

# HOW TO STAY ALIVE IN THE WOODS

**A complete guide to food, shelter,  
and self-preservation . . . anywhere**



**BRADFORD ANGIER**

# HOW TO STAY ALIVE IN THE WOODS

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**BRADFORD ANGIER**

Originally published as *LIVING OFF THE COUNTRY*

Illustrated by Jack Doherty



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& LEVENTHAL  
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To my friend

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**COLONEL TOWNSEND WHELEN**

who early began making some marginal notes on the book of nature, some of whose most valuable chapters he is still writing.

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## **PART ONE**

### **SUSTENANCE**

“A party living off the country must know how to get full value from everything available, especially in the way of food.”

—**Royal Canadian Mounted Police**

## Chapter 1

### Every Necessity Is Free

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ANYONE AT ANYTIME CAN SUDDENLY FIND HIMSELF dependent on his own resources for survival. It costs very little time, money, and effort to be ready for such an emergency. If you are not ready, it may cost your life.

You may become lost or stranded in the woods. Thousands of North America's millions of annually-licensed fishermen and hunters do each year, many fatally. Yet, almost invariably, where such individuals suffer and all too often succumb to starvation or exposure, wild food is free for the picking, meat is free for the taking, fire may be made, and clothes and shelter are there for the building.

You may be in an automobile that is stalled by mishap or storm in an unsettled area, a not uncommon occurrence that frequently results in unnecessary hardship and tragedy. Perhaps you'll be a passenger in an aircraft that has to make a forced landing. Perhaps you'll be shipwrecked.

It may even happen that you and yours will one day be compelled to seek sanctuary in the wilderness because of threats to civilization itself—an atom bomb catastrophe or the even more terrible microscopic foes of germ warfare.

“Man's capacities have never been measured; nor are we to judge what we can do by any precedents, so little has been tried,” pointed out Thoreau. “What people say you can not do, you try and find you can.”

No hard and fast rules can be laid down for survival anywhere, particularly in the farther places. Conditions vary. So do localities, and especially individuals. Initiative on the other hand may be guided by a consideration of general principles such as those presented in this book.

Many of the pitfalls, too, may be recognized and avoided that otherwise might have to be learned by unnecessarily hard and often dangerous personal experience. It will be far more satisfactory to deal with natural difficulties by adaptation and avoidance than by attempting to overcome them by force.

Using the ways of living off the country discussed herein as a foundation for ingenuity and common sense, will allow anybody who suddenly finds himself dependent upon his own resources to keep living and to walk away from any hardships smiling.

The wilderness is too big to fight. Yet for those of us who'll take advantage of what it freely offers nature will furnish every necessity. These necessities are food, warmth, shelter, and clothing.



## Chapter 2

### Living Off the Country

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ONE DAY YOU MAY BE BOATING DOWN THE PEACE River near the start of its more than 2000 mile journey inland to Great Slave Lake and thence as the Mackenzie to the Arctic Ocean. Soon after the headwaters of this wilderness highway mingle in the Continental Trough, the river turns abruptly eastward to flow with surprising tranquility through the entire range of the Rocky Mountains. If you watch the left shore after chuting through the minor turbulence known as Finlay Rapids, your eyes will likely as not catch the platinum gleam of Lost Cabin Creek.

Here it was at the turn of the century, during those apical days on the world's gold-fever chart, that four prospectors shared the cabin from which the stream has taken its name. Their grubstake dwindling, three watched with growing helplessness their fourth companion die, by which time the survivors themselves had become so feeble they lacked the vigor to open the frozen ground outside.

They buried their companion in the only spot they could find earth still loose enough to dig. A second prospector died and had also to be there interred. Before the fourth succumbed, he had by himself managed to scoop out enough earth so that a third emaciated body could be added to the grave beneath the cabin floor.

Yet as you will be able to testify from what you can see while boating past Lost Cabin Creek, and as I can substantiate from having camped there on several occasions, the vicinity abounds year around with wild edibles.

### Sustenance in the Silent Places

Starvation is not a great deal more pleasant than most of us would expect. The body becomes auto-cannibalistic after a few foodless hours. The carbohydrates in the system are devoured first. The fats follow.

This might not be too disagreeable, inasmuch as diets seek to accomplish much the same result, but then proteins from muscles and tendons are consumed to maintain the dwindling strength their loss more gravely weakens.

No reasonable nourishment should therefore be scorned if one needs food. The Pilgrims derived considerable nutriment during their first desperate Massachusetts winter from ground nuts which are similar to small potatoes. Some northern explorers including Richardson, Franklin, and members of their parties lived for weeks and sometimes months almost entirely on the lichen known as rock tripe.

