

The Survival Kit – How to Keep Your Edge When Mother Nature Catches You With Your Pants Down

December 13, 2008 in [Miscellany](#) | Tags: [bushcraft](#), [Fire](#), [kit](#), [pocket](#), [shelter](#), [survival](#), [water](#)

Oh Goodie! Yet another blogger who posts pictures of his survival kit; that's original. I know, I know; there must be 100,000 survival kits posted on the internet ranging from duffel bags containing four year supplies of Spam and 80mm mortars, to mini kits so tiny that they are mistaken for suppositories. What does this mean? That there is no such thing as one perfect survival kit. All of us have different abilities, needs, and priorities when it comes to survival and our kits reflect that. You will also find that if once you start building a survival kit, it will forever be a work in progress; you will be constantly reorganizing, refining, and redesigning. Why? As you try different things and read different peoples' work, you will find better gear to carry and new ideas to explore. Plus, playing with your survival kit is just plain fun!



There are many companies out there who make a living selling already completed survival kits. I have bought a couple over the years, but mostly for parts. Commercial kits often tend to be gimmicky and include things like tea bags, hard candy, and chapstick that might be conveniences, but take up valuable space that could be better used for more vital equipment. Also, as a major goal of business is to keep production costs down, the items in commercial kits can often be cheap and unreliable. This is not to say that there are not some great kits out there, but I believe that a premade kit should only be a starting point and will need refinement.

Then there is the subject of size. There are two major schools of thought: those who think kits should be big enough to carry the best equipment, and those who think kits should be small enough to be carried at all times. The people who believe in big kits include things like hatchets, radios, and firearms and their kits are usually between lumbar pack and backpack sized. Their philosophy is well founded; a good axe greatly simplifies life when making a fire, and a good firearm will outperform a throwing stick or a sling. While I do see the logic of their kits, I find them too bulky to be practical. When your kit is the size of a backpack, or even a lumbar pack, you will find excuses to leave it back in camp because it is such a pain to carry. Murphy's law states that it will be the time that you are without your kit that you will get lost.

The pocket sized kit, on the other hand, is small enough to be carried comfortably at all times. If your kit is not a burden, you will be more apt to have it on you when you really need it. The down side of small kits is that in order to make them small, compromises have to be made. Axes are replaced by wire saws, and firearms by snare wire. What they gain in smallness they can lose in durability.

Despite the compromises, I subscribe to the pocket kit theory. When I am carrying a 50 pound canoe and 60 pound pack, I don't really want to be toting another 10 to 15 pounds of survival kit. Besides, the more you strive to learn the ways of the woods, the less gear you should need (that is the theory anyway).

Building a survival kit is a very personal affair and should be built with a plan in mind. Too many kits are thrown together without considering the potential uses (or lack of use) of the items included. Looking at other people's kits over the years has given me inspiration, and is a good way for you to determine what you want include in your kit.

My personal kit is based loosely on the SAS kits made famous by the British soldiers

of that organization. They are traditionally built using a 2 oz tobacco tin, and are explained thoroughly in the [SAS Survival Guide](#) by Lofty Wiseman. I have strayed a bit from the traditional kit perhaps, but I have a plan for everything in my kit. Here it is:



