

ADVENTURER

Setting Out Into the Wilderness With Only a Knife

By JONATHAN GREEN

ON a brisk morning in October, Lee Posner, a stout New York orthopedic devices salesman, drove to a remote spot in the northern Arizona mountains, removed his glasses, unclipped his cellphone and placed them in the glove box. Then, with a deep sigh, he stepped into the cougar-infested wilderness with nothing more than a sharp knife.

His face was a mask of apprehension as he struck out through the thick Ponderosa pines. "My survival will come down to this," he said, patting the knife (a Swedish Mora knife with a four-inch blade) at his waist as he negotiated some thick sagebrush. "The blade will decide."

Mr. Posner was one of three people taking a two-day course led by Tony Nestor of Ancient Pathways, an Arizona outdoor survival school that teaches survival using only primitive technology. Participants are allowed to take only a knife, the clothes they arrive in and a tiny survival kit containing parachute cord, a fire sparker and a water bottle. Tent, sleeping bag, G.P.S., camping mattress and, more important, food, are all forbidden. The idea is to learn how to survive if a day hike goes wrong.

Shaded under the greasy brim of a worn bush hat, Mr. Nestor hiked a few steps behind the group. "We belong out here," he said, scrambling up mossy rocks with the agility of a mountain goat. "It's our birthright. We've had a spear in our hands a lot longer than we've had a laptop. If you have knowledge, all you need out here is a knife."

Mr. Nestor, a soft-spoken man with a plegmatic demeanor and a natural, calorie-saving economy of movement, has made it his life's work to understand how to survive in the wild with nothing. From the age of 17 he has wandered the country spending years with mountain men, Indians and outdoor survivalists to learn his craft. Proudly

'Positive mental attitude and knowledge of the jungle.'

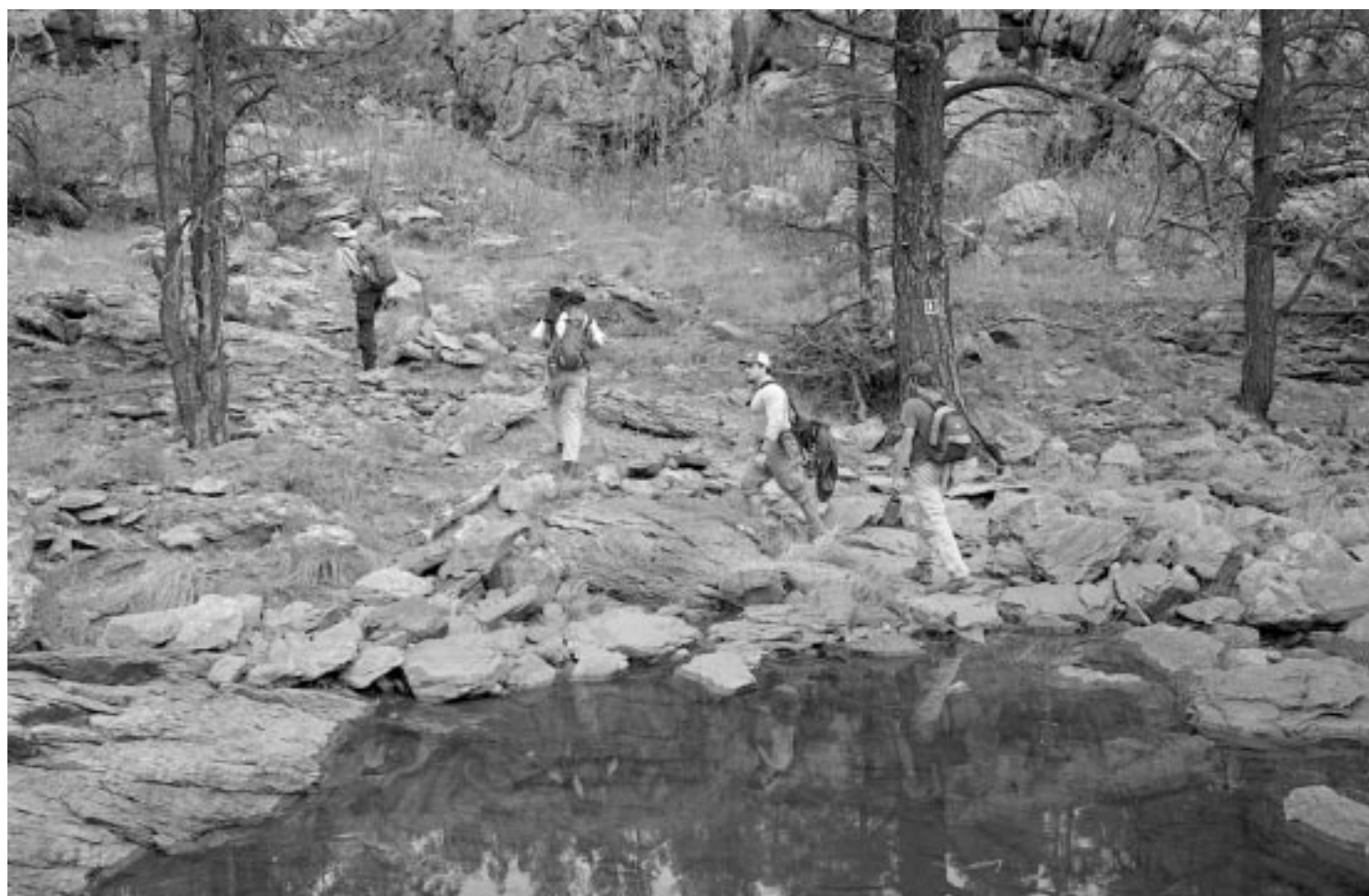
mounted on the living room wall of his solar-powered house in Flagstaff are the sticks he used the first time he started a fire "in the old way."