Wild turnips kept up John Colter's strength when the mountain man made his notable escape from the Indians. Beaver meat was a main item on the menu while Samuel Black explored the Finlay River. When regular rations on the Lewis and Clark expedition had to be reduced to one biscuit a day, it was the sweet yellow fruit of the papaw tree that kept the men going.

There is no need to explain why, if any of us are ever stranded and hungry in the wilderness, we will want to start searching for food while our strength is still near its maximum.

### Food Prejudices

Few will disagree, at least not when the moment of decision is at hand, that there is a point where luxuries as such become relatively unimportant.

One of life's luxuries, which we esteem most highly, is the freedom to indulge our taste buds. Our taste prejudices, a better understanding of which may one day prove beneficial, are commonly based

on two factors.

First: there is a human tendency to look down upon certain foods as being beneath one's social station. Where grouse have been particularly thick in the Northeast, I've seen them scorned among backwoodsmen as a "poor man's dish." The same season in the Northwest where there happened to be a scarcity of grouse but numerous varying hares, the former were esteemed while I heard habitants apologizing for having rabbits in their pots. As it is everywhere in such matters, the lower the designated station of the creature, the more prejudiced against eating it the locals are.

Second: it is natural to like the food to which we have become accustomed. We in the United States and Canada have our wheat. The Mexican has his corn, the Asian his rice. These grains we like also, but it would seem a hardship to have to eat them every day as we do wheat bread.

Our fastidiousness, too, is perhaps repelled by the idea of a Polynesian's eating raw fish, although at the moment we may be twirling a raw oyster in grated horseradish. The Eskimo enjoys fish mellowed by age. Many of us regard as choice some particularly moldy, odoriferous cheeses.

## What About Frogs

Frog meat is one example of an often disdained food. Yet frog can be very expensive in the more fashionable restaurants of the world, though in nature it is free for the taking. Amphibians can be hooked with fishing tackle and small fly. They can be caught with string and a bit of cloth, the former being given a quick tug when the latter is taken experimentally into the mouth.

Frogs can be secured with spears of various types. A sharpened stick will do. They can be so occupied at night by a light that you'll be able to net them and, even, occasionally to reach cautiously around and clamp a hand over one.



*With a string and a bit of brightly colored cloth in the absence of live bait, you may be able to capture a frog. When you cannot see frogs, their presence is obvious by their easily distinguished croaking. Jerk the string so the cloth flutters. You may have luck with the chance that a frog will take it as food in its mouth. Then jerk the line and frog towards you to catch it.*

Most of the delicately flavored meat is on the hind legs which can be cut off, skinned, and in the absence of cooking utensils, extended over hot coals on a green stick for broiling. If rations are scant you can use the entire skinned frog after removing or at least emptying and cleaning the entrails, perhaps boiling the meat briefly with some wild greens.

## Letting Predators Hunt for Us

If one of us is ever stranded and hungry, it may not be amiss to watch for owls, for spying one roosting in a quiet shadowy spot is not unusual, and it may be possible to steal close enough to knock it down. Although not as large and plump as would seem from outward appearances, an owl nevertheless is excellent eating.

What is more likely, however, is that we may scare an owl from a kill and thus secure ourselves a fresh supper. We may also have such good fortune, perhaps earlier in the day, with other predatory birds such as hawks and eagles. It is not uncommon to come upon one of these after it has just

captured a partridge, hare, or other prey that is too heavy to lift from the ground. By running to drive the hunter away, we may thus secure a fresh meal.

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Wolves, coyotes, and foxes may also be surprised at fresh kills that are still fit for human consumption. Such carnivores will seek new hunting grounds at the sight or scent of an approaching human being.



*It is prudent to be aware of an owl's presence. With careful footsteps, you may get close enough to secure the bird as a source of food for yourself. More easily executed, though, is the heist of the owl's food. With good timing, you can easily scare an owl from prey that cannot readily be carried off by the startled bird.*

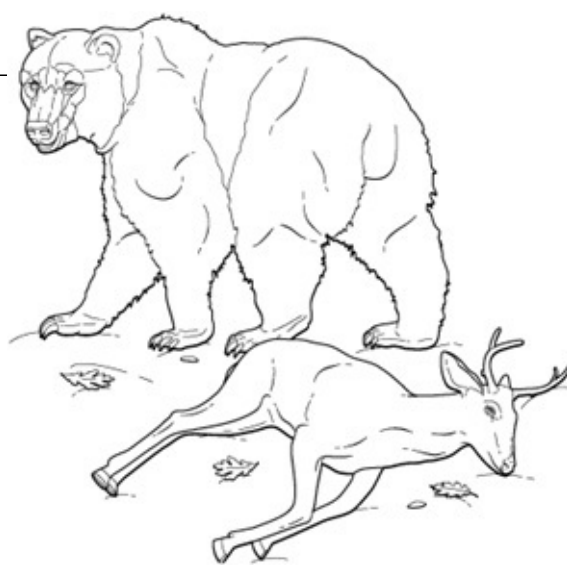
### **Can Live Meat Spoil Too Quickly to Be Consumed?**