1. **The Tin** - It is an old container from a surplus East German 7.62mm rifle cleaning kit. Unlike Altoids cans (the usual containers for these kits since tobacco tins have become harder to find) it opens from the end. This has two great functions; first, I can fit more into it without the lid popping off, and second, I can wrap things like duct tape around the container. Plus, I find it fits more comfortably in my pocket than a traditional tin. I waterproof it with a strip of duct tape around the top.
2. **Spark-Lite and Tinder Tabs** - It's like a lighter flint on steroids. The included tinder tabs work great with it (and only part of a tab need be used for each fire), and I have also been able to ignite plenty of natural tinders like cattail fluff and finely shredded birch bark.
3. **Waxed Book Matches** - There are better matches on the market, but a cut down book of matches (there are eight matches included, and they can be split to make 16) that is waxed to make it waterproof fits better, keeps the matches together, and provides a striker. It is meant to be a backup to the Spark-Lite, not a primary firestarter.
4. **Folding Razor** - A simple razor blade attached to a plastic handle. A razor blade is no equal to a real knife, but if I lose or damage my pocket knife I will at least have a sharp edge to work with.
5. **P-38 Can Opener** - I have sharpened this so that in addition to being able to open cans I can also use it as a gutting hook to help clean game and fish.
6. **Small LED Light** - Night vision is great, but a simple light can make all the difference in the dark. With the development of new LEDs, you can find very bright lights packed into tiny packages that fit easily into survival kits. If you need to use it at night, close one of your eyes; it will help keep your night vision.
7. **Duct Tape** - Five feet wrapped around the tin. The uses of duct tape are limitless. You can make a splint, seal a wound, patch a leak, form a cord, lash poles together, or anything else you can imagine. Duct Tape is also flammable; something worth remembering if you are short on tinder.
8. **Innertube Bands** - Two, looped around the tin. Simply sections of an old innertube, they make great rubber bands. I mainly include them to make the casting stick I wrote about previously, but like duct tape they could be used for multiple purposes.
9. **40 Pound Test Woven Fishing Line** - 25 feet of Spiderwire brand. This is not so much for fishing as for use as high quality cord. Rope is of limitless value for everything from making tools to building shelters, and although making passable cordage is not difficult given the right materials, some good high test cordage is not something you want to forget.
10. **Eight Pound Test Fluorocarbon Fishing Line** - 50 feet. Fish are one of the easier creatures to catch for food, and fishing line takes up little space. Many

kits include cheap line, but when my life might depend on something I want the best. Fluorocarbon line is almost invisible in water, and at eight pound test offers some forgiveness when fishing without the benefit of a fishing rod.

11. **Fishing Kit** - A Panther Martin 1/32 oz gold fly lure, nine Gamakatsu Hooks, and six sinkers. I have had caught many fish with Panther Martin Style lures, especially the gold plated ones (nothing beats gold for shine and it doesn't tarnish like silver or brass). Gamakatsu hooks are top quality and incredibly sharp; I have always had the best luck with size six hooks, and have caught everything from three inch suckers to a three pound smallmouth bass with them (I let the bass go, so if you are on Lake Brule in the BWCAW, you can try to find it; say hi from me if you do).
12. **Nightline Kit** - That is what the little green bundle in the bottom center of the picture is. It consists of a 24 foot line (40 pound test) with snap swivels at each end. At the 8, 12, and 16 foot marks there are fluorocarbon lines (8#) tied to the main line (3, 4, and 3 feet long respectively). Three size six hooks are included to tie to each hanging line. By securing one end of the long line to shore and anchoring the other end out in the water (or suspending across a stream), you can have multiple hooks fishing for you at all times. You may cover more ground with a fishing rod or casting stick, but having the nightline out day and night will increase your odds of catching something.

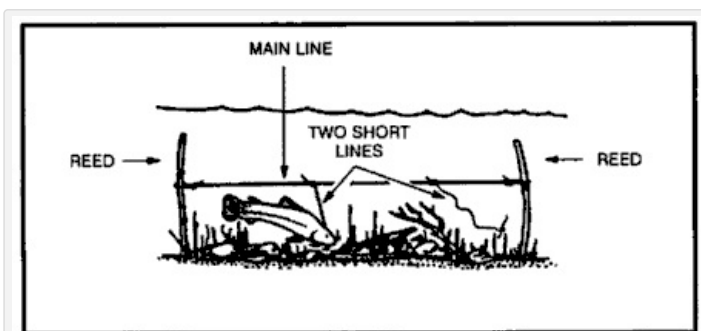


Figure 8-18. Stakeout.

A nightline works like this (from the U.S. Army Survival Manual)

13. **Snare Kit** - 14 feet of brass wire, and eight feet of 40 pound line. Snares are a fast and easy way to get traps out and working for you. Most kits I have looked at seem to only include about 2 or 3 feet of wire; that only comes out to about 1 or 2 snares. Most estimates for successful trapping say you should have 20 or more traps working to ensure a reasonably reliable food supply (per person surviving). 14 feet of wire will make around 5 rabbit sized snares and a squirrel pole with 3 smaller snares (the eight feet of line is to help secure the wires to anchor points). This is only a start, but will enable me to already have traps out working while I make deadfalls or go fishing to round out my food supply. A good basic how-to on snaring can be found [here on YouTube](#).