He has become such an authority on outdoor survival, particularly desert survival, that he has taught it to Hopi and Navajo students, as well as to the Army's Special Forces before their deployment to Iraq and Afghanistan. He also trains prospective contestants on the television reality show "Survivor" who are eager to gain an edge.

Mostly, though, he teaches a growing band of people intrigued with primitive technology. "With Y2K and then 9/11, the numbers interested in this have exploded," Mr. Nestor said. "A lot of people want to be less reliant, particularly after Hurricane Katrina. People want to know how to survive when the shelves at the grocery store are not filled with food and the government is not around to supply water." A significant number of his students are women.

Becoming a real weekend Rambo appeals on a number of different levels. "Modern hiking inventions are great," Mr. Posner said. "But Gore-Tex is not going to find me water if I am stranded. I was a huge fan of Tarzan growing up, and I have always been fascinated with the idea of living in the wild with only a knife."

Elliot Spaulding, 23, an undergraduate at Northern Arizona University, agreed. "I'm more interested in how my ancestors used to live," he said. "I want to sleep in a shelter that I have made myself, in front of a fire that I have lit myself with nothing more



Photographs by Rick Scibelli Jr. for The New York Times

INTO THE WILD Tony Nestor, above, leads three students; they learned to prepare food, below left, and build a fire, below right.



than sticks."

The kind of course Mr. Spaulding and Mr. Posner were taking (this reporter was the third student) does have very real dangers. Last July, Dave Buschow, 29, a security operative from River Vale, N.J., died in Utah while taking part in a 28-day survival course run by the Boulder Outdoor Survival School.

After an hour of hiking up and down mountains and canyons at 7,000 feet, Mr. Nestor led the group to a clearing in the dense pine woods. "Shelter is one of the first things you need to take care of, whether you are roasting in the desert or freezing in sub-zero degrees," he said.

He instructed his students on how to make a primitive shelter called a wickiup. He lashed the ends of two 12-foot logs to the trunk of a tree with a half-hitch at roughly waist height, forming a steeple. We then hacked and laid branches along the sides and dropped pine needles over the top to seal it. We were left with a wigwam shape big enough for two people, along with a pie-shaped space at the front where we would build our fire pit. We then littered the floor inside with pine needles. "You have to have something between you and the ground," Mr. Nestor said. "Otherwise the ground will suck the 98.6 degrees of temperature right out of your body."

The next imperative was the hunt for wa-

ter and food. We hiked deep into a tree-lined canyon, where the rocks at the bottom held rust-brown rainwater. The oasis was used as a waterhole by local animals. Mr. Nestor pointed out footprints. "Those three-lobe prints would indicate a cougar," he said. Mr. Posner filled his water bottle with a wary eye on the canyon's rocky outcrops.

Sinewy stalks of wild onions protruded from the boggy ground around the waterhole. Mr. Nestor instructed the group to dig out the marble-size onions using our blades. It took a good hour of hard labor to collect even a cupful.