One often hears it suggested that when any bird or animal has been unduly harassed before death, as may be considered to be the case if, for example, it has been relayed by wolves, its meat is no longer fit to eat. Such conclusions are false, however, and are more attributed to fancy than fact. Although it is true that the amounts of lactic acid in the muscle tissues of such animals is higher than those not chased by their predators and that the rate of spoilage is faster, this meat is still quite safe to eat if cooked well and immediately.

### **How About Bears?**

Coming up to a bear's kill may be something else again. A wild bear probably won't dispute your presence. Then again it may, and although the chances are very much against this latter possibility, that is all the more reason not to take disproportionate risks.

If you are unarmed and really need the bear's meal, you will want to plan and execute your campaign with all reasonable caution. This will probably mean, first of all, spotting with the minutest detail, preferably at least two paths of escape in case a fast exit should become advisable. This should not be too difficult where there are small trees to climb.



*If you are trying to steal dinner from a bear, or just help to clean his plate, be aware of at least two distinct escape routes. Even if the bear seems to have left the vicinity, approach with quiet caution and stay alert. Bears often sleep soon after—and nearby—their last meal. Use discretion to build a fire near the food, gathering enough fuel to keep it going throughout the night.*

You'll then watch your opportunity and if, for instance, the kill is a still warm moose calf, build a large fire beside it, discreetly gathering enough fuel to last for several hours—until morning, if night be close at hand. You will take care in any event to be constantly alert as bears, especially when they have gorged themselves, have a habit of dropping down near their food.

If you have a gun, you will be able to judge for yourself if the best procedure may not be to bag the bear itself. Fat is the most important single item in most survival diets, and the bear is particularly well fortified with this throughout most of the year. Except usually for a short period in the spring, bear flesh is therefore particularly nourishing.

Many, most of whom have never tasted bear meat nor smelled it cooking, are prejudiced against the carnivore as a table delicacy for one reason or another. One excuse often heard concerns the animal's eating habits. Yet the most ravenous bear is a finicky diner when compared to such game as lobster and chicken.

It is only natural that preferences should vary, and if only for this reason it may be interesting to note:

(a) That many of our close acquaintances who live on wild meat much of the time relish plump bear more than any other North American game meat with the single exception of sheep,

(b) and that, furthermore, these individuals include a sizable number who after long professing an inability to stomach bear meat in any form found themselves coming back for thirds and even fourths of bear roast or bear stew under the impression that anything so savory must be, at the very least, choice beef.

### **Getting Birds Without Guns**

Game birds such as ptarmigan and grouse promise feasts for anybody lost in the wilderness, especially as a few stones or sticks are often the only weapons needed to catch one. If one misses the first time, such fowl usually will afford a second and even a third chance to be captured. When they fly, they generally go only short distances and may be successfully followed, particularly if this is done casually and at such a tangent that it would seem that one were strolling on past.

It goes without saying that no sportsman finds any amusement in indiscriminate killing: it follows

with equal reason that when survival is at stake and when wild meat may mean life itself, otherwise distasteful means of securing meat may be justified, even though regrets for their necessity may remain.

Any bird, as a matter of fact, will furnish good eating in an emergency. The only difference is that some are more tender and plump, and to different palates better tasting than others. Colonies afford particular opportunities, some of which are considered in [Chapter 5](#). Even ripe eggs should not be overlooked when one needs food.



*Because bevies of grouse tend to fly and flutter close to the ground for short distances only, a casual pursuit with a few good stones or sticks may lead to an important feast. The birds will usually allow the hunter a few opportunities to get reasonably close enough to them so that his chances of success are quite high.*

### **Why Porcupines Are Given Reprieves**

Porcupines, like thistles and nettles, are better eating than it might seem reasonable to expect. The slow moving, dull witted rodent is in human estimation often a nuisance, being so ravenous for salt that practically anything touched by human hands will whenever possible be investigated by sharp inquisitive teeth.

When shooting the rocky headwaters of the Southwest Miramichi River in New Brunswick, I've had to hunch out of my sleeping robe a half-dozen times a night to switch determined brown porkies away from my canvas canoe. Several years later, King Gething told me how when boating mail in the Canadian Rockies he'd solved with better success a similar problem, looping wires harmlessly around the yellowish necks of offending western hedgehogs and hitching them to poplars until he was ready to go the next morning.