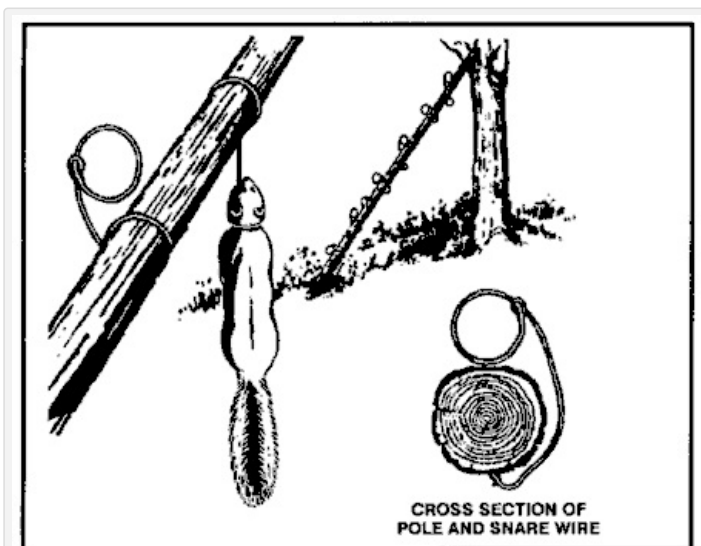


Figure 8-8. Squirrel pole.

Squirrel Pole taken from U.S. Army Survival Manual

14. **Sewing Kit** - Two sewing needles and 10 feet of thread. For making and

repairing clothing, or sewing wounds (I hopefully won't have to try this one out).

15. **Two Safety Pins** - Great as garment fasteners, makeshift fishing hooks, ferrules on a fishing rod, or grommets on a tarp.
16. **Aluminum Foil** - 18" square, heavy duty. Serves to make a pot to boil water for purification. In addition, boiling any fish, meat, or plants you forage to make a stew will enable you to get all the nutrition out of your food. If you crack and boil the bones of snared animals, you can extract the high fat content of the bone marrow and bone grease, helping to avoid [rabbit starvation](#). The local Ojibwe peoples used this method to get fat from the overly lean cottontail rabbits and snowshoe hares of my area according to [Francis Densmore](#).
17. **Water Bag** and two twist ties - The type used for transporting goldfish. I used to carry a condom like everyone else, but they are difficult to fill and can be fragile. These fish bags are waterproof, robust (I can stick my finger up to the second knuckle in a full one without causing a leak), and hold a little over a liter. This brand supposedly can keep goldfish alive by releasing CO2 through the bag walls; I might see how my extra bags do for transporting minnows.
18. **Aquatabs** - 10 chlorine purification tablets (purifies 10 liters) in a flat package perfectly sized for my kit. As my supply of Aquatabs is finite, boiling in the foil pot would be my primary method of purification. I should note that while there is a risk of waterborne parasites anywhere you go, there are many outdoorsmen in my neck of the woods who have drunk straight from lakes and streams their whole life without getting sick. You should try to purify water if possible, but a chance of illness is preferable to certain death if you are really dehydrated in my opinion. Avoiding stagnant water and gathering from moving sources will help decrease your chances of illness.
19. **Potassium Permanganate** - An antiseptic. Mixed with water to a deep purple it will help treat foot fungus and disinfect sores (I know from experience how debilitating foot problems can be in the woods). It is also said that when mixed sparingly with water (to a light pink) it will serve as a means of water purification, but I have never tried it. It should be noted that all chemical purifiers should be used as a back up, not as a permanent source of drinking water. Since a purifying agent is basically a low dose poison (meant to kill the critters in our water), I have heard that long term use can lead to some pretty bad kidney or liver problems. When mixed with sugar or glycerin (another sugar), potassium permanganate will also start a fire quite effectively (something well demonstrated on Survivorman). It is a useful chemical to carry in your kit.
20. **First Aid Supplies** - Bandaid, butterfly closures, alcohol swab, and Neosporin. Open wounds can fester in unsanitary situations and become major health liabilities, so a few first aid supplies can be a lifesaver.
21. **Pencil and Paper** - Good for making patrol maps, tracking bearings and time travelled, and if things are bad enough, your last will and testament.
22. **Button Compass** - Even if you do not know where you are, if conditions are such where travel is preferable to staying put, there are few places on this continent where heading along a constant bearing won't lead you to a trail, logging road, or other thoroughfare. Knowing direction is also useful for tracking time (East = 6 AM, South East = 9 AM, South = Noon, etc) and wind direction (where I live wind can often be an indicator of weather; E = wet, W = clear, N = cold, S = warm - not always, but often).
23. **\$100 Bill** - People will generally help a lost individual without question, but Ben Franklin is still a hand guy to have around. If nothing else, he can buy me cold beer and a greasy burger after I "get found."

