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The Abo' Course

Sargey

- Skills and guides - Bushcraft and Survival -



Publication: Friday 30 January 2004

Description :

Diary of a week long advanced bushcraft survival course.

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The Abo Course.

The basic premise, a week long advanced bushcraft or survival course, set in the Lake District, north west of England, somewhere to the west of lake Windermere. You get a couple of days to tune in, and then off into the woods with little more than the clothes on your back, a knife and a billycan&.



Most of the course members met up at a pub Sunday evening for a meet and greet, a quick pint as a final taste of civilisation before heading off to the grounds of a private estate for the week. We parked the cars, and loaded the rucks onto the top of the woodsmoke landrover for a short but bumpy drive across country to the training area. At the training site we hastily erected bivi's, tents and tarps as each trainee saw fit. There was a light supper of soup and bread, eaten in the parachute tipi that was to be the focal point for classes and social gatherings over the next couple of days.



para teepee in the rain

That night the rain set in. The sort of rain that gave the impression it'd had enough of drifting aimlessly, it was time to set up home, and this was where it was going to stay...

During the night I had to get up and adjust my tarp. It was a vain attempt to exclude the mist, as it drifted slowly down through the conifers and settled coldly on my face. It seemed to permeate everything. By far from the best nights sleep. I drifted off in the small hours; dawn arrived shortly after, as did the sound of other trainees cracking wood to restart the fire in the para tipi.

Following a breakfast of coffee, cigarettes and muesli, the rest of that day and the next consisted of part refresher training, shelter location/styles, properties of wood, and; part advanced training, nutrition and physiology, hydration, the effects of starvation diets, foraging techniques, goals, and plant recognition. During the foraging walk, the training

The Abo' Course

area was revealed as a superb mix of broadleaf and coniferous woods with a few craggy tops and the tarn with it's glorious old boat house.



There was also physical preparation of a more mundane variety, in the form of the new rustic diet, provided by the kind team at Woodsmoke.



The Abo' Course

One of the fun highlights of this part of the course was the construction of "basha boats". Due to the location forming part of a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), harbouring breeding grounds for rare species of dragonfly, we would only be able to approach the tarn from the concrete dam. Any fishing would have to be done from these boats using only fishing kit handmade from natural resources.

The course participants consisted of 8 "civilians"; four assistant instructors would be taking part in the field exercise. The instructors would be going into the field solo, the civvies in two teams of four. A basha boat race was organised between the two teams. We won a bar of chocolate, the other team sank! Our attempts to claim salvage rights on the abandoned and swamped basha boat, were thwarted by the instructor navy intervening with one of their exquisite hand crafted cedar strip canoes.

After final briefings and manufacture of legal six strand snares, priests, digging sticks and other accoutrements, we settled in for our last night's sleep in the relative comfort of our bashas, tents and sleeping bags, before the start of the field exercise Wednesday morning.

Wednesday morning came around and the two teams went their separate ways. Each trainee was allowed only three layers of clothing, not to include any Gore-Tex, triple point or other synthetic waterproofs, a knife, billycan, saw and five snares. Both teams had a member qualified and equipped with a Gransfors Bruks small forest axe. We were to retain the axes for the first day only. The only other equipment allowed was a small personal first aid kit and fishing kit or cordage manufactured from natural resources. The only permitted source of ignition was friction fire lighting.

Our team split up into two pairs, our champion bow driller and myself would head straight for our camp area, pre-selected during Tuesday's recce. On the way we stopped to admire a couple of red deer, bounding across a field and into the trees beyond. The other two guys would start foraging for blackberries and rosehips.

Following the previous couple of day's incessant rain, the break in the weather was very welcome. But all our searches through damp woodland in the weak sunlight failed to produce bow drill components which were dry enough to produce an ember. After eight weary and frustrating hours we had to concede a defeat of sorts. We would have to fall back on the pre-fabricated bow set. This set was made from a hazel drill on a hazel hearth, a difficult combination. Solo attempts by both Will and myself failed to produce that all-important ember. Working together, we at last had one that seemed useable. A flurry of activity ensued; the ember was placed in a tinder ball of lovingly prepared shredded and now woolly juniper bark.

There were heartfelt groans of disappointment all round as the ember was lost without getting flame. Will looked again and there it was still glowing in it's nest! A few more puffs and a wave and FLAME!! We leapt and danced and burnt all the stored wood in nearly no time at all. A billy of water was quickly on the boil, our first drink in nearly nine hours of hard labour was imminent, but after waiting impatiently for it to boil, we now had to wait for it to cool. The billy was taken for a cooling dunk in the stream. As the light started to fade we were tired and hungry, but we had fire and water, the shelter was well behind schedule and there was no food to speak of...



