



bushcraft



what is it?

It's about living in the wild, using knowledge and natural resources to sustain yourself over a prolonged period. The concept goes beyond mere survival - it's about thriving, being comfortable in nature. But bushcraft has fewer creature comforts and links to civilisation than recreational camping - the more you bring with you, the less you're doing bushcraft and the more you're camping.

Of all our topics, it has the longest history. It's how our prehistoric ancestors lived every day. Sustainability is fundamental to bushcraft, as the close relationship with nature allows you to see clearly if you're using resources too quickly, or creating waste that can't be absorbed, or just damaging nature. Unfortunately, the distance between our lives and our environmental impact has made this difficult for most of us today. Ironically, it may be this disconnect that has stimulated such interest in bushcraft.

The essential tasks are obtaining potable water, fire, shelter and food, which involves a range of skills such as flintknapping, firecraft, foraging, hunting, fishing, making shelters, rope/cord making, skins & hides, tracking, navigation, basketry, leatherwork, and much more.

A large bushcraft movement has developed (more in the UK/US than Europe) from different sources. First there were the survivalists, the most famous of whom was probably Lofty Wiseman, and then the Bush Tucker Man, focusing on food, followed by Ray Mears, whose thoughtful, ecological approach brought bushcraft into millions of living rooms and made it extremely popular. The three main perspectives are probably (still) survivalism; then the Ray Mears / ecological approach; and finally the spiritual / Native American path.

what are the benefits?

Bushcraft is fun, exciting, (potentially) free, satisfying, and you get to hang out in beautiful places. The skills you gain will be helpful in non-bushcraft situations, and they could save your life or the lives of your loved ones. You'll also gain a greater understanding and appreciation of nature. The environment will of course benefit from a greater number of people who appreciate and respect its beauty and value, and who want to engage with it in a non-exploitative way - it has a lower impact than possibly any other leisure activity, unless of course it involves flying to get to your wilderness. Let's keep it local folks.

The calming effect of nature can help people with behavioural or mental health problems.

what can I do?

Gain some skills by attending a course before you go into the wild. It's essential to learn the correct way to do things, especially as regards safety. It can't really be learnt from books - although they can certainly increase your knowledge. You can immerse yourself, or focus on specific skills.

Where to do it: there are access issues to consider. In Scotland there is more freedom than in England & Wales - you can roam, camp and have a fire without the landowner's permission, as long as you're responsible - think of your impact on the environment and on other people - but it's useful to read the Countryside Code and the Scottish Outdoor Access Code. In England and Wales you need permission from a landowner if you wish to practice bushcraft on their land.

'Leave no trace' is a good rule of thumb. It means: minimising your impacts, such as avoiding



Bushcraft skills: rope & cord work; firelighting; foraging; tracking; canoeing; fishing; cooking; navigation.



contaminating water sources; minimising fire risk; avoiding erosion; respecting wildlife; not damaging or removing things; burying or burning organic waste and taking everything else away with you.

A canoe or kayak will allow you to be more nomadic, and to carry more kit. Hunting wild game is subject to seasons and regulations, and bowhunting is illegal in the UK. You can make your own hooks and natural-fibre lines, or basket/creel-type traps to catch fish or crayfish. Fishing by hand is illegal in the UK, as is spear fishing, except in the sea.

Equipment: the less kit used, the 'purer' the bushcraft. 'Bare hands' bushcraft involves no bought equipment - knives, tools, shelter and fire are made using natural materials. This type of bushcraft is cheaper, but most people will require at least some basic kit - for example:

- Knife & sheath: Mora make a strong, cheap, entry-level knife. You only need one. A good all-round knife would be medium length, 4-5" (10-12cm) blade, fairly straight profile towards the tip, full tang (the metal continues from the blade all through the handle), with a flat bevel on the blade sloping to a sharp point.
- Water container.
- Fire steel: alloy and scraper plate; scrape the alloy - it becomes molten and you get sparks.
- Folding saw.
- Water purification aid: millbank bag for filtering; billy can for boiling; or pump filter.
- Bivouac bag, sleeping bag and sleeping mat.
- Shelter: tarp and hammock; most bushcrafters will prefer this, as it's more 'outdoors', lighter weight and allows a fire underneath.
- Outdoor clothing: (depending on the season) thermal layers; outer, waterproof, breathable layer; strong, waterproof boots.
- Rucksack.

See online bushcraft stores, and eBay for second-hand kit. It can be a cheap hobby, but make sure you have a quality knife and fire steel. Apart from those, try to reduce kit rather than increase it.

Health & safety: the main risk areas are:

- Fire: take care to avoid wild fires and have water and first aid kit handy in case of burns.
- Shelter: make sure it's secure and safe - look overhead to see what might fall on you.
- Coast: avoid camping or sheltering below the high-tide line; beware of falling rocks from cliffs.



- Wild food: make sure you can identify plants; be aware of the risk of allergies and contamination (wash/cook food properly).
- Water: collect close to its source to avoid chemical contamination. Assume some form of biological contamination, but it can be treated effectively by filtering and boiling. Chemicals are more difficult to treat unless you have a carbon filter, so avoid places where chemical contamination is suspected.
- Tools: sheath a knife when not in use; cut away from yourself; don't work with cutting tools between your legs, in case you cut the femoral artery. Give other people plenty of space, and make them aware of what you're doing.

You definitely don't want to hurt yourself in the wilderness, a long way from the nearest hospital.

resources

- see lowimpact.org/bushcraft for more info, courses, links and books, including:
- Jenner & Smith, *the Outdoor Pocket Bible*
- Ray Mears, *Bushcraft*
- Peter Drank, *Campcraft & Wilderness Skills*
- William Forgey, *Wilderness Medicine*
- A Akkermans, *Outdoor Survival Handbook*
- naturalengland.org.uk - Countryside Code
- outdooraccess-scotland.com - Scottish Outdoor Access Code
- wildernessfoundation.org.uk - campaigning to preserve wilderness areas
- bushcraftmagazine.com - *Bushcraft & Survival Magazine*

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