

Wilderness Survival – How to Build a Shelter in a Tree

Few wilderness survival resources are more important than trees, so making camp in proximity to trees often makes a great deal of sense as it puts the survivor's shelter in proximity to resources and often provides a solid support structure off which to build.

Trees can also provide areas to build a shelter that are relatively free from deep snow. In these cases, trees can save a great deal of time and work.

Saving work by building off what is already provided by nature burns fewer calories and helps keep the survivor from working up a sweat, which can lead to severe discomfort or put the survivor at risk of hypothermia in cold weather.

Briefly:

- Trees mean shelter from cold and heat alike, some species indicate the presence of surface water and any good camp site has an inexhaustible supply of firewood, so make for the trees.
- Choose multipurpose hammock gear over the highly specialized stuff. Your expensive hammock may be comfy, but can't catch dinner, secure an elk quarter to pack frame or be repurposed as a ghillie cloak.
- In addition to many other survival uses, an autolocking carabiner doubles as a set of brass knuckles you can take almost anywhere, so clip one on your go bag. Add a length of 1" tubular webbing and you now have a lot more capability than if you only carry para cord.
- Most hominid apes, including humans, build nests. Whether or not you believe in evolution, your ancestors have been building nests in trees for a long time, so

you could say it is in your DNA.

Trees Provide Many Important Survival Resources

- **Fire** – Trees can provide tools and tinder to start fires, fuel to keep them going, light to work into the night, coals to cook on and fire to work and cook with.
- **Shelter** – Boughs provide insulation from the cold, hard ground. Branches and leaves provide a roof. Trunks and branches provide structural support, a windbreak and insulation.
- **Safety** – Trees provide concealment and large trees can provide cover or a refuge from predators, snakes, thorns and biting insects. Branches from thorny trees or shrubs can also be used to create a barricade against predators.
- **Water** – Some species of trees provide drinkable water, catch rainwater or provide support and shade for water-bearing vines. Other species indicate the likely presence of water or where water is likely to be near to the surface and accessible via shallow hand-dug wells. Trees also provide fire starting tools and materials to treat water by boiling.
- **Cordage** – Bark is an important source of cordage material.
- **Food** – Many species of trees produce edible nuts, fruits, leaves or layers of bark. Forests, trees and transition zones along the border of forests or stands of trees provide key habitat for many animal species that are useful for survival. Trees also provide engines to power snares and traps, can channel game to traps and provide secure anchor points for traps, nets and bank lines for fishing.

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- **Medicine** – Many species of trees have medical uses.
- **Tanning** – Branches are useful for frames to stretch hides and the bark of some species is useful for bark tanning hides.
- **Tools & Weapons** – Trees provide materials for bows, arrows, spears, rodent skewers, rabbit sticks, atlatls and other important weapons.
- **Communications** – Trees are useful for some methods of short-range communications, trail signs and for blazes.
- **Navigation** – Trees can be useful in direction finding and ascertaining the direction of prevailing winds when choosing campsites.

While trees provide bountiful survival resources, they can also present certain dangers which should not be ignored. I will list dangers at the end of the article.

Ground-based Tree Shelters

Tree-based shelters can be built on the ground or up off the ground. The choice between the two is largely dictated by situation and availability.

Keep an open mind as you search for the beginnings of a suitable shelter site. I like to say that survival is a DIY proposition and all shelters are fixer-uppers to some degree. I do not recall ever having stumbled upon a truly readymade natural shelter that needed no improvements, but nature has been kind enough to save me a great deal of work on many occasions.

Fallen Trees

Opportunity from fallen trees typically comes in forms of root balls and trunks. In areas with poor, shallow topsoil, trees

often blow over.

A root ball can form walls or even a partial roof. Depending on how long ago the tree fell, roots can often be bent out of the way or broken to clear an area large enough to sleep. Build up the walls and roof as desired.

The trunks of fallen trees can serve as ridgepole, roof or wall depending on the size of the tree and terrain that it falls in.

Tree Wells

You could look in hundreds of tree wells and not find one that looks anything like the diagrams you will find in survival manuals. This is because the shape of tree wells is determined by interactions between the tree the well forms under, the terrain and the wind, snowfall and other weather-related factors.

What you are looking for is dryer ground, dryer fire starting materials, shallower snow, a barrier against the wind, some semblance of overhead protection from precipitation.

You may find one or two of the above or you may hit the lottery and find them all.

Buttresses

Species of trees with buttresses typically grow in coastal areas or rainforests and the space between two buttresses can form two or three walls and leafy branches can provide a degree of shelter from precipitation. Sometimes a windbreak on two sides is all that is needed.

Hollow Trees

Some species of trees can have large hollows among the roots, in the trunk or in large false cavities inside a circle of fused trunks in species such as the baobab tree in Africa. You

will not find hobbits or elves living inside hollow trees, but you may find that some other critter had the same idea that you did and beat you to it, so inspect hollow trees carefully before settling in.

Off the Ground

Most of the time, I sleep on the ground, but there are times when it is best to be up off the ground.

Reasons to Get off the Ground

- **Safety from Predators** – Situation dependent, trees can offer shelter from large predators or even other human beings. Be sure you know what you are dealing with though as climbing a tree limits your mobility and some predators can climb just fine. Hanging bear bags is standard practice in bear country.
- **Creepy Crawlies** – Hammocks and other suspended shelters can get you up and out of reach of snakes and venomous arthropods.
- **Swamp, Bog or Wetlands** – You do not get to choose where, the weather or time of day your transportation breaks down or crashes. This, coupled with injuries, darkness or other factors that limit mobility
- **Deep Snow, Rocky or Uneven Ground** – Forced to shelter on a steep, snowy and/or rocky mountainside trees or hammocks can provide welcome, time-saving alternatives.
- **Excessive Spiny or Poisonous Flora** – Even in the Arizona desert, I have never had trouble finding spots to sleep on the ground free of spines or plants that produce irritants, but it is possible that you could find yourself in such a situation, especially if you are



Hammock

For survival use, is generally more effective to steer clear of highly-specialized gear in favor of gear that is more modular and multipurpose. Instead of a high-end hammock, I carry gear that can serve as a hammock, but can also serve a multitude of other needs whether I am in the jungle in Brazil, a forest in the Rockies or in the desert.