The survival kit is a toolbox with items that will make survival potentially easier should the occasion arise, but will unlikely be the only item that you carry into the wild. Rather than make a kit that has everything you may need, you can save a lot of size and weight by building it to augment what you already carry.

Some basic items that I carry during the summer months can be seen here. They include:

1. **Swiss Army Knife** - I carry the Victorinox Camper model as it has the tools I

use most: two knives, wood saw, reamer/awl, etc. If you are wondering what the little thing attached to the lanyard ring is, it is a **Torch Lighter Flint** (used in the igniters for acetylene torches) with a hole drilled into the aluminum threaded base to facilitate attaching it to the knife, and a small amount of cotton wool packed into the threads. It is an idea I found in the



[Backwoodsman](#)

[Magazine](#) (an awesome periodical for anyone interested in bushcraft and self reliant living) and allows me to carry a firesteel without making my knife awkward to carry or use.



2. **Bic Lighter** wrapped with **Duct Tape** - Cheap, reliable, and effective. You cannot have too many means of starting fire at your disposal, and duct tape is second only to toilet paper as a crowning achievement of civilization.
3. [Heatsheets Emergency Bivvy](#), made by Adventure Medical Kits - I am sure that all of you are familiar with space blankets; this is a space blanket sleeping bag. They are not particularly comfortable or quiet (they like to crinkle when you move), but can keep you from freezing to death.
4. [Equinox Silnylon Poncho](#) with 550 cord to serve as guy lines - An ultralight poncho that has grommets to make it function as a tarp. Ponchos make great rain gear (except when in a canoe and the wind is coming from straight ahead), and a tarp will greatly simplify waterproofing your shelter. Keeping dry is key to avoiding hypothermia and fungal diseases.

Winter presents its own set of challenges; water is clean and abundant in the form of snow and animals are easier to track, but shelter takes on the ultimate imperative. Here is what I keep in my parka, and not just when in the woods. A broken down vehicle can quickly turn into a struggle to survive in cold weather (my thermometer read -18F Friday morning; plenty cold to kill you).

1. **Matches and Tinder Tabs** - Not paper matches this time, but high quality lifeboat matches that burn for up to 15 seconds under water. When you need fire in winter, you need it bad!
2. **Candle** - not the highest BTU output, but does the job when used correctly.
3. **Space Banket** - Not a premade unit like the last one, just a large sheet. The idea is to sit and wrap it around you with the lit candle between your legs; that way all the heat from the candle will reflect and stay within the confines of the blanket. Just keep your head exposed so you don't have carbon monoxide issues.
4. **55 Gallon Drum Liner** - Basically a really heavy and large trash bag. Makes a quickie tarp.
5. **Wool Socks** - I wear dress socks to work (not great for insulation) and cotton when driving normally (cotton + wet + cold = amputation). As the feet are one of the first places to suffer from the cold, and since when feet are injured survival becomes way more difficult, wool socks can help to keep my feet functioning in an emergency. If I am already wearing wool socks, I have a dry pair in case my feet get wet (wool maintains 85% of its insulation when wet, but soaking feet in heavy boots can cause trench foot).
6. **Two lengths of 550 Cord** - If stuck in deep snow, cutting the tops off of two evergreen trees will provide field expedient snowshoes. The rope is to make bindings for them.
7. **Wire Saw** - While I don't include this in my regular kit, in winter deep snow can make firewood more difficult to get to, and green wood is needed as a base to keep your fire out of the snow.

To sum up, this list is meant to give you ideas for your own kit. Your needs and skills

will determine what is right for you. I warn you, building survival kits can become an obsession; a quest for the perfect kit. A survival kit is no substitute for knowledge of your environment or common sense, but it will give you an edge when you need it most.

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[December 17, 2008 at 8:21 pm](#) **Chris** There can never be too many kit posts! 


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[March 11, 2010 at 12:35 pm](#) **John Middleton** From your survival kit entry... where do you purchase the 'Potassium Permanganate ' 

mentioned...?

Thanks, - John M.

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[March 11, 2010 at 1:06 pm](#) **minnesotahillbilly** It is used generally for cleaning pools and the like, so it usually comes in pretty large quantities. I received my small supply as a part of another SAS-style kit from the UK, but you can also usually find it on eBay in smaller quantities. I hope that helps you! 

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