The sluggish porcupine is the one animal that even the greenest tenderfoots, even weak with hunger, can kill with a weapon no more formidable than a stick. All one usually has to do to collect a meal is reach over the animal, which generally presents the raised quills of back and tail, and strike it on the head. Being so low in intelligence, the hedgehog requires a lot more killing than might be expected.

Porcupines can not, of course, shoot their quills, but any that are stuck in the flesh by contact should be pulled out immediately, for their barbed tips cause them to be gradually worked in and out of sight. Dogs are common victims. I had a big Irish Wolfhound who became so infuriated at the genus that with no regard for himself, until later, he killed every porcupine he could find.

If you're alone in the bush with a dog in such a disagreeable predicament, you'll probably have to do as I did; lash the pet as motionless as possible against a tree, and use your weight for any necessary



additional leverage. Pincers can be improvised by splitting a short branch, At any rate, each of the perhaps hundreds of quills has to come out, or death may be the least painful result.



*Because they are so dumb, porcupines, which may provide a good source of nutrition, are possibly the easiest forest-dwelling animals to kill. A few blows with a simple, sturdy stick to the head of the slow moving animal, and your kill should be complete. But take heed: although porcupines cannot shoot their quills, if a quill happens to stick you, it can easily become lodged beneath the surface of the skin and thus, it should be removed immediately. Before cooking, skin the porcupine completely, using caution, by first making an incision on the smooth underbelly.*

This danger from quills is one reason why it is a poor practice to cook a porcupine by tossing it in a small fire. Very often all the quills do not burn off. The best procedure is to skin out the porcupine by first turning it over so as to make the initial incision along the smooth underneath portion. Many who've dined on this meat consider the surprisingly large liver uncommonly toothsome.

### **The Most Widely Hunted Game Animal**

In the spring particularly, those years when rabbit cycles are near their zeniths, the young lie so fearlessly that a dog will step over one without scenting it, and all an individual has to do, if he wants is to reach down and pick the youngster up.

Adult rabbits themselves depend so much on camouflage that at any time if you pretend not to see one and continue strolling as if going past, it is frequently possible to come close enough to do some immediately accurate throwing with a ready stone.

Tularemia, or rabbit fever, is occasionally a threat in some localities and in one respect the disease is a little harder to avoid when not hunting with a firearm, for one precaution can be to shoot only rabbits that appear to be lively and in good health. The germs of rabbit fever are destroyed by heat, however, and another safeguard is to handle the animal with covered hands until the meat is thoroughly cooked.

Rabbits are unusually easy to clean. One method is to begin by pinching up enough of the loose back skin to slit it by shoving a knife through. Insert your fingers and tear the fragile skin apart completely around the rabbit. Now peel back the lower half like a glove, disjuncting the tail when you come to it and finally cutting off each hind foot. Do the same thing with the top section of skin, loosening it finally by severing the head and two forefeet. You can then, as you've already possibly found, pull the animal open just below the ribs and flip out the entrails, retrieving heart and liver. You may also want to cut out the small waxy gland between each front leg and the body.

### **Starvation Next to Impossible**

"It is next to impossible to starve in a wilderness," says George Leopold Herter, of Herter's, Inc.,

sporting goods manufacturer, importer, and exporter. "If no game, fish, mollusk, etc. are present, you are still in no danger."

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"Insects are wonderful food, being mostly fat, and are far more fortifying than either fish or meat. It does not take many insects to keep you fit. Do not be squeamish about eating insects, as it is entirely uncalled for. In parts of Mexico, the most nutritious flour is made from the eggs of small insects found in the marshes. In Japan, darning needles or dragon flies are a delicacy. They have a delicious delicate taste, so be sure to try them

"Moths, mayflies, in fact about all the insects found in the woods, are very palatable. The only one I ever found that I did not care for were ants. They contain formic acid and have a bitter taste. Some aborigines have capitalized on the ants' acidity by mashing them in water sweetened with berries or sap to make a sort of lemonade. The eggs and the young of the ant are also eaten.

"A small light at night will get you all the insects you need to keep you in good condition. If the weather is too cold for flying insects, kick open some rotten logs or look under stones and get some grubs. They keep bears fat and healthy and will do the same for you."

### **Odd Meals**

Grasshoppers are edible when hard portions such as wings and legs have been removed. So are cicadas. Termites, locusts, and crickets may be similarly eaten.

Both lizards and snakes are not only digestible but are often considered delicacies for which some willingly pay many times the amount they expend for a similar weight of prime beef. The only time snake meat may be poisonous is when it has suffered a venomous bite, perhaps from its own fangs. This also holds true with lizards, the only poisonous ones on this continent being the Southwest's Gila monster and Mexico's beaded lizard. To prepare the reptiles, decapitate, skin, remove the entrails, and cook like chicken to whose white meat the somewhat fibrous flesh is often compared.