Multi-purpose Hammock Gear

- **Cargo Net, General Purpose** – In addition to serving as an able hammock, the GP cargo net can secure heavy/bulky materiel to a cargo frame, create a camouflage net or ghillie cape, create shade without stopping a breeze in the desert, catch fish, birds or small game for food.
- **1" Tubular Webbing** – Tubular webbing can be used to attach carabiners, lines or other equipment to trees without damaging them. It can also be used to fashion a rappelling harness or be used in combination with a carabiner to quickly rig an improvised seatbelt on a dangerous bus or train, rig a tourniquet, a ladder or a line to pull an injured comrade behind cover. The list just goes on and on. Short on space? Use it as the strap

for your go bag.

- **Autolocking Carabiner & Mini Carabiners** – I carry an autolocking carabiner on my go bag and two smaller, climbing-rated mini-carabiners on my go-bag. The autolocking carabiners serves double duty as a self-defense tool. Think of it as brass knuckles that you can carry anywhere without looking like brass knuckles. Together with the mini-carabiners and cordage, I can hang a hammock, rig a backcountry block and tackle for heavy lifting, get down out of a third-floor window without breaking my legs and much more.
- **Para Cord** – Para Cord and survival-specific composite, kernmantle-sheathed cordage are worth the weight and space they occupy in a go bag. I tie this type of cordage in rip cord hanks for compact storage and tangle-free deployment.
- **Military Poncho/Liner Combination or Equivalent** – There are a lot of options that offer the same functionality as the poncho/liner combination and what I carry varies according to climate, environment, mission and so forth. Adaptations offer increased adaptability, modularity, insulation, sometimes superior materials and more but even the issue poncho and liner are an undeniably flexible bit of kit.
- **Insect Netting** – I have suffered some nights of just indescribable discomfort for want of netting and repellent. With malaria, zika, west Nile and other serious arthropod-borne illnesses, it does not make sense to take chances. Add in that insect netting is lightweight and multi-use and it should find its way into your bag when you have room and headed anywhere you could find yourself in the middle of a hatch.

In a primitive setting, hammocks can sometimes be constructed of sufficiently strong natural materials. They can be woven from dried banana fronds (no banana hammock jokes please) or yucca fiber or green bamboo can be cut and split to make a

hammock from natural materials.

Nest

A nest shelter is just what it sounds like. Imagine a bird's nest, only large enough for one or more humans. Lemurs and hominid apes, including humans build nests. Gorillas build different nests for day and night with nighttime nests being more elaborate.

Day nests are typically on the ground, but night nests are sometimes in trees with building in trees being more common for juveniles, females and in high stress environments.

We humans often tend to 'unlearn' or bury our survival instincts, but no matter how much we suppress them, all the basics we need to survive are still deeply imprinted in us. When I consider this, it is no surprise that we are drawn to natural settings.

Platform

A platform tree shelter is like a nest, only with a more engineered, flatter floor. Think "Robison Crusoe." Platforms can be pegged, tied or notched together. Add some walls and a roof and you have a tree house or a hunting blind.

Tree Shelter Dangers

Survival requires a certain degree of risk management. Since there are a few dangers inherent to tree shelters, they should be weighed against other dangers before making the call to invest the energy and take the risk of building a shelter in a tree.

Widow Makers

Widow makers are dead branches or tree tops. They are so called because high and heavy-enough specimens sometimes inflict fatal wounds.

Critters

Trees should be inspected thoroughly for venomous arthropods, snakes and other potential threats/opportunities. Should you be so lucky as to find a half-dozen scorpions in your potential shelter, you just found some grub. Cut off their tails, roast them and pop the 'land shrimp' in your mouth. If you find a snake, then you will have a better meal.

Falling

It may or may not seem obvious, but falling even a couple of feet and hit your head on a sharp rock and no matter how bad your survival situation was, it just got worse. If the hardware holding your hammock gives way, you could just end up bruised and embarrassed, but you could also end up with skull fracture and a traumatic brain injury, depending on how you land. So, if you are thinking about saving a couple of bucks by purchasing carabiners stamped "Not for Climbing Use!", you might want to rethink that and choose someplace else to economize.

Respiratory Dangers

Any tree that looks like it has the makings of a home for your, probably looked like a home to many animals that found it before you did. Unlike most humans, many species of animals urinate and defecate where they sleep.

This creates more of a danger than just foul smell, especially in dry climates and when bats are doing the defecating. Bat droppings are easily kicked up as dust and breathed into the lungs, where they can cause respiratory illness.

Fire

As with any debris shelter, fire is always a danger, but when you combine that with the fact that you are up a tree where your mobility is limited, and you are liable to fall, fire

becomes even more dangerous. Outside a very narrow range of circumstances, keep your fire on the ground.

Camouflage

Survivalists clearly have a thing for camouflage, so how could it possibly be a danger? Only when you are trying to be found. Debris shelters are notoriously difficult to spot since they are basically hunting blinds that blend perfectly with the environment.

If you want to be found, be sure to construct signals where they can be seen before you hole up or your chance to be found may stroll right on past.