MR. NESTOR regarded everything in the outdoors as having a utilitarian purpose. Don't have a toothbrush for the night? Cut a fresh twig from an oak tree and scrape your teeth with it; the tannin acts as a natural toothpaste. Don't have rope? Use the fibrous leaves of the yucca plant and braid them into a line which is strong enough to lash shelters or even to use as mountaineering rope.

We foraged a few wild cranberries and spent a further hour collecting acorns in our bandanas. But soon hunger, a chilling drop in temperature and darkness descended on the group. Mr. Nestor could tell how many hours of daylight were left by measuring how many fists there were between the sun

and the horizon. "We have an hour to get back to camp to light a fire," he said.

Back at camp, we whittled wood to make fire-making implements. A bow drill consisted of a flexible piece of wood bent into a bow shape with some cord, a spindle made from yucca stalk and a flat piece of wood known as a fireboard. Mr. Spaulding pulled the bow back and forth, with a jerky, forceful momentum, spinning the spindle in the fireboard and producing a fine, hot dust. The friction eventually produced a little billowing cloud of smoke and then a few licks of flame in the withering light, just as the sun sank below a tree-lined ridge. The dust was used to light pitch from a pine tree. A blanket of complete darkness descended just as the fire gathered a roaring life of its own. "Natural fire that I made myself," Mr. Spaulding said, grinning with his accomplishment.

The group, ravenous with hunger, began the laborious process of shelling acorns, which were dropped into a rusty can we had found. Then we boiled up an acorn-and-wild-onion broth and devoured it ravenously. But we were all still hungry. Despite laboring for much of the day collecting onions and acorns we still couldn't fill our bellies.

"I'm so hungry I could eat a squirrel," Mr. Posner said morosely. Mr. Nestor explained that in an emergency situation hunting

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FOR those who like the idea of learning to be real weekend Tarzans and Rambos, there are a number of instructors around the country who teach knife-only survival courses:

ARIZONA Ancient Pathways (928-526-2552; www.apathways.com) offers a full range of courses from knife-only, starting at \$275, up to a nine-week bushcraft course for \$4,800.

MONTANA At the Wilderness Arts Institute (406-660-2204; www.wilderness-arts.com), David Cronenwett offers one- and five-day survival courses in the northern Rockies for around \$100 a person a day.

NEW HAMPSHIRE Tim Smith of the Jack Mountain Bushcraft and Guide Service (603-569-6150; www.jackmntn.com) offers various bushcraft and survival outings for \$125 a day or \$250 for a two-day course.

could burn up more calories, especially when there was a chance of not actually catching anything.

Mr. Nestor has regularly dined on pack rats, mice and squirrels on his long sojourns in the wild. "When it's winter and there is no food on the ground, you have to eat that to survive," he said, shadows cast by the campfire flickering over his face. "You can't be squeamish about it. It's a good thing our ancestors weren't or we wouldn't be here today. Mice are too small to skin, so you just throw them on the fire and eat them whole. Rats you throw on for 30 seconds to burn off bubonic plague, lice and parasites and then skin them. If you're really hungry you just eat them straight down."

The long night stretched out ahead of us. The temperature dropped to 36 degrees. The soaring darkness of the woods enclosed as the needling cold stabbed into our clothing. We lay on our beds of prickly pine needles, sticking some into our clothes for extra insulation. We fed the fire to stay warm. The smoke from the fire pit billowed into our eyes, turning them bloodshot and sooty. We either roasted in the shelter or froze when we fell asleep and the fire died.

A gray dawn woke us early. Despite lack of sleep and a gnawing hunger with little food for 24 hours, there was a sense of pride we had survived the night. "There are students and advanced students," Mr. Nestor said, "but no masters when it comes to outdoor survival."

Our trip was only a taste, but it demonstrated the brutality of life without easily accessible food, heat, light and all the other features of modern living that we take for granted. "It's about a positive mental attitude and knowledge of the jungle," Mr. Posner said. "Just like Tarzan had."

Mr. Nestor demonstrated signaling with a mirror to use in an emergency. The flash can be seen as far as 105 miles away by rescue workers. And with that lesson we made our escape from the wilderness.

Mr. Posner tucked his knife securely into the waistband of his pants and hiked back to civilization. "Right," he said, safely back at his car. "Where's a McDonald's? I want a quarter-pounder with cheese."

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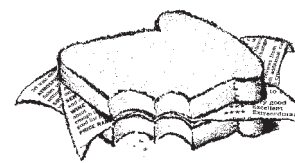
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