

The Great Outdoors: Our intrepid outdoorsman explores the woods under quarantine



For much of the country, March 15 marked the official beginning of quarantine. That morning, I took to the woods with two of my good friends.

I figured the three of us could manage to spend the day outside together without breaching the recommended distance of 6 feet. Our text thread from the night before indicated that they took COVID as seriously as I did.

We normally cook family style. We share ingredients and cookware, and coordinate culinary plans. This time was different. The plan was to cook our own food with our own utensils. One message read, “Bring your own whiskey flask!” Normally, we all swig from the same pint bottle.

Morning came, and we packed light — just some food, our hammocks and a few other basics. We hiked out to our spot and set up camp. The hammocks hung close enough for us to talk, but far enough away to keep a safe distance.

The afternoon rolled by as we pondered the unknown future around a small fire. We talked about the food and supplies we stocked up on, the future of our jobs and the proverbial zombie apocalypse, among other things.

We left the woods that day setting a new precedent of how we would continue these outings into the future.

One month later, a lot changed. The pandemic was in full swing and much of the world was in lockdown. We still made it out to the woods. There were six people in our group this time. More people made it harder to distance, especially on tight trails. Again, everyone took it seriously. We went single file when the trail got tight. The destination was a spot that was open enough to spread out. It was by a tiny pond where we could fish on opposite sides and still talk to each other if we yelled.

We brought our own food and took turns cooking over the fire. The personal whiskey flask became the new protocol.

A few weeks later we hit the woods again. This time there were four people in our crew. The spot was an opening on the edge of a river. The surrounding area was swampy and difficult to hike. The thick briers and lack of a trail are probably why I've never seen another person out there before.

I had some housework to do in the morning, so I planned on meeting everyone at the spot a little later. I'd been to it a few times, and figured I would remember how to get there.

I was wrong. I was lost for about an hour.

It was very humid, and I had too much clothing on. I was sweating heavily. I put my gear down for a moment to tie my sweatshirt around my waist. When I geared back up, I forgot to grab my small set of pots and pans. I realized this about 15 minutes back into my hike.

The thought of attempting to go back for the pan set overwhelmed me. I was already lost and struggling with the heat. I felt defeated and considered leaving it behind. On the other hand, it was a Christmas gift from my brother, and this was supposed to be my first time using it. I had to at least try to find it.

After about 15 minutes of stumbling through thick brush and wondering if any of it looked familiar, a metallic glare caught my eye. It was my pans! Against seemingly impossible odds, I found them. This problem was solved ... but I was still lost.

I decided to follow the river since my friends would be on the edge of it. The terrain was swampy, muddy and full of briers. There was very little solid ground to step on. It would be difficult to traverse, but at least I wouldn't be lost if I went that way.

After about 45 minutes of fumbling around, I heard the sound of laughter in the distance. I could tell by the voices that it was my friends. I tried to make my way in their direction, but was met with impassable swampland and briers. I managed to hop along roots and stumps that stuck out of the water. At one point, my friends were close, just on the other side of an impenetrable patch. I'd have to hop back the way I came and find a way around.

I finally found a passable section. I shoved my way through the remaining briers, enduring cuts and scrapes the whole way. Finally, I emerged from the brush.

I was greeted with a warm welcome from my friends. Almost instantly, the stress of the last hour or so quickly disappeared. I didn't even tell them about my mishaps getting there. I didn't have the energy to.

Our camp was already set up. Hammocks were hung, and the fire was ready to get started. I put my pack down and settled in. I pulled two ticks off of my arm, then took a big swig of whiskey — out of my own flask, of course.