

LOST IN THE WOODS SURVIVAL & RESCUE CHECKLIST

Stay calm • Stay alive • Make yourself easier to find

Your goal is rescue, not proving your wilderness skills. Stop unnecessary movement, deal with immediate threats, protect yourself from exposure, conserve resources, and make yourself easy to find.

1. BEFORE THE TRIP

- **Leave a trip plan:** route, trailhead, vehicle, companions, expected return time, and when someone should call for help.
- Check weather, daylight, terrain, fire restrictions, and known hazards.
- Carry water, weather protection, navigation, light, first aid, signaling gear, and necessary medications.
- Charge your phone; consider backup power and a satellite communicator or personal locator beacon for remote travel.
- Know how to use your map, compass, filter, first aid, shelter, and signaling equipment before the trip.

2. WHEN YOU REALIZE YOU'RE LOST: STOP

- **STOP:** Stop moving. Wandering can enlarge the search area and increase injury risk.
- **THINK:** When did you last know your location? Who expects you? How much daylight remains? Is anyone injured?
- **OBSERVE:** Check map, compass, GPS, trail signs, terrain, weather, and nearby hazards.
- **PLAN:** Decide deliberately whether staying put or moving is safer.

3. STAY PUT OR MOVE?

- **Stay:** if someone knows your route, you are unsure of your location, darkness/bad weather is approaching, you are injured, or terrain is hazardous.
- **Move:** only toward a known nearby trail, road, occupied structure, or away from an immediate hazard.
- If you move, note your direction and leave an obvious indication when practical.
- **Do not turn a small navigation mistake into miles of uncertain wandering.**

4. IMMEDIATE SURVIVAL PRIORITIES

- Treat serious bleeding, injuries, breathing problems, or other urgent medical issues first.
- Protect against hypothermia, heat illness, severe weather, flooding, wildfire, falling rock, or other immediate threats.
- Use carried shelter and clothing before spending major energy building something elaborate.
- Insulate yourself from cold/wet ground and get out of wind, rain, snow, or intense sun.
- Use fire only when needed and when conditions allow it to be controlled safely.

5. WATER & FOOD

- Use carried water intelligently; seek more water only when necessary and safe.
- Treat uncertain natural water with appropriate filtration, purification, boiling, or disinfection.
- Do not risk a fall, dangerous crossing, or long detour simply to reach water.
- **Food is usually not the first priority.** Avoid wasting energy searching during a short-term emergency.
- Never eat wild plants or mushrooms unless you can identify them confidently and know they are safe.

6. MAKE YOURSELF EASY TO FIND

- Use bright clothing, reflective material, emergency blankets, or other high-contrast items.
- If safe, position yourself where rescuers or aircraft have a better chance of seeing you.
- Keep signaling tools accessible rather than buried in your pack.
- If you hear rescuers, vehicles, or aircraft: signal, then stop and listen for instructions.

7. SIGNAL FOR RESCUE

- **Whistle:** repeated blasts, then pause and listen. It saves energy compared with continuous shouting.
- **Light:** use a headlamp or flashlight after dark; repeated flashes can attract attention.
- **Mirror:** use reflected sunlight when conditions allow.
- **Ground signal:** create a large, obvious contrast in an open area when safe.
- **Fire/smoke:** only when controllable and permitted. Never create a wildfire to signal for help.

8. PHONE & BATTERY

- If service is available, contact emergency services and provide location, condition, route, and useful landmarks.
- Use low-power mode, reduce brightness, close unnecessary apps, and avoid entertainment use.
- Protect the phone from extreme cold; use backup power if carried.
- Do not wander aimlessly searching for cell service unless moving is otherwise justified.
- If your device offers satellite emergency messaging or SOS, follow its instructions carefully.

9. BEFORE NIGHTFALL

- Stop unnecessary travel early enough to choose a safe location while terrain is still visible.
- Improve shelter, add insulation, organize gear, and put on warm/dry clothing before becoming seriously cold.
- Locate your headlamp, whistle, first aid, water, and signaling equipment.
- Keep the group together. Do not send one person off alone to scout.
- **Making it safely to morning can be the correct survival decision.**

10. IF YOU MUST MOVE

- Know where you are trying to go and why moving is safer than staying.
- Check daylight, terrain, weather, map, compass, and physical condition before leaving.
- Avoid cliffs, swift water, steep slopes, loose rock, snowfields, dense brush, and risky shortcuts.
- Move slowly enough to prevent a fall or injury.
- Leave an indication of your direction when practical.

11. ESSENTIAL ITEMS TO CARRY

- Water + treatment method • Weather-appropriate clothing + rain protection
- Map + compass • Headlamp/flashlight + backup power • First-aid kit + medications
- Whistle + signal mirror + bright/reflective material • Emergency shelter/blanket
- Extra food • Knife/multi-tool • Fire-starting equipment where appropriate
- Communication device appropriate to the remoteness of the trip

STOP • ASSESS • PROTECT • SIGNAL • CONSERVE • BE FINDABLE

Emergency reminder: Follow instructions from emergency services and search-and-rescue personnel. This checklist is general preparedness information and is not a substitute for professional wilderness or medical training.