

Signaling & Self-Rescue – Staying Alive When You're Lost or Stranded

Most of the experts will tell you that it's better to stay put once you become lost, and that may well be true, but sometimes it's not an option depending on the circumstances. The first rule of surviving being lost or stranded is to take time to assess your situation. Unless you're about to get eaten by a Grizzly bear, have bullets flying your way, or have a severe medical emergency, don't let the panic of "fixing it right now" make you jumpy. You're not going to die of thirst or starvation for a long time so calm down and assess your survival supplies as well as the possibilities of getting rescued. If you're in a cold environment then your first needs may be finding/building shelter and/or building a fire. If it's a combat zone then you may need to find a hiding place before worrying about anything else. Each situation is unique and only the rational victim will be able to prioritize their survival checklist. Once you've taken the time to weigh the facts then make a decision based on these facts (notice I said "facts"). Now it's time for the 64,000 dollar question: do we stay or move once we realize we're lost or stranded? If you're in the middle of BFE and no one knows you're missing then most likely your best bet is to move and attempt self-rescue. If you left a detailed plan of your trip with a friend or relative then it may be best to hunker down and wait for the cavalry. Whatever you do at this stage, you have to accept your current situation and make a decision based on the facts and your capabilities. There is nothing more deadly in a survival situation than indecisiveness – a lot of bodies have been recovered a short distance from safety. When a victim begins questioning their own decisions, panic sets in. The otherwise rational individual gets tunnel vision with their only thought being to get out of their situation as fast as they can. Once panic takes over, the victim can no longer concentrate on simple survival priorities. They tire quickly and beat themselves up for being so stupid. Finally they succumb to the elements, give up, roll over, and die.

If you decide to stay and wait for rescue then prepare your base camp for potential rescue. Distress signaling such as signal fires, smoke, mirrors, flares, battery operated signal strobes, and ground markings are all excellent means to attract wanted attention. If you're stuck in the wilderness with no signaling device, fires can be used but you must maintain them for a constant state of readiness. Waiting until you hear a plane before building your fire is useless. By the time you get the kindling burning the aircraft will probably be long gone. The only exception I could imagine to this is if you have flammable fluid (for example: gas from your stranded vehicle or camp stove) or large piles of bone-dry flash tinder. The average adventurer is not going to be that lucky, so if fire is your only means to signal then get ready for a lot of work. If you're in heavy forest you will have to find a clearing or make one to allow a wider angle of view for rescue aircraft. You will also need to gather an abundance of firemaking materials as well as green vegetation. The internationally recognized rescue signal is three fires equally spaced in a line or in a triangle. If possible separate each fire at least 50 feet apart. If you hear a plane at night build all three fires up quickly with small dry wood or dead leaves to produce as much light and flame as possible. If the plane is



passing by in daylight, then cover the fires with vegetation to produce heavy smoke, grab some type of signaling device such as a white T-shirt and frantically wave. If a search and rescue plane locates you, the pilot will usually do at least one direct flyover at low altitude and “wave” you with his wings. You can also make ground signals from logs, ponchos, clothes or anything else that is visible from the air. A few international signals laid on the ground may be all you need to communicate your needs: A straight line means you need immediate evacuation or medical assistance. An F indicates a need for food or water. X means you are unable to move. An arrow communicates your direction of travel if you plan on moving (or have moved) from that location.

If the plane is close enough you can also use a good flashlight to signal the international distress Morse code of SOS (three shorts, three longs, three shorts.) Pen flares and pocket signal strobes are also good for night time signaling. The strobe units are very compact, battery operated, and can be switched



on and off to conserve battery power. For daytime signaling of aircraft nothing beats a signal mirror. We suggest the Air Force type since it has an aiming screen that is very accurate for flashing a pilot's eye many miles away. If you have no signal mirror then find anything with high reflectivity and put a hole in the center of it so you can see through it. To aim it extend an arm in front of you and hold up two fingers in a peace sign configuration and box the aircraft inside these fingers. With your other hand

move the reflective device up to your eye and peer through the hole finding the aircraft in between your two fingers. While keeping your eye on the plane move the reflective device around until you see a flash of light cross over your peace sign. You have just flashed the aircraft. Make sure not to hold the signal static on the plane, instead flash it back and forth. Once you receive a positive signal from the plane that you have been seen, quit signaling so it does not confuse the situation. Signal mirrors can also be effective on hazy days, but the better the mirror then the better the chances of you being seen. Bottom line; pack a good night time signaling device and daytime signal mirror in your kit. If nothing else the mirror may come in handy for extracting foreign objects from your eye or a splinter out of your butt?

If you find yourself lost and decide to self-rescue, hopefully you've done your pre-trip homework and have a rough idea in which cardinal direction you'll find civilization. If you're totally lost and confused always remember that water almost always runs towards civilization, although it may be the long way out. Following streams will eventually lead to larger bodies of water. Larger bodies of water will eventually lead to humans. If you're not sure where flowing water is then look for animal trails since they typically lead towards fresh water supplies. Also, birds typically fly towards water in the evening hours.

If you decide to leave your base camp then always leave a direction marker pointing to the way you are going. If rescuers reach you camp they will at least know which general direction you are headed. You should also build yourself a return route as you travel. In the woods we make a “back trail” by simpling hacking the backside of trees every so

often. Once you begin a return trip the hack sign will be visible. This can also be done by breaking over small plants so they will be visible on your return trip. If you use this technique always break the plant so the underside of the leaf will be visible on your return. The bottom side of a leaf will contrast better against the forest than the top side and will be notably out of place when you're looking for sign.

It is amazing how fast you can get lost in an unknown environment. Staying calm, assessing your situation and being decisive will go a long way when it comes to saving your own life. Whatever you do, never take off on any trip without a compass and signaling device in your possession. And if you don't carry a map with you make sure you do a little homework by taking mental notes of features such as surrounding roads, rivers and adverse terrain. It might just save your life.