof container
- ✓Fire starters, such as candle and strips of paper
- ✓Flashlight with extra batteries and bulb
- ✓Map, GPS and compass
- ✓Medications that will be needed during your trip
- ✓Shelter, such as emergency blanket or plastic sheet
- ✓Knife or multi-use tool with cutting surface
- ✓Signal device, such as a whistle or mirror
- ✓Food that is high-energy and lightweight
- ✓Water, or a way to purify water you find, such as tablets or filter
- ✓Cord, such as 50 feet of nylon parachute cord
- ✓Toilet paper



Cold Weather Kit

(Reasonably cold weather and/or longer trips)

All of the above-listed items plus

- ✓Rain gear
- ✓Extra hat
- ✓Extra socks
- ✓Gloves (NOT cotton)
- ✓Extra hand warmers
- ✓Small first-aid kit

Inclement Weather Kit (right)

(More severe weather; day trip or overnight)

All of the above-listed items plus

- ✓Medium jacket
- ✓Extra food and water
- ✓Extra gloves
- ✓Mittens
- ✓Stove and sleeping bag

Important Tip

Consider carrying your most important safety items, such as matches, flashlight and navigation materials, including map, GPS and compass, on your person, not in your backpack. This lessens the chance that you will lose them.

