

WILDERNESS NAVIGATION

QUICK REFERENCE - MAP, COMPASS & LOST-PERSON BASICS

Survival Place Blog | Print this sheet and keep a copy with your map or hiking gear.

1. BEFORE YOU LEAVE

- Study the route, major intersections, ridges, waterways, elevation changes and bailout routes.
- Download offline maps and fully charge your phone or GPS.
- Carry a paper map and a compass appropriate for the trip.
- Check the current magnetic declination for the area.
- Set a turnaround time and leave your itinerary and expected return time with a trusted person.
- Carry enough emergency gear to handle an unexpected delay or night outside.

2. COMPASS BASICS

True north is geographic north. **Magnetic north** is the direction a magnetic compass responds to. The angle between them is **magnetic declination**, which varies by location and changes over time.

Common baseplate compass parts: magnetic needle, direction-of-travel arrow, rotating housing/bezel, degree markings, orienting arrow, orienting lines and baseplate.

Important: Learn how your specific compass handles declination before relying on it in the field.

3. ORIENT A MAP

- Place the map on a stable surface and identify north on the map.
- Position the compass along a north-south reference line.
- Account for the local magnetic declination.
- Rotate the map and compass until they are properly aligned.
- Compare visible ridges, valleys, rivers, trails and other terrain with the map.

4. FOLLOW A BASIC BEARING

- Place the compass edge between your known position and destination.
- Point the direction-of-travel arrow toward the destination.
- Rotate the housing so its orienting lines align with north on the map.
- Account for declination as required by your compass.
- Read the bearing, hold the compass level and turn until the needle aligns correctly.
- Sight a landmark along the bearing, walk to it, then repeat.

5. READ THE TERRAIN

Contour lines: close spacing generally means steeper terrain; wide spacing generally means gentler terrain. When contours cross a stream or drainage, the V generally points toward higher ground.

Handrails: trails, rivers, ridgelines, roads or shorelines that help guide travel.

Backstops: obvious features beyond your destination that tell you when you have gone too far.

Catching features: easy-to-identify landmarks near your destination that simplify the final approach.

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6. IF YOU THINK YOU'RE LOST: STOP

S - STOP: Stop moving instead of continuing in an uncertain direction.

T - THINK: Identify the last place where you were certain of your location.

O - OBSERVE: Check your map, compass, GPS, terrain, weather, daylight, water, injuries and equipment.

P - PLAN: Decide whether you can safely return to a known location, establish your position, or should remain in a safe location and seek assistance.

Do not keep wandering just to stay moving. A small error is usually easier to correct before it becomes a large one.

7. SIGNALING & STAYING FINDABLE

- If you cannot establish a safe route, remaining in a safe location may make you easier to find.
- Move if staying put exposes you to immediate danger such as wildfire, flooding, avalanche hazard or falling rocks.
- Use a whistle, headlamp, signal mirror, bright clothing or reflective material to improve visibility.
- Conserve your voice and energy. A whistle allows repeated audible signaling.
- If someone has your itinerary, avoid unnecessarily expanding the search area.

8. NATURAL NAVIGATION: USE AS BACKUP CLUES

- The sun can provide a general directional clue, but sunrise and sunset positions vary with season and latitude.
- Polaris provides a useful approximate north reference in the Northern Hemisphere when correctly identified.
- Do not rely on moss growing on one side of a tree.
- Do not assume following a river downstream guarantees a route to civilization.
- Cross-check natural clues with your map, compass and terrain whenever possible.

9. QUICK NAVIGATION KIT

- Current topographic map; baseplate compass; phone or GPS with offline maps
- Backup battery/power bank; waterproof map protection; pencil and small notebook
- Headlamp; emergency whistle; water and treatment/filter option
- Emergency shelter or blanket appropriate for conditions

10. FIVE QUESTIONS TO ASK WHILE MOVING

1. What direction am I traveling?
2. What terrain feature should I encounter next?
3. What was my last confirmed location?
4. About how far have I traveled?
5. What major feature will tell me if I've gone too far?

Remember: GPS and traditional navigation work best together. Practice map-and-compass skills in a familiar, low-risk area before depending on them in remote terrain.

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