An ancient method for securing already cooked insects, reptiles, and small animals is to fire large tracts of grassland and then to comb them for whatever may have been roasted by the conflagration.

### **A Rule for Survival**

Although it is true that under ideal conditions the human body can sometimes fend off starvation for upwards of two months by living on its own tissues, it is equally certain that such auto-cannibalism is seldom necessary anywhere in the North American wilderness.

A good rule is not to pass up any reasonable food sources if we are ever in need. There are many dead men who, through ignorance or fastidiousness, did.

## Chapter 3

### Science of Staying Alive

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SOME NATIVES ROAST THE BLAND YOUNG ANTLERS of the deer family when they are in velvet. Others esteem the stomach contents of herbivorous mammals such as caribou, for such greens mixed as they are with digestive acids are not too unlike salad prepared with vinegar.

Some aborigines, as desirous of wasting nothing as those who can whole sardines, do not bother to open the smaller birds and animals they secure, but pound them to a pulp which is tossed in its entirety into the pot. Other peoples gather moose and rabbit excrement for thickening boiled dishes. Even such an unlikely ingredient as gall has, among other uses, utility as a seasoning.

Nearly every part of North American animals is edible. Exceptions are polar bear and ringed and bearded seal liver which become so excessively rich in Vitamin A that they are poisonous to some degree at certain times and are usually as well avoided. All freshwater fish are likewise good to eat.

Animals should not be bled any more than can be helped if food is scarce. Whether they should be so handled at other times is a matter largely of circumstances and of personal opinion.

Blood, which is not far removed from milk, is unusually rich in easily absorbed minerals and vitamins. Our bodies need iron. It would require the assimilation of ten ordinary eggs, we are told, to supply one man's normal daily requirements. Four tablespoons of blood are capable of doing the same job.

Fresh blood can be secured and carried, in the absence of handier means, in a bag improvised from one or another parts of the entrails. One way to use it is in broths and soups enlivened perhaps by a wild vegetable or two.

### Leather and Rawhide Both Edible

The skin of the animal is as nourishing as a similar quantity of lean meat. Baking a catch in its hide, although ordinarily both a handy and tasty method of occasionally preparing camp meat, is therefore practice we should not indulge in when rations are scarce.

Rawhide is also high in protein. Boiled, it has even less flavor than roasted antlers, and the not overly appealing and yet scarcely unpleasant look and feel of the boiled skin of a large fish. When it is raw, a usual procedure naturally adopted in emergencies is to chew on a small bit until mastication becomes tiresome and then to swallow the slippery shred.

Explorers speak of variances of opinion among individual members of groups as to whether or not leather, generally footwear or other body covering, should be eaten. When we are so situated that to reach safety we will need to walk, retaining our foot protection should of course come first. If we are cold as well as hungry, we will stay warmer by wearing the rawhide than we would by sacrificing it to obtain a little additional heat via the digestive system. If the article in question is made of commercially tanned leather, the answer will be simpler indeed, for such leather generally has scant if any food value.

### Bones May Mean Salvation

A lot of us, given the time, capitalize on the food value inherent in bones in two ways: Small bones go into the pot to thicken stews and soups, and we may also like to chew on the softer of these, particularly if we are lounging around a campfire. Larger marrow bones are opened so that their soft vascular tissue can be extracted.



The mineral-rich marrow found in the bones of animals that were in good physical condition at demise is not surpassed by any other natural food in caloric strength. What is, at the same time, the most delectable of tidbits is wasted by the common outdoor practice of roasting such bones until they are on the point of crumbling. A more conservative procedure is to crack them at the onset, with two stones if nothing handier is available. The less the marrow is then cooked, the better it will remain as far as nutrition is concerned.

All this is something to consider if any of us, when desperate for food, happens upon the skeleton of a large animal.

### **Rare or Well Done**

When food supplies are limited, nothing should be cooked longer than is considered necessary for palatableness. The only exception is when there may be germs or parasites to be destroyed.

The more food is subjected to heat, the greater are the losses of nutritive values. Even the practice of making toast diminishes both bread's proteins and digestibility. The greatest single universal error made in preparing venison and similar game meat for the table is overcooking which, in addition to drying it out, tends to make it tough and stringy. What this practice does to the flavor is a matter of opinion.

