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Go Wild

written by

Fiona Danks and Jo Schofield

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IGLOOS AND SNOW SHELTERS

Who isn't intrigued by the notion of sleeping in an igloo and not freezing to death? Building a proper igloo or snow shelter takes considerable time and skill, but it's possible to make a simpler version. Try having a go, even if you have no intention of actually sleeping in it.

A SIMPLE IGLOO

We made this simple igloo from snow bricks made by packing wet snow into plastic storage boxes. We tipped the bricks out of the boxes and placed some in a circle; then we set a second layer slightly further in and overlapping the bricks in the first layer. As we added more layers, we packed loose snow into the gaps, making sure each layer was stable before moving on to the next. By the time the igloo was completed everyone's hands were far too cold to enjoy it, but we went back later that night with lanterns and hot chocolate.

If you intend to sleep out in your igloo, dig snow out to make a large hole and then build the igloo around it. Place some snow bricks along a length of wall as a sleeping platform. Cut a hole under the wall for a cold sink and entrance; hot air from your body will rise and be trapped in the dome while cold air falls into the sink. Remember to make some ventilation holes in the walls.







EDIBLE WILD PLANTS

On our expeditions we have tasted various wild plants; we sampled some in passing, made seasonal snacks and used herbs to flavour meals we were cooking over a fire. See what edible plants you can find in your area – get hold of a guide book or look out for organized foraging expeditions (see Further Information, page 156). Here are a few we have tried.

Marjoram

Known as oregano in Mediterranean countries, this is a common summer-flowering herb in chalk country. Gather it just before the flowers open and add to vegetable dishes or serve with tomatoes. We used it here to flavour some bread we cooked over a fire.

Elderberries

The common shrub elder is often laden with berries in the early autumn, providing a feast for the birds. My brother-in-law remembers being given hot elderberry cordial as a child to ward off colds.

Juniper

This evergreen shrub produces small aromatic berries with a purple sheen. Best known as an ingredient of gin, they are also great for flavouring stews.

Nettles

Gather the tips of nettles in the spring and early summer when they are young. Ben and the boys tried cooking them directly over the fire; the process of wilting somehow stops them from stinging your mouth. Nettles are extremely rich in vitamins, and make a very good soup.



Marjoram



Elderberry



Juniper



Nettle



Sweet chestnut



Hazelnuts

Nuts

Rich in protein and fat, these are one of the best survival foods. They are also an important food source for wildlife, so don't be tempted to over-collect. We tried roasting hazelnuts in the embers of the fire for a few minutes, and then shelling them with the aid of the back of an axe. They were so delicious that everyone clamoured to try them.



Wood sorrel

Wood sorrel

Since I've introduced my children to the fresh lemony tang of these pale green heart-shaped leaves they always search for them when out in the woods. They are only to be eaten as a snack, as wood sorrel is slightly toxic in large quantities.

Wild herb teas

For a refreshing and tasty drink, try collecting wild herbs, such as chamomile, fennel or mint, and making tea on the spot. Take a Kelly kettle (see page 47) out with you or a little stove and simply boil up some water and pour it over your wild herbs to make a brew; taste and remove the leaves when the tea is strong enough.



Fennel

COOKING METHODS

COOKING STRAIGHT ON THE FIRE

For cooking, you need a bed of hot coals; flames just blacken food. Light your fire well ahead of time; it takes a while to build up the hot coals. Make sure you have a supply of dry firewood close by. Having built up your fire, use a log or spade to drag a load of hot coals from the middle to the edge; this bed will become your 'cooker'. Keep the main fire stoked up to create more coals if you need more heat later; you can also increase the temperature of your cooker by fanning it. Make sure your cooking pots are solidly placed on the coals, possibly supported by logs on each side.





USING A POTHOLDER

A potholder allows for more even distribution of heat than cooking directly on the fire. This metal potholder has a chain with which to suspend the pot over the fire; the height of the pot could be varied according to our needs. If you don't have a metal potholder, make one out of three sturdy sticks and a chain or piece of strong cord (see page 119).

MAKING A DUTCH OVEN

We put this cast-iron cooking pot in the heart of the fire and scraped burning wood and ashes all around it to make a Dutch baking oven. The bread we baked was a little burnt on the bottom, but we could have prevented that by placing another smaller pan inside to help spread the heat more evenly. Try using a Dutch oven to bake loaves of bread, vegetables, biscuits or even cakes.



COOKING ON A METAL GRILL

A sturdily placed grill provides a convenient surface to cook on. Either place the grill over two logs, making sure it is level and stable, or make your fire in a trench and place the grill directly on the ground over the top. Another handy piece of equipment is a double grill with a handle; you can sandwich bacon or sausages inside the grill, which is easily turned over, so you're not likely to lose any supper in the fire.



COOKING ON A STICK OR A SPIT

Roasting marshmallows on a stick is always popular. To cook bread dough, meat or fish, try using peeled green wood skewers (to make skewers, see page 116). We rolled this bread dough into a sausage shape and wound it round a cooking stick, which we held over hot coals, turning it occasionally to ensure even cooking. This fish and fresh roadkill meat are being cooked in the same way.

A friend told us she has cooked sausages on green sticks pushed into the ground beside the fire and tilted towards the heat. Other than turning them a couple of times, you can just leave the sausages to cook. Alternatively, try constructing a simple spit: bang a forked stick into the ground on each side of the fire, make sure the forks are at the same height and then place a third stick across them. You can either hang a pot from this or peel the 'spit' and thread your food along it for cooking.









USING AN AXE

1 As with knives, check there are no people or obstacles near by. My father nearly killed himself once when he failed to notice a washing line above his head and it caught the axe he was swinging.

1 Don't try to cut straight through a log or branch; instead make a V-shaped notch at the point where you wish to cut and then break it. Make small, accurate, focused cuts, not large swings.

1 Cut away from yourself at all times.

1 Be aware that an axe can bounce back if it hits very hard wood.



USING A FOLDING SAW

This handy tool can be folded away safely when not in use.

1 Make sure that the hand holding the wood is a long way away from where you are cutting; then should the saw slip your other hand will be safely out of reach. If you cross your arms before you start to saw, your holding hand is always away from the blade (see photograph).

1 Find something firm and steady to rest the wood on when sawing.

1 Don't push hard – let the saw do the work for you.

1 When closing a folding saw, hold the saw on the outside of the handle so that your hand will not be trapped against the blade.



USING A SPOON OR CROOK KNIFE

This tool with a blade on each side is used to carve out the bowl of a spoon. It can slip very easily, so use with caution (for further details, see page 117).

STONE AGE TOOLS

After a good party the night before, the morning was not what Jake wanted to see. To make things worse, we were dragging him and Edward off to some Stone Age workshop for our book. Edward too was dragging his heels, and grunting as only teenage boys know how. But both boys got completely stuck in and by the end of the day they had a collection of arrowheads and knives to be proud of.

Flint-knapper John Lord and his wife focused on working with flint, a versatile material suitable for making into hammers, knives and arrowheads, not to mention lighting fires. Flint occurs as nodules within chalk deposits; the UK's best flints are found in East Anglia, but other places have suitable flints.

Using rocks and a lump of antler as hammers, John made a hand axe and several small arrowheads from a huge piece of flint. He turned the flint, hitting it apparently randomly, but in time he produced a beautiful symmetrical oval hand axe with multi-faceted serrated edges – handy for chopping up mammoths! Making a large axe takes skill and a deep understanding of how flint shears, but smaller weapons and tools can be made quite easily; even a roughly hewn flake with a fine edge is a tool that will cut through hide or carve bone.