The Abo' Course

As the sun set, we set to with a meagre layer of thatch over the shelter. During the course of our foraging we'd gathered a couple of boletes, we chunked these giant mushrooms and boiled them for a stew. It was revolting, the chunks were slimy. A routine was quickly established, take two scoops and pass the rest on. Gagging on each mouthful, it was hard to say whether it was better to eat with the light on or off. After dinner one of the guys got up for some air, a couple of minutes later the sound of puking came to us on the breeze.

Two of the guys went off for a bit of fishing by lamplight, I went to gather the wood I'd cut earlier. After a bit of a scenic detour (lost) I found James and Joe had returned. No sign of any fish. Feeling a bit crap I decided to have a lie down. After a while I got up and Joe asked how I was, I replied To be honest I could do with a good puke And with that, I set off into the bushes for a bout of vomiting and dry retching. I went back to the hut, visibly shaking and with sweat dripping from my nose. I said You two should be ok, we've had our fifty percent During one of the classes it had been predicted that up to fifty percent of the guys doing the course would be sick! This was due to the strange/irregular diet coming as a bit of a shock to the system, and the potential for dehydration. That bit wasn't in the bloody brochure!

A cold, draughty and restless night followed. Short bouts of what could've been sleep, interspersed with sitting up to get the most from the fire.

At dawn Will was gone. The three of us remaining debated what building works would give us the best return on our calorie investment. Will returned midmorning, he'd been off on a recce. Having spotted a couple of pheasants, he'd set out a dozen of our combined snares. Plans were drawn up for a drive, and, optimistically armed to the teeth with throwing sticks, we set off to hunt pheasant.

Three of us stalked carefully through the woods. We wanted to drive the birds without them getting so scared that they took off. The fourth hunter was stationed in the field just beyond the tree line. We could hear the birds moving through the woods, they were going in the right direction, but then took fright and took flight. The cock bird however chose to escape via one of his usual runs. As his head appeared in the snare he was jumped on, after a bit of raucous flapping there was quiet. We'd got one! Back at camp Joe did a great job of jointing the bird and within half an hour we were eating pheasant breast meat kebabs for starters, with rowan berry stuffed drumsticks for the main course, and a fruits of the forest medley (a blackberry) for afters. All washed down with rosehip tea.

Cooking with Will power



We got to work on the shelter, ripping off all the thatch, we doubled the number of rafters. We replaced the hazel branches and added a couple of layers of spruce bows. We came to appreciate the subtle differences in the properties of woods. There was the nice soft fragrant spruce that we had on our beds. Then there was the bloody

The Abo' Course

pointy spiky sappy buggery stuff that is sitka spruce. Not the sort of stuff you want on your bed.



Later on James and will went fishing. Joe and myself carried on building. We stewed the carcass and neck for tea. As the stew was stirred the neck would float to the surface, resembling a different part of the anatomy altogether.

For breakfast Friday we had one glob of a blackberry each as we launched our great foraging expedition. Attempts at a duck hunt were completely unsuccessful. It seemed that this duck had already been harassed by a bunch of grubby abos with sticks. Instead we chased the little stuff that doesn't run away , rosebay willow herb, nettles, thistles, mint, wood sorrel and field mushrooms. We walked all the way back up to the tarn for a spot more fishing.



Later that afternoon the shelter was finished, complete with a door. We "enjoyed" a stew of nettles, mint and cloverleaf. It had a bizarrely fishy taste. After dinner, we summoned up just enough strength to visit the neighbour's brush-tipi hybrid shelter.



We were all awake very early and spent a couple of hours chatting. As Saturday morning dawned, so did the realisation that we'd soon be breakfasting in a more civilised manner. Attempts to roast willowherb roots for a morning meal were half hearted at best. It took a couple of hours to dismantle the shelter and ensure the fire was properly out, before embarking on what felt like, a long arduous trek back to the boathouse for food and a final debrief.

Arriving at the boathouse, we were greeted by the instructors, the other team of survivors, and the exquisite smell of a fried breakfast. Bacon baps and sausage sandwiches were demolished in short order. During the meal I benefited from a great act of human kindness, Ben passed me a small filter full of ground coffee; all that was needed was my titanium mug, hot water, and a little sugar. After a tortuous week of caffeine deprivation, it was heaven!

All in all, it was a fantastic learning experience. I was able to learn a lot from my teammates, and consolidate knowledge I already had. It was certainly hard going in places. The course did seem expensive when I first considered it, but the wealth of knowledge available, along with great scenery and prolific wildlife, made it well worthwhile.

Many thanks to Lisa Fenton, Ben Mcnutt and the rest of the team at Woodsmoke for a great week, in a superb environment. Highly recommended.

Cheers, And.

The Abo' Course

Post-scriptum :

For more information see <http://www.woodsmoke.uk.com/homepage.htm> or email <mailto:info@woodsmoke.uk.com>

All photo's were taken with a Kodak "high definition" disposable camera.