

## On the Wild Side

September 2009

by Deborah Greaves

### You May Want to Clip This Article

If you've traveled the Okanagan Connector, Hope-Princeton, Coquihalla and other BC highways, you've likely admired the scenery as you sped by, maybe stopped to go to the washroom or have a picnic, then driven on to your planned destination. The wild lands were next to the tidy confines of a rest stop, or far below the highway's roadbed. Unless you've walked a trail during your break from driving, you may have seen the natural landscape as a blur.

The disturbing sight of a single set of tire tracks leading across the highway and over its edge may have caught your eye during your travels; evidence of a lone vehicle that strayed off the road and into wild land.

What would happen if it were *you* whose vehicle ended up deep in the wilderness where no one could see it? These days, most people don't know much about woodcraft, but the basics can be learned quickly. A few supplies and a calm head can help anyone who gets stranded.

West Kelowna-based Selah Outdoor Explorations, operated by Laurie and Jordie Bowen, has tips for those who find themselves in the midst of such an adventure:

**First things first.** Breathe slowly and calm yourself. Don't get frightened- get thinking.

If your vehicle has air bags that have deployed, the passenger area may be filled with a cloud of powder that's hard to breathe but isn't dangerous. Check your vehicle to ensure everything is turned off.

Check for any leakage of fuel. If fuel has been spilled, move away fast – it rarely happens, but fumes could explode if you light a match. If you feel the vehicle is safe, turn off the engine, then the headlights, interior lights and anything else that drains the vehicle's battery. You may need the lights later.

In a safe place, check yourself over for wounds that might need cleansing and covering. If you don't have a first aid kit, you can use clean bandanas, towels or even a clean torn-up shirt to protect any open wounds.

Lay out all of your supplies- any plastic, blankets, rope, extra clothing, food and water you may have. If the vehicle is safe, you already have a shelter. If you have a first aid booklet or survival guide in your car, have it handy.

Now's the time to think of your next steps.

“Keep S-S-R in mind,” say the Bowens, “Safety, shelter and resources.”

If you've been forced to move from the vehicle and it's raining, pull everything into a pile in a sheltered spot and cover to keep dry. No plastic? Use branches, stump end up.

Carefully survey the terrain. If you can't use the vehicle, search for a good spot to make a shelter. It should be near a large rock or stump so that one side is protected from the wind and rain and can anchor the structure you're about to build.

Jot down the date on whatever paper you have. Sharpie pens allow writing on metal or bark as well as paper. Note the time, and estimate the daylight hours you have available. If it's safe to be near the vehicle, put a note on the driver's door to tell rescuers the date, your name, that you're nearby and need help.

Now's your chance to be a Hunter-Gatherer. Search the area for the things you're going to need: materials with which to make your shelter, and materials for not one, but two fires.

If it's getting dark rapidly and it's wet or chilly out, shelter comes first.

If you have time before dark, you have the luxury of organizing shelter and fires while you can see easily. If you're already cold and your vehicle is safe for shelter, you can keep warm inside with a simple candle. Survival candles that come in a tin with several wicks are useful. Bowen recommends one for every vehicle, and you can buy them at hunting, fishing and hiking supplies stores.

Now's the time to lay out any colourful clothing or material you have that may be spotted by searchers. Remember to weigh them down so they don't blow away. If you have reflectors or safety cones inside your vehicle, set them out so they can be seen. If there is nothing else but rocks, line up large ones in an arrow that points to your camp.

Next, you'll be making one fire for warmth and cooking- even if just to boil water- and for comfort. The other fire is completely different- its sole purpose is to communicate to the outside world. Fire Number Two is your Signal Fire.

## Your shelter

The Bowens say surveillance is important. Look for a well-drained area *away* from water and trails made by animals. It should be tucked out of the wind, and within walking distance to drinking water- which you'll boil before drinking if you can. Find an anchor point about three feet/one metre off the ground- something to which you can secure the high end of your main support pole with rocks, tied fabric, a belt or some rope. Now it's time to work.

First, you scrape clear an area just a little bigger than a sleeping bag. Now, find one long, sturdy pole to form the “spine” of your shelter, (about eight feet in length and several inches thick) and place the head end about three feet/one metre off the ground against your rock or stump with the foot end on the ground. You’re about to construct a compact shelter roughly the shape of a mummy-style sleeping bag.

Now collect numerous branches and poles about a hand-width thick and roughly three feet/ one metre long. These smaller poles will be the ‘ribs.’ Lean them on an angle from the ground to the spine, one against another, a row down each side. The more ribs your shelter has the stronger it will be. Now, forage for some flexible, slender branches that can be woven through the ribs, parallel to the ground, to hold your walls together.

Your ‘siding’ will be made of many green tree branches, ideally evergreen boughs, that will cover the ribs. Place them stump ends to the sky and green tips to the ground, so that any rain will run down the branches and drain away from your nest.

When your two-walled survival shelter is finished, you need to fill it completely with soft branches, tree needles, and straw. The high end will be the ‘door’ where you will climb in, stuff yourself inside, and then pull the outer branches over yourself. Why is it so small? [So that your nest will be adequately warmed by your own body heat.](#)

## The comfort fire

There are several ways to make a fire, but all involve several kinds of material that will burn, starting with the most delicate and flammable and working up to sturdy pieces of wood that will burn for up to several hours once heated.

The magic ingredients are matches or a lighter, pitch from tree trunks or stumps, cattail fluff, dry grasses, paper, cardboard and a collection of dry twigs.

Start with a suitable spot. If it’s raining, look for a rock or similar land feature that will shelter you and the fire. Make a small platform of criss-crossed twigs over a depression in the earth. The air flow beneath will help your fire.

Now, make a small mound of your delicate flammables, secured by a teepee or woven layer of slender twigs to keep your fluffy stuff from blowing away. Once it’s secure, light the fine tinder, and blow very gently to get the flame to spread. Have your small heaps of dry slender twigs or cardboard ready to add when the fire catches, and your thicker pieces of wood handy to add after that. You may have to create some kind of water resistant ‘umbrella’ out of a piece of wood, cardboard, metal or plastic to protect your fire from heavy rain. Once there are glowing embers, your fire is probably hot enough to burn heavy pieces of wood for several hours.

## Selah's ultimate smoke signal

Your signal fire is for daytime. Once you get this one going, you'll be impressed with yourself- and so will the people looking for you.

Find three nice straight poles and make a teepee. Find some rope or long grass, then make and attach a platform inside the teepee poles, about a foot off the ground. Now, with the best dry tinder and kindling you can find, prepare a fire on top of the platform, but do not light it yet.

Next, find a whole armload of moist, green branches, at least three feet/one metre long- ideally evergreen boughs. Stack the green branches around your teepee until it's covered in green. Get your matches or lighter, reach through the green branches, and light the fire. The hot fire will heat the green boughs and create an impressive column of dark smoke that will help draw attention to your location.

## Stuck in your car?

Don't give up. True-life tales abound about people who've driven off roads, plunged into ravines and been pinned in their cars- and lived to talk about it. One woman ate chocolates spilled from the back seat. Another licked the condensation off the windows to stay hydrated. A young man was in such good physical shape, his body managed to keep going for a week with no food or water at all.

What have you got to lose when you take a few provisions in your car whenever you take a trip? A couple of stainless steel water containers, a survival candle and some matches, a first aid kit, a sheet of plastic and a nice warm coat or blanket take just a few minutes to toss into your car. These items could help save a life- yours or someone else's- and if you get stuck at the side of the road for some reason, you'll be more comfy while you wait for help.

Happy travels.