

Ten Items to Tame the Wilderness

It was a cold, blustery, rain soaked evening as night started to fall across D'Alton Lake. The rest of the guys in our party were back at the cabin comfortably playing cards by a warm fire while my fishing partner, Mickey, and I were trying to squeeze the final minutes out of our last evening of fishing. It had become too dark to see our lines so we decided to call it quits and start the twenty-five minute boat ride back to the cabin. As we started to make our way down the lake I suddenly realized that I had forgotten to check our boat gas before leaving the pier for our second half of the days fishing. A shot of adrenalin raced through my veins as I reached down and picked up the nearly empty gas tank. I didn't say anything to Mickey but I was worried. I started wondering, will we make it back? What if we get stuck out here in this miserable weather for any length of time? When would the other guys come looking for us? Would they find us? Did we tell them where we were going? How would we stay warm for any length of time? Would they be able to hear our yells over the noise of their motors and find us?

Still about twenty minutes from the cabin, I remembered seeing a survival show on the Discovery Channel, where they said the best way to overcome a bad situation in the wilderness is to stay calm and think your way through each what-if. I then forced my mind to go back through my list of uncertainties. I frankly didn't think we'd make it back but as I addressed each of the remaining what-ifs, I became more assured that we'd be okay. I told myself to first cut back on the motor throttle to conserve gas. I then realized both of us had our head lamps for light and the guys would probably come looking around 11:00 PM. I remembered I always keep a lighter in my tackle box and a fire would help keep us warm until we were found. As I went down the rest of my what-if list my thoughts became even clearer. I figured we could build the fire near the shoreline so the search party could easily see it when they came looking. I also remembered telling them that we were going to fish the "honey hole" and they all know where that is. My feeling of near panic quickly was replaced by confidence, and after a twenty minute ride, we made it back without incident. Upon our return to the dock, however, I checked the gas tank one more time and it was completely empty. We must have made it back on fumes and some help from the big guy upstairs.

The point to this story is that the unexpected can arise at any time. Things will turn out in your favor most of the time, like they did for us, but if they don't, please make sure you are prepared. I've heard stories of anglers in Canada getting stuck overnight in the bush and it doesn't sound very pleasant, especially if it happens in the peak of mosquito and black fly season. Here's a list of 10 important items you should keep with you, in the boat, for convenience and safety.

- 1) **Life Jacket/PFD (personal floatation device)** - Always be sure to take a life jacket or PFD in the boat with you (it's the law) and make sure it's easily accessible at all times. Stearns and Mustang are both dependable brand names for life jackets and PFDs. Both make their products using the highest standards for safety and both brands can be found at most marine or sporting goods shops. If you prefer to shop online, Cabela's and Bass Pro offer good selections of life jackets and PFDs. The most important thing to consider when buying a life jacket or PFD is to make sure it fits properly, especially if you're buying one for a child.
- 2) **Lake Map** – Wilderness North provides excellent maps for each of their lakes. Study the map before your trip to become familiar with the lake. Ask the folks at base camp to mark the fishing hot spots for you but, just as important, also ask them to mark potential hazards such as underwater rocks or dangerous rapids. They won't be able to tell you where every hazard is but they'll be able to point out the historically bad ones. It's up to us to use our own judgment and common sense while we're on the water.
- 3) **GPS/Compass** – Also when you're on the water, make sure you're aware of your surroundings at all times and be sure to take a compass or hand-held GPS with you. Garmin and Lowrance are leading brand names in the hand-held GPS world. Garmin makes a dependable and affordable unit called the GPS 60. It retails for under \$200.00. If you don't want to spend that kind of money but you would still like a navigational aid for your trip into the bush, there are dozens of dependable compasses available for under \$50.00. Silva makes some dependable compasses and their Guide 460 is a good choice for under \$20.00. It's also a good idea to keep one eye to the sky for signs of approaching storms and, please, don't wait for the storm to hit before you seek shelter. Trust me, it ain't any fun! Before you leave the pier, look at your map and speak to a camp manager and know where there might be shelter on the lake. Shelter might be another camp or an abandoned trapper's cabin. Always have a plan just in case you can't make it back to camp and always tell someone where you're going.
- 4) **Waterproof Jacket** - Even on the warmest days in Canada a popup shower can come through and chill the air. A chilly breeze on wet skin can chill to the bone and take away the enjoyment and your time on the water. A jacket might also become critical if you run into problems that prevent you from making it back to camp before nightfall. I purchased a rain jacket from Wilderness North last spring and it's one of the best investments I've made in a long time. I don't know if they plan to stock them again next season but I hope they do. The jacket is called the Viking Tempest II and it's made by Alliance Mercantile Inc. in Vancouver, BC. The jacket itself is warm, breathable and made of a waterproof polyester outer shell with a PVC backing. It's a great value at under \$80.00 US.

