

FREE PRINTABLE RESOURCE

FIRST-NIGHT SHELTER FIELD CARD

Stop while you still have light. Work the order: decide, site, ground, roof, signal.

1. BEFORE YOU BUILD (NPS ORDER)

- ☐ **STEP 1 — Stop, breathe, find your location**
Map, compass, GPS or visible landmarks. Retrace your steps only if it is safe to do so
- ☐ **STEP 2 — If you cannot retrace, call 911**
Give GPS coordinates if you have them, the trail or park area you started from, last known location, surroundings, clothing colors, gear, medical conditions. Then STAY PUT. Move only for an immediate threat to life
- ☐ **STEP 3 — Wait for help**
Headed for no phone or no reception, but the plan also applies while you wait after calling. This is where shelter appears. Find a place that protects you from sun, rain and snow. Inventory your gear. Keep warm. Signal. Conserve energy

2. SITE CHECK (TEN MINUTES, EVERY TIME)

- ☐ **LOOK UP, from the spot and from all four sides**
Forest Service: avoid camping where trees could fall; avoid dense patches of dead trees. Trees missing needles, bark or limbs may be defective. Conks, broken tops, basal scars, downed limbs, ants or many woodpecker holes can mean internal rot
- ☐ **OFF the low ground next to streams**
National Weather Service: never camp on low ground next to streams, a flash flood can catch you asleep. Dry streambeds can become torrents with no rain in sight. Heavy rain in hilly terrain can send debris flows through a campsite
- ☐ **OUT of the wind, not just out of the rain**
Lee side of a ridge, thick conifers, behind a rock face. Not a saddle, not a bare ridgeline, not an open lakeshore
- ☐ **Boring terrain wins**
Gently sloped so water runs past, living trees overhead, building material within a few steps

Stay out of the forest when winds are strong enough to blow trees down. If the wind gets up while you are still in timber, the Forest Service says head for a clearing out of reach of any tree that could come down. A shelter is not worth standing under a hazard tree to finish.

3. BUILD: GROUND FIRST, ROOF SECOND

- ☐ **Take a found shelter if there is one**
Rock overhang, dry hollow under a thick low conifer, root ball, deadfall against a trunk. Close the windward end, then bed it. Check what lives there and what hangs above it
- ☐ **Bed BEFORE roof if light is short**
Boughs, dry leaves, grass, ferns, bark. Thick enough that it still has loft once you lie on it. Whatever looks like enough, double it
- ☐ **Pad, blanket or empty pack goes UNDER you**
Not over you. The ground is in contact with you all night
- ☐ **Tarp / poncho / bivvy: low lean-to**
Ridgeline at waist height, low edge staked into the windward side, open side sheltered. Tall means a wind tunnel with a roof
- ☐ **No gear: debris hut, shoulder-width and no bigger**
Spine branch on a support at hip height, steep ribs both sides, fine branches crosswise, then pile debris from the bottom up. Stuff the inside until you have to burrow in
- ☐ **TEST: crawl in and look for daylight**
Light means heat leaves and rain follows. Add debris until it is dark inside, then add one more armful because it settles

4. WARMTH, FIRE, SIGNAL

- ☐ **Do not sweat while building; strip a layer, then re-layer**
CDC: hypothermia can occur even at cool temperatures above 40°F when a person is chilled by rain, sweat or cold water
- ☐ **Watch for shivering, exhaustion, confusion, fumbling hands, memory loss, slurred speech, drowsiness**
Hypothermia is itself a medical emergency: seek help as soon as possible; below 95°F confirms it. If help is not available right away: shelter, remove wet clothing, warm the core — chest, neck, head, groin
- ☐ **NO fire if fire risk is high or it is wildland fire season**
NPS states this plainly. Check restrictions before you leave. If you cannot recall them, treat it as a no
- ☐ **Lay the signal out in daylight**
Whistle three blasts, rest, three again. Light: three fast, three slow, three fast. Mirror at aircraft. Lay out your shelter or arrange rocks into a shape visible from the air. Whistle on your neck, not in the pack

Carried	Tarp or bivvy _____ Pad _____
	Cord _____
Told	Route and return time left with: _____
Sources	NPS Outdoor Emergency Plan • USFS Hazard Trees • NWS flood safety • CDC hypothermia

Full guide: tacticalbox.com/blogs/tacticalbox-blog/how-to-build-a-first-night-shelter-in-the-wild

Educational use only, not a substitute for wilderness survival or medical training. If you cannot safely retrace your route, call 911 as soon as you have any reception. Follow the current instructions of the land manager and search and rescue authorities for your area.

GEAR UP BEFORE YOU NEED IT. NEW GEAR MONTHLY.

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