### **Scurvy Easily Prevented and Cured**

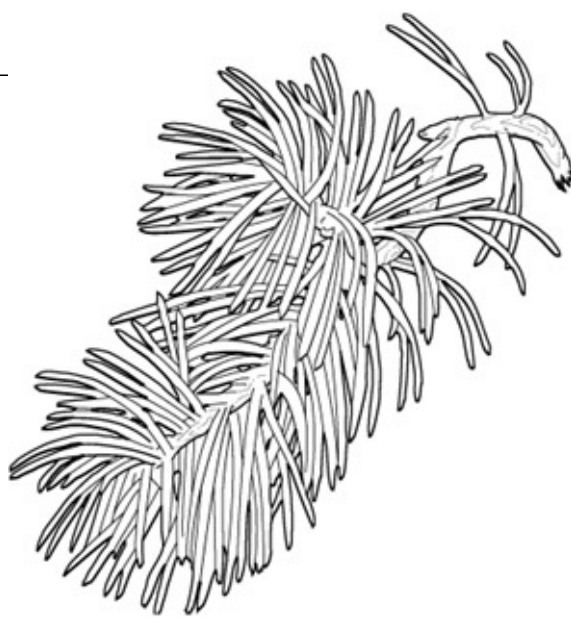
A very definite risk when fresh food is habitually overcooked, especially under survival conditions, arises from the fact that oxidation destroys the inherent Vitamin C, lack of which in the diet causes scurvy.

Scurvy has gathered more explorers, pioneers, trappers, and prospectors to their fathers than can be reckoned, for it is a debilitating killer whose lethal subtleties through the centuries have too often been misinterpreted and misunderstood.

Scurvy, it is known now, is a deficiency disease. If you have it, taking Vitamin C into your system will cure you. Eating a little Vitamin C regularly will, indeed, keep you from having scurvy in the first place.

### **Free Vitamins**

Spruce tea can be made, by steeping fresh evergreen needles in water, that will be as potent with the both preventative and curative ascorbic acid as the ordinary orange juice. This vitamin you can get even more directly by chewing the tender new needles, whose starchy green tips are particularly pleasant to eat in the spring.



*Boiling supple needles in water will provide as much Vitamin C as fresh orange juice and can restore a body with warmth and a sense of well-being under cold and trying circumstances.*

Fresh meat will both prevent and cure scurvy. So will fresh fish. So will fresh fruits and vegetables wild or otherwise. So will lime juice and lemon juice but, no matter how sour, only if they too are fresh. The Vitamin C in all these is lessened and eventually destroyed by oxidation, by age, and, incidentally, by salt.

### **How Rabbit Starvation Really Happens**

A man can have all the rabbit meat he wants to eat and still perish. So-called rabbit starvation, as a matter of fact, is particularly well known in the Far North.

An exclusive diet of any lean meat, of which rabbit is a practical example, will cause digestive upset and diarrhea. Eating more and more rabbit, as one is compelled to do because of the increasing uneasiness of hunger, will only worsen the condition.

The diarrhea and general discomfort will not be relieved unless fat is added to the diet. Death will otherwise follow within a few days. One would probably be better off on just water than on rabbit and water.

### **The Tremendous Importance of Fat**

Why is fat so important an item in a survival diet? Part of the answer, as we have seen, lies in the fact that eating lean flesh without a sufficient amount of fat will kill us, an actuality that may seem astonishing, for in civilization we obtain numerous fats from a very great number of often unrecognized sources. These include butter, margarine, lard, milk, cheese, bacon, salad oil, mayonnaise, various sauces, candy, nuts, ice cream, and the fatty contents of such staples as bread.

If in an emergency we have to subsist entirely on meat, the fat of course will have to come from the meat itself. The initial consideration in a meat diet, therefore, is fat.

Yet history tells of supposedly experienced men who, although starving, have burned vital fat to give nutritiously inferior lean meat what seemed to them a more appetizing flavor—a suicidal error of which we, having learned better in an easier way, need never be guilty.

### **Cannibalism**

It has always been believed, among all social levels of all peoples, that starving human beings left to their own resources will devour everything suspected of having food value, including their fellow human beings.

“It is rare, except in fiction, that men are killed to be eaten. There are cases where a member of a party becomes so unsocial in his conduct towards the rest that by agreement he is killed; but if his body then is eaten it is not logically correct to say that he was killed for food,” Villijalinur Stefansson says. “What does happen constantly is that those who have died of hunger, or of another cause, will be eaten. But long before cannibalism develops the party has eaten whatever else is edible.”

Some scientists, who point out that objections are psychological and sociological, declare abstractly that animal proteins are desirable, in direct ratio with their chemical similarity to the eating organism, and that therefore for the fullest and easiest assimilation of flesh, human meat can hardly be equaled.

### What to Kill for Food

Some member of the deer family is what anyone really bogged down in the North American wilderness is most apt to turn to for sustenance. The adult male, as any sportsman knows, is fattest just before the mating season which, varying according to species and climate, commences roughly in early autumn. The male then becomes progressively poorer. At the end of the rut, the prime male is practically without fat even in the normally rich marrows.

