



Seeking Shelter by Sabrina Carlson

On April 5, 2016, I had the pleasure of joining the Rim Country Middle School Outdoor Adventure Club for an after school meeting, where I was able to share with them an important outdoor survival skill on how to build an emergency shelter.

We began the lesson by going through some of the reasons a person might need to build a shelter. Perhaps an unexpected wrong turn got you lost, you were hurt, or maybe you simply overestimated your abilities and found yourself too far from your car at a late hour. Whatever the reason, I wanted the students to know that the primary danger when spending the night in the wilderness is exposure. In a harsh desert environment a person can make it 2-3 days without water, perhaps weeks without food, but hypothermia can kill in a matter of a few hours.



Stacking rocks to block off one side of their structure.



Mr. Davidson demonstrates making a "chicken head" knot to secure the space

Since body heat is lost 25 times faster in water than in air, our first simple shelter was with a basic trash bag. Staying dry is a must so with a hole strategically cut to allow for a person to breathe, a large lawn and garden bag can be draped over most of a person's whole body while they are sitting. This preserves body heat and prevents any precipitation from reaching the person's clothes or skin, while keeping the top of the head covered.

Next, we discussed natural shelter options. With dead and down branches and plenty of leaf or pine needle matter, a natural shelter is a fairly simple. The downsides are that it can take significant time to gather materials to construct a natural shelter, and building a fire of pine needles near the shelter

entrance is a risky proposition.

Last but not least, we examined and practiced building shelter with more modern technology. We used space blankets and nylon cord to make shelters in the schoolyard to test how warm they felt. One group used a combination of a space blanket and rocks and sticks to construct a somewhat complex two-person shelter. Another student made a simple improvised tent very close to the ground.

After everyone had put their shelters together, we had the students describe their shelters and explain their choices. Then they each had a chance to describe what works well, and what could have been better.

The group who made the two-person tent liked that they could share the space. They reasoned that two bodies heating the space would be better than one. They chose to put the reflective side of their space blanket facing up, rather than down towards the inside reasoning that a helicopter looking for them would see it more easily if they were lost. They did agree that it might make their shelter less warm. The downside of this particular structure was that it took a lot of time to build, was a bit too high to trap body heat efficiently, and they had trouble keeping their stone wall at one opening in place.



A warm and successful shelter!

The student who improvised a small tent was very happy with her shelter. She described that when she slid inside she could instantly feel her body heat being reflected back to her. She also wisely left just a big enough opening to tend a small fire to keep her extra warm. There were a few downsides to her structure. She had built it sloping toward her head, which was not only a bit uncomfortable for sleeping, but would have caused any rain to drip towards the opening of her shelter.

In the end, both groups could see why practicing shelter building BEFORE you are in an emergency is such a valuable activity, and everyone agreed to keep a big trash bag and a space blanket in their packs from now on.

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