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Survival Hacks: How to Stay Alive Without Breaking a Sweat

by Tim MacWelch



We've all been in the wrong place at the wrong time. But what happens when you have the wrong gear at the wrong time? This is where a few creative survival hacks can save the day. In the modern vernacular, hacks are alternative plans, utilizing materials at hand, to get a job done. They are usually smart, expedient, and easy to perform. Here, we'll examine a few hacks that will come in handy on a hunt, in your camp, or, God-forbid, during a survival situation. And if you still find yourself trying to pound a square peg into a round hole, just ask yourself, "WWMD?"—What would MacGyver do?

Hack Your Fire

Can't get that damp tinder to light? Then dip into your food supply and pull out some high-calorie comfort food—especially chips. Delicious greasy snack chips make an outstanding fire starter when you apply an open flame to them. Sacrificing two or three corn or potato chips won't put much of a dent in your food supply, but they can have a massive impact on your fire building.

Grab A Meal

Although most areas possess fish and game animals throughout all seasons, it can still be tricky to find enough to eat. If you find yourself in need of a meal, and wild game is scarce, put together a wild salad. Chickweed, dandelions, wild onions, watercress, and many other tasty salad items can be found growing most of the year. Since salad is low in calories, you can enhance it by crumbling high-fat edible nuts on top, such as walnut, hickory, beech, or hazelnut. If you don't have tree nuts or another fatty topping, at least you'll have a belly full of greens while you look for richer foods. You can also boil any of these salad plants into a pot of cooked greens, making them more digestible and tender.

Lighten Things Up

If your flashlight runs out of batteries, you still may have a shot at using it. If you have smaller batteries that are charged, wrap the sides in tape, paper or cardboard to achieve the right diameter. Then, use aluminum foil or stacked coins to increase the length with conductive metal. With this trick, you can substitute AAA batteries for AA, and C cells for D cells. This isn't just for flashlights, either. Any battery operated device can work on modified batteries, providing the replacements are the same voltage.

Add Some Candlepower

If the flashlight still won't work, you can improvise a candle from many things. You just need a fireproof container; some kind of grease, oil, or wax; and a natural plant fiber wick. Put the fuel—either liquid or solid—into the container, then insert your wick. Cotton clothesline and jute cord work great. Light it with an open flame, and you have a candle. With shallow containers, leave the wick hanging off the side. For a wind-resistant candle, use a glass jar with only a little fuel and a wick at the bottom. The sides of the jar act as a wind screen, and the light will still shine through.

Baffle The Bugs

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The stinking smoke of smoldering materials can act as a good insect repellent. Cattail seed heads work well, and are found in wetlands throughout the world. Collect a dry, brown seed head and light one end. It will usually smoke without completely catching flame. Place the smoking cattail punk on a fire-safe surface, upwind from your position and the bug repelling smoke will waft over you for 20 to 30 minutes.

Nurse A Wound

Got an injury but no medical kit? Find the leaves of yarrow or common plantain, crush them into a paste, and apply them as a poultice. The tannic acid in the juice will act as an antibacterial agent, and also soothe inflammation. Other plant compounds in the leaves (like allantoin) speed up the healing of skin. Keep these poultices in place for several hours, and then replace them with fresh material as needed.

Find Your Way

Improvise a compass to navigate your way out of a wilderness emergency. A metal item (like a sewing needle) can act like a compass needle when it is magnetized and suspended to allow free movement that is not affected by wind or any other forces. Magnetize a needle by rubbing just the eye of it 100 times against hair, fur, or silk. Lay the needle on a leaf that can float in water. If no wind is allowed to hit the leaf, the needle should pull the floating leaf to orient itself on a North-South alignment. Watch out for gun barrels and other metal items that can pull the compass needle off course and distort your bearing.

Signal For Help

Anything reflective can come into play as a visual distress signal. Use CDs, car mirrors, polished metal, and whatever else you can scrounge to reflect sunlight toward distant targets. Sweep the light up and down and side to side to increase the likelihood that your target sees a flash of light. The farther away they are, the harder they will be to hit, so keep it up as long as you can. As long as you can still see the target, which could be a distant boat, plane, vehicle, or people walking, then keep on signaling.

Boil Your Water

Bottles and cans aren't always trash, sometimes they are treasure. Use these containers to boil your water in a pinch. If you get stuck somewhere without a pot to boil in, clean out a glass bottle or metal can, and boil your water in the ashes next to a fire. Don't try to suspend glass containers over the fire, as intense heat can break the glass.

Cut Fire Wood

Don't have a hatchet or saw? You can still cut your wood in half, and into smaller lengths, by using one of man's oldest tools—fire. Place long branches, poles, and logs over the fire, and allow the fire to burn them in two. These pieces of wood can be halved again, or you can continue shoving them into the fire a little bit at a time, keeping your fire well fed.

Stop A Toothache

Any pain in your mouth or head can be debilitating. While you may be able to mentally block out some of the pain from an extremity, toothaches are hard to ignore. If you are familiar with wild medicinal plants, you can use a natural mouth rinse from water in which you boiled crushed acorns. The tannic acid from these oak nuts and shells is very soothing to toothaches and also any inflamed skin. You can also use a wet tea bag against your tooth to release the same tannic acid. If it still hurts after one treatment, continue with the tannic acid rinsing, and drink a cup of willow bark tea or aspen bark tea—the original aspirin.

TP Replacement

Running out of toilet paper in the woods is no joke. Finding the right substitute can be tricky, as you don't want to get poison ivy leaves, or something slick that won't wipe. And some fuzzy plants that look right for the job (like mullein) can cause a rash. For best results, use a stack of dead dry leaves, with one green leaf in the middle for structural integrity. Also try a wet, well-packed snowball. Although it's very brisk, it wipes well and even washes your skin as it melts a little.



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Some cool bits of advice, but you can negate ALL of these by being prepared in the first place. First and foremost, you have no business being out in a wilderness setting without at least a basic survival kit on your person. A day pack full of decent gear is preferable, but for those times when it isn't reasonable, then consider a well-planned kit that focuses on fire, shelter and water.

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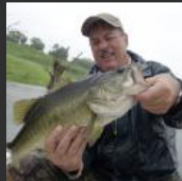
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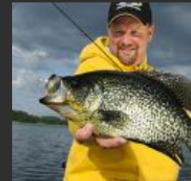
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