



# Siwashing Principles

**T**HROUGH MY binoculars, I could see the two bull caribou move across the hillside and bed down near a clump of aspen. I watched for awhile until I was sure they'd bedded for the evening, then thought about making my stalk. It was still shy of dark by about an hour, but it would take about that long for me to move off the hillside I was on and into accurate shooting range of the caribou. Then, assuming everything went right, I'd have to field-dress the animal by flashlight. I'd done that once with a deer, and once was certainly more than enough.

I moved down the hill, through an infuriatingly thick alder patch, across the creek and up another hill toward camp. From my higher vantage point, I should have been looking down on camp, but I wasn't. I pulled my map from my pack and studied it. I found the lake and the hill above it where the caribou were bedded. I found the creek I'd crossed and found the hill above camp. What I failed to find was the hill I was on. The USGS topographic maps are wonderful things, and they're usually so detailed and accurate that they inspire complete confidence. There are a very few maps that are less than accurate, however, and most of them are of Alaska. Through eagerness to get on with my hunting, I'd forgotten to field check my map throughout the day and this was one of those rare, inaccurate maps. In the lower left-hand corner of the map it said: "Map not field checked."

I wasn't really lost. Camp was farther up the stream I'd crossed. But how much farther? The shallow angle of the sun makes Alaskan twilights last a long time, but this day's was about over. The colors on the autumn leaves were still distinguishable, but muted in the dimming light. I'd been hunting for 12 straight hours and the previous year of desk work and

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**By Warren Eastland**

inactivity was making itself all too evident. I was tired. Rather than try and make it the unknown distance to camp and risk wandering around lost in the dark, it was time to do some siwashing.

Siwash. During the Rush of '98, siwash was sometimes used as an opprobrious term for native Indians, particularly those of mixed racial heritage. Over the years, perhaps in recognition of how much they can do, siwash has changed from a degrading noun to a respectful verb — meaning to camp without benefit of sleeping bag, tent or almost any of the niceties of a modern camp. I had siwashed before and undoubtedly will again, but that doesn't mean I necessarily had to like it.

I'd passed a large spruce a few yards back, so I decided to camp there. The branches were thick and low to the ground and most of

the lower branches were dead. The lower branches would make good firewood and the size of the tree told me the permafrost level was fairly deep at that spot. Permafrost is a thick layer of soil that is frozen all year long. In most of interior Alaska, the permafrost starts only two or three feet down, but on south-facing hillsides, better drainage and more sun cause a deeper thaw. The size of spruce trees can often be a guide to permafrost depth, since the roots can grow deeper and produce bigger trees where the permafrost is farther underground.

I shed my pack beneath the tree and got out my tea billy — a one-pound coffee can with a coat-hanger wire bail. I took that and a plastic bread sack down to the creek I'd crossed earlier. I shoved the plastic bag down into the can, then filled it with water. I tied the top of the bag closed and was able to climb back to my siwash camp without spilling any of my water.

Before light faded completely, I used my Knapp saw (a handy gadget with teeth for cutting bone on one side and weed-cutting teeth on the other side) to cut down several spruce limbs. Dragged into place around the big tree, they served as windbreaks. I debated building a bed of spruce branches but decided against it. The permafrost layer was deep enough that the ground wouldn't be excessively cold and, despite the wondrous way Ruark describes a bough-bed in *The Old Man and the Boy*, I've always found them to be a prickly, sticky mess. This was certainly not minimum impact camping.

By full dark, I had a cheery little fire going and tea brewing. I'm actually a coffee-drinker, but instant coffee is disgusting and I prefer not to strain the grounds of real coffee with my moustache. The bits of spruce branch

I'd used to get the fire going had absorbed some moisture from previous rains, so I used a bit of fire-starter — a one-inch-square piece of corrugated cardboard soaked in candle wax. They're waterproof, are easy to light, burn slow and hot, and a dozen of them are unnoticeable in my pack until I need one. I had no food in my pack, it had all been eaten at lunch, too many hours ago. I did, however, have a little bag of sugar tucked in my tea bags for just such occasions as this. I usually drink both my coffee and tea straight, but sugar provides at least a little energy for thermoregulation: the body's own central heating and cooling system.

I stripped off my boots and put my sweaty socks on sticks to dry by the fire and did the same with my t-shirt. When they had dried, I cycled through the rest of the clothes I was wearing. Moisture decreases the insulating qualities of most material. A calorie is defined as the energy required to heat one gram of water from four to five degrees centigrade. In addition to reducing the insulative value of my clothes, any sweat in them would be heated by my body energy and evaporate, carrying off my body's calories with it. I was going to be cold enough without my sleeping bag, thank you, and had no desire to make things worse than they were going to be anyway. Although less of a risk to a healthy individual than many people might believe, hypothermia — the drastic lowering of the body's temperature — is still a very real danger.

After several cups of hot, sweet tea, it was time to try to sleep. I put all my clothes on including my rainpants, laced my boots loosely so they wouldn't interfere with my circulation and so my feet would stay as warm as possible. Finally, I wrapped my head in a turban made of my bandana and a game bag, because the head has lots of blood vessels close to the surface and can lose a surprising amount of heat in a very short time. It didn't rain or get too cold that night, it only dropped down to about 35 degrees or so, but I still woke up every hour or so and added wood to my fire. I certainly didn't spend a comfortable night, but I wasn't totally miserable, either.

Normally, I carry a space blanket and a large sheet of plastic in my hunting pack, but through another lapse of judgment, I'd left the space blanket in camp and had left the plastic sheeting at home. The space blanket, a full-size regular one and not the so-called "emergency" variety, is one of the few things produced by the space age that I can really appreciate. With its silvered reflective lining, it helps hold in a lot of body heat that would otherwise escape. There is an "emergency sleeping bag" on the market. It is made of the same metalized mylar® material as the "emergency" space blanket.

A healthy person will lose between a pint and a quart of water through breathing and sweating in a single night, and all that moisture will collect in the emergency bag. The lack of porosity, however, will also keep the rain out.

If you carry one of them, you'll have to make a judgment call on its use: will it keep out more water than it keeps in? With the 50 feet of parachute cord I always carry in my pack for tying antlers and meat onto the pack frame, I can easily rig a small tent from the plastic sheeting. Under its waterproof roof and wrapped in the space blanket, I can spend a dry night in all but the worst storms. The standard space blanket doesn't pass water vapor through its material either, but because I'm not encased in it, as with the emergency bag, enough moisture escapes around the edges to keep me dry.

The entire package of tea-billy, space blanket, and plastic sheet weighs less than a pound and doesn't occupy much volume in my hunting pack. When I'm hunting, the billy gets used daily, if not more often, so I keep it wrapped in a section of old pants leg to prevent the soot caked on it from contaminating everything in my pack. However, you can't use equipment you don't have with you and the

most valuable thing you have cannot be left behind: cultivate an attitude of preparedness.

Preparedness is not just making sure you've packed your siwashing gear, it is the attitude that lets you keep calm when things go wrong. The shelves at booksellers and libraries always have several books on survival skills. Read them. You may never use the more esoteric skills, such as making and using fish spears, but the knowledge gained from those books will help you make the right decisions at the right times. The first time you siwash will likely be a bit intimidating. But it will never be boring, even with repetition, and it will rarely be horrific if you're prepared.

The caribou? I did a stalk the next morning, but an unexpected wind shift carried my scent to them and they escaped. I shot a fairly nice one eight days later, though. I had to siwash, again, at the harvest site for that one. But I had my space blanket, a fresh caribou hide to sleep in, and two good friends with me to help eat fresh tenderloin. ■