- 5) **Band Aids** – It's always a good idea to have a fully stocked first aid kit at camp, especially if you're staying at a remote outpost. However, it's also a good idea to keep a few band aids in your tackle box for those unexpected encounters with Mr. ESOX. For some reason those darn cuts from northern always seem to bleed forever. Especially when they get wet.

- 6) **Side Cutters** – Speaking of the devil. If you're in the bush and a trashing pike happens to bury a hook in your hand, a good stout pair of side cutters can become your best friend. The first time it happened to me was in 1994 and I learned quickly that it's almost impossible to remove one set of Rapala hooks from a trashing northern while the other set of hooks are embedded in your hand. Thank goodness for my dad and his trusty side cutters. He first used the side cutter to cut the lure and fish free from my hand. Then we went to work on trying to remove the embedded hook from my hand. However, the hook was positioned in such a way that we were not able to snatch it out the way it went in. I had to push the hook deeper through my flesh and out my skin (Scotch anyone?). Once I got the hook pushed through, we cut the barb off, backed the hook out and continued fishing (not without a band aid, of course). Keep in mind that side cutters are not pliers. Side cutters are strictly used for cutting hard metal and do a much better job than pliers. You can find a good pair of side cutters at any hardware store for under \$20.00. Cabela's also stocks a good cutter called Advanced Anglers. They're stainless steel and retail under \$15.00.

- 7) **Insect Repellent** – This is a real convenience item especially around 9:00 PM on an early summer's evening in Canada. However, if you ever run into problems and get stuck on the water or in the woods overnight, a full can of good repellent might just save your sanity and your life. I know that sounds extreme but think about your ability to make good decisions with thousands of mosquito's, black flies and no-see-em's using your body as a smorgasbord. Most bug repellent brands are created equal. The difference is the amount of DEET the manufacturer uses. Typically, the higher percentage of DEET the more protection, but 80% DEET should be adequate for most situations in Ontario. Be sure to always check the label for allergic reaction statements and proper use with children!

- 8) **Flashlight/Head lamp** – There's something about a flashlight that has a mystique to it. It might be the fond memories of playing outside after dark as a kid, telling ghost stories or playing flashlight tag with the other kids in the neighborhood. Flashlights can be a lot of fun, especially if you have one of the newer LED headlamps with multi-color lights but, besides their mystique, it's important to keep some form of light in your boat at all times. Lights are very handy to have when you're out past dusk and need to retie or untangle your fishing line. Even if you don't plan to stay out late it's a good idea to carry a light because you never know what might happen that could delay your return to camp. A flashlight will provide security and, in the worst case, make a good tool to signal someone for assistance.

9) Lighter/Waterproof Matches – I believe this might be one of the most important items to keep in your tackle box. You never know when a lighter or waterproof match might come in handy. It may be for something as harmless as somebody forgetting to bring the camp matches to a shore lunch. However, when you've got 6 hungry men standing on a rock in the middle of nowhere and an hour's boat ride separating them from lunch, things can get real ugly, real fast. Trust me! On the more serious side, if somebody falls in the water on a cold early spring day or you have motor problems and have to wait for someone in your party to find you, dry matches or a lighter can mean the difference between real trouble and a temporary inconvenience. You can obviously buy a lighter almost anywhere and you can find waterproof matches at most army surplus stores or on-line.

10) Dry Storage Bag – Finally, to keep some of your important items safe and separated from the elements, a dry storage bag can be a wonderful item to take in the boat with you. Cameras, maps, GPS, compass, rain suit, extra clothes and even a stocking cap and gloves if it's early or late in the season can all be stored in the bag. If you do run into an unexpected situation while fishing, it's nice to know all your important gear is safe, dry and ready to be used. The brand, style and size of dry storage bag depend on your tastes and what you plan to use it for. Cabela's and Bass Pro both carry a wide variety of these bags retailing from just \$5.00 up to \$100.00. The Sea To Summit series of dry sacks offers complete waterproof protection and, depending on their storage size, only run \$8.00 to \$20.00.

I can hardly wait for next season's fly-in trip with Wilderness North and I'm sure you feel the same. However, please don't pull a bone-headed mistake like I did this fall and forget to check your gas supply before you leave the pier. In fact, let's make a promise to each other for next season, that before we get in our boats and race away from the pier to go fishing, let's STOP for a second and make sure we are prepared for the unexpected. Please keep this list in your tackle box or somewhere you won't forget about it and seriously consider packing all 10 of these important items so they are in your boat next season.

Mickey filling gas tanks before fishing





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Wilderness North

Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada

Phone toll free: 888-465-3474

www.wildernessnorth.com