The mature female is the choice of the meat hunter once the rutting season is well under way. She remains preferable until approximately early spring. Then the male once more becomes more desirable. Generally speaking, older animals have more body fat than younger ones.

### Tidbit of Old-Time Trappers

Beaver was something I had very much wanted to eat ever since I was a boy and had read Horace Kephart's regretful observation: “This tidbit of old-time trappers will be tasted by few of our generation, more's the pity.” It was a lean black-haired trapper, Dan Macdonald, who gave me the opportunity some years later, and as beaver are one of the principal fur animals along the upper Peace River I've been fortunate enough to be able to enjoy *amisk* many times since.

The meat is so sustaining that anyone lost and hungry is markedly fortunate to secure it. Beaver cuttings on trees, which indicate the presence of the amphibian, are easily recognized by the marks left by the large sharp teeth that have kept gnawing around and around, biting continually deeper until the wood is severed. Because beaver don't know how trees will fall, the animal is occasionally found trapped beneath trunk and branches.



*The characteristic marks on trees near rivers are indicators of the presence of the beaver. Where*

*there are beavers, there will usually be such easily identifiable evidence of its company; it is said that if a beaver never gnawed into trees, a process which grinds down the amphibious rodent's dramatically-inward-curving teeth, the teeth would continue to grow until they fully impaled the amphibious rodent's head, killing it. Were this the common case, the challenge of the hunt would be dramatically diminished, although of course, the evidence of the beaver's presence would not then be read in the trees.*

If you have a gun and enough time at your disposal to wait for a sure shot, an often productive campaign is to steal to a concealed vantage on the downward side of a beaver pond. The furry animal may then be seen swimming and shot in the head. If you have a choice and not much ammunition, wait to bag the biggest one you can. Beaver, the largest rodents on this continent, weigh up to fifty pounds or more.

Beaver quarters seem almost incommensurably delicious when you're hungry from outdoor exertion, although with the larger adults the meat does, even though you may be reluctant to heed it, have a tendency to become somewhat fibrous and stringy when cooked. The meat has a distinctive taste and odor somewhat resembling that of plump turkey. A sound idea in an emergency is to supplement it with lean flesh such as rabbit, so as to take the fullest possible advantage of the fat.

A beaver tail looks surprisingly like a scaly black fish whose head has been removed. Tails may be propped up or hung near a cooking fire whose heat will cause the rough black hide to puff and to separate from the flesh, whereupon it can be peeled off in large flakes.

The beaver tail is so full of nourishing oil, incidentally, that if set too close to a blaze it will burn like a torch. The meat is white and gelatinous, and rich enough that one finds himself not wanting too much of it at a time.

### **What Parts of Meat to Eat**

We will probably want to eat most of any animals we can secure if short of food. Some parts, such as the liver, have been recognized even among some primitive tribes as a specific cure for night blindness as it is high in Vitamin A. But any section of plump fresh meat is a complete diet in itself, affording all the necessary food ingredients even if we dine on nothing but fat rare steaks for week after month after year.

# EDIBLE VEGETATION IDENTIFICATION GUIDE

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“I LEARNED THAT A MAN MAY USE AS SIMPLE A DIET AS THE ANIMALS, AND YET RETAIN HEALTH AND STRENGTH. I HAVE MADE A SATISFACTORY DINNER OFF A DISH OF PURSLANE WHICH I GATHERED AND BOILED, YET MEN HAVE COME TO SUCH A PASS THAT THEY FREQUENTLY STARVE, NOT FROM WANT OF NECESSARIES BUT FOR WANT OF LUXURIES.”

—HENRY DAVID THOREAU

The salad plants and potherbs growing wild on this continent, among which the trailing purslane with its yellow flowers for which it is often regarded less highly than others, are so abundant that when one stays hungry for very long in the silent spaces it is not always with good reason.

## VEGETARIANISM

“One farmer says to me,” Thoreau recounted, “You cannot live on vegetable food solely, for it furnishes nothing to make bones with; walking all the while he talks behind his oxen, which, with vegetable-made bones, jerk him and his plow along.”

## HOW TO TEST FOR EDIBILITY

Innumerable edible wild fruits, barks, roots, seeds, flowers, pods, saps, gums, herbs, nuts, leaves, greens, and tubers are both nourishing and satisfying. The need for extreme discretion unless one is sure of what he is eating can not be however overemphasized, as we all realize.

The possible gain in an absolute emergency might be important enough, in ratio to risk, that we would be justified in trying a very small sample of a strange plant, then if all went well a slightly larger sample, and so on. This process should be stretched over as long a period as reasonable, certainly no less than twenty-four hours, because of the slowness in which some poisons act.

During that time we'd be watching with as much detachment as we could muster for any ill effects. If everything seemed all right we would then be justified if the emergency continued to consider the plant edible in at least small quantities.

Thousands of bushes, flowers, mosses and trees are edible. Here is an A-to-Z guide of the most common and fortifying vegetation we can use as food if we are to survive in the woods.



*Acorns*

## ACORNS

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All acorns are good to eat. Some are less sweet than others, that's all. But the bitterness that is prevalent in differing degrees is due to tannin, the same ingredient that gives tea its bitterish characteristic. Although tannin is not digestible by humans in large amounts, it is very readily soluble in water. It follows, therefore, that even the bitterest acorns can be made sweet enough to eat without any great effort. Indians leached their acorns to make them more palatable. It's an easy matter to leach your bitter acorns today. Just shell the nuts and boil them whole for at least two hours, changing the water (at least four times) each time it becomes light brown in color. The acorns can then be dried in the sun. Eat them as is or grind into a fine meal, which can then be formed into cakes and baked on a hot stone.



*Barberry*

## BARBERRY

Barberries become redolent expanses of golden blossoms in the springtime, shiny and opulent green masses during the summer, and bright scarlets and bronzes in the nippy weeks of autumn. The wood, particularly lovely yellow, is sometimes used for jewelry. This shrub grows some eight or nine feet tall along fences, in dusty thickets, in stony pastures, and along the rims of rocky woodlands. The berries of this particular bushlike herb are for the most part red. Oval-shaped, not unlike fairy footballs, they are rather dry, acidulous, and rich in Vitamin C. You can make a pleasantly cooling drink from the berries or turn them into appetizingly tart sauces, jams, purees, and preserves. Parched hikers find chewing a few of the agreeably acid, younger leaves refreshing.





*Bayberry*

### **BAYBERRY**

These evergreen shrubs and small trees sometimes grow 30 feet or more high. The attractive fruit, actually a nutlet, is based on a hard stone which encloses a two-seeded kernel. On the outside of the stone are gunpowder-like grains. Over this is a dryish, pleasantly scented crust of granular, green-white wax that once smelled will never be forgotten. When bruised, the leaves, too, give off a memorable aroma. The winy evergreen leaves of the bayberry, used in moderation and removed before the dish is brought to table, have been doing wonderful things for soups, broths, stews, and steaming chowders since Colonial times.



### **HOW TO OBTAIN BIRCH SYRUP**

“Heavenly concoction,” Dudley Shaw promised one spring day up on the Peace River. “I’ll stow a gimlet in my pack when I prowl up the first of the week to retrieve a couple of traps that got frozen in Noble lap, birch syrup is. Glorious on flippers.”

Bore a hole with a knife or make a clean, deep gash in a birch tree with an ax. Attach a birch bark cup (made by folding a sheet of birch bark to form a conical cup) or a tin can just below the hole with wire or another form of binding. When cup is full, plug hole with a whittled wooden peg. Boil sap low and slow until it reduces to birch syrup, which is sweet and pleasantly spicy.

The old trapper, who as mentioned in *At Home in the Woods*, is the happiest man Vena and I have ever known. He left instructions about preparing containers to capture birch sap for us. These could have been improvised from birchbark itself, but tomato cans to which we attached wire bails worked out well enough. Hung on nails driven above each tiny hole Dudley made with his gimlet, the bright buckets echoed with the dripping flow of watery sap. Wooden pegs could have secured the containers below ax gashes or holes bored with a knife.

“You’d better amble out this way regularly to see that these don’t overflow,” Dudley Shaw cautioned, eyes blinking good humoredly behind thick spectacles. “Keep the sap simmering cheerful on back of the stove. Tons of steam has to come off.” Would the procedure hurt the trees?

“No, no.” Our nearest neighbor shook his head. “The plunder will begin to bog down when the day cools, anyway. Then we’ll whittle out pegs and drive them in to close the blinking holes. Everything will be noble.”

Everything was, particularly the birch syrup. It wasn’t as thick as it might have been, not even after a great deal of cooking. There also seemed to be an unfortunately small amount. Yet what remained was sweet, delicately spicy, and more than ordinarily delicious. If one is ever seeking emergency sustenance in the spring, birch syrup may be well worth the time and effort if only for its psychological lift.



*Fashioning a cone-shaped cup is a simple procedure. Fold a section of birch-bark loosely in half meanwhile turning a corner inward and wrapping another corner around the outside; then push both sides together until a cone shape is contrived. Use available materials such as a thin strip of birch bark to weave the rim of the conical cup in place.*



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