

*This shelter
is one year old,
weatherproof and
very comfortable*

The author will
be presenting
bushcraft
workshops
at the IOL
Conference

The Heart of Bushcraft

Part 2: Perceptions and Time

by Dave Watson



In the Spring edition of Horizons last year (H45, 2009) I wrote about some of the key differences between Bushcraft and Survival as well as giving you some thoughts on what makes a good Bushcraft session and how versatile it is as a tool.

In this article I want to look at some of the many key hidden lessons in life that Bushcraft skills can so easily highlight if understood sufficiently well.

The overriding issue that I have had to take on board over the years of using these skills for real while travelling around the countryside is that of my perceptions of how I see things. They have been consistently challenged or changed.

On almost every course I run we start with the students looking at a section of woodland and telling me about what they see.

Well, very often the first thing is trees, followed by bracken, nettle etc. A few will focus on basic provisions like shelter material and firewood. All of course are correct. After discussing the basic needs of water, food, fire and shelter they go off to see what they can find. Following what is usually an interesting discussion about what they have found I expound a little on what I see in that particular section of wood which can often include medicines, rope materials, glue, insect repellent, basket materials as well as the more usual foods, fire and shelter material. The point I am trying to make here is that Bushcraft skills or indeed spending quality time out in wild places consistently challenges our perceptions and no matter how much we know, we need to stay fresh and allow this challenge, even welcome



it. It keeps us questioning, challenges assumptions and draws out more and more skills that we did not know were there.

I shall give you an example. A common perception is that to be in a natural shelter won't be waterproof or comfortable. Over the last 15 years I have regularly slept in a shelter, sleeping on old bracken and birch twigs and been totally dry and very comfortable indeed. When you are out for several days you need to sleep well and yet I would choose my woodland debris bed over roll mats any day. Consistently my students are surprised at just how cosy a shelter can be however this does require some know how to make them withstand the elements and of course it takes time too.

Well this brings me to one of the most important aspects of good Bushcraft. It requires TIME to understand each skill. Some of you may well be thinking hang on, Bushcraft skills are quite simple aren't they? Yes in principle they are, which is why so many of us are armchair experts at it, but for any of these skills to be really useful to us on a real wilderness trip, or indeed in order to teach, we need to know first hand how and why these skills work and that takes time. It is no different to you getting into a canoe with a paddle and saying that because you are able to move the vessel forward you can canoe.

Time is something that is being squeezed out of our lives and yet we all know it has consequences when we aren't able to find time, especially for our children or friends.

With time we can start to break through the limitations of quick answers and discover the truth behind what is being taught or written in the many books and courses available.

On my training courses especially I invite people to question and ask why I am saying what I am saying if I have not already explained.

*.....cooking trout
wrapped in leaves...
tender and juicy....*



This is critical if a student is to learn something for themselves.

When cooking trout wrapped in leaves and put on the embers I can tell you how many minutes it will take for each side and I will consistently be right, impressing even many non fish eaters with the tender and juicy morsels. It is only properly learned when you spend enough time trying and getting it over or undercooked on a few occasions and then you understand how to get it right.

You could of course just try it once, overcook it and think that is a stupid idea anyway and not worth bothering with. This takes us right back to our perceptions again doesn't it?

Try burying some small potatoes in the outside embers of your campfire and see how long it takes to cook. I usually turn them over once but whereas my early attempts left some undercooked and some charred on the outside I get most spot on these days. Children like it as it is so simple and hey no washing up! Smelling the potato as you break it open releases aromas that most of us don't even know are there in such humble and familiar foods.

It takes TIME to learn your wild plants and trees and understand which can be used for food, string etc. In nature there are no straightforward formulas. So many students want to know which mushrooms you can eat and which you can't. What they would like is a simple formula. Formulas are not found in the natural environment. There are however plenty of guidelines.

Trees with needles tend to be very resinous, fast growing trees tend to be less dense and not last as long. Even just this knowledge becomes very useful

when considering fire lighting. For those who want a simple formula for mushrooms then I give you this advice. Buy them from a shop.

For those who are prepared to make time to learn I can tell you that you will get back what

you put in. Not only will you learn the direct subject you focus on but you will also gain so much more. After focusing on friction fire you will end up learning much more about trees. When you start to look closely and enquire, more opens up. Now on a serious note, if you want to learn about mushrooms then spend some time with someone who has learned first hand over many years or go on a reputable course to give you a starter for ten.

What I am very aware of is that students take on board what they see much more than what they hear and so their perception of a given subject is going to be heavily influenced by us, therefore we need to be very open and not blag it.



I was very annoyed years ago when someone taught young people that the traditional Flint and Steel fire lighting method was very difficult indeed as he proceeded to hack away unsuccessfully with his striker. What he should have said is that it can be done quite easily if you know how but he



had not acquired this level of skill yet. Since he had an instructor who used to demonstrate it with confidence needing to strike the flint no more than twice to get an ember he had no excuse. This is criminal as so many Bushcraft skills - if taught well - are inspiring, creative and quite often magical.

One way I often describe the way I have learned many Bushcraft skills is with the analogy of an egg timer.

For me this was best illustrated when discovering how to create fire with the Hand Drill method. My perception was that it had to be exactly right in order to get an ember, this involved getting the right type of wood, the right thickness, straightness with lots of detail about technique and especially the weather conditions. As each week went by I was more aware of the need to get it so spot on.

When at last I had a few successes (with a few hiccups of course) I started to realise that I managed when the wood was a bit wider than



my last set, I succeeded on a dull day when previously only a blazing hot day would do. Over time I have found that it is unusual for me not to get an ember.

So to sum up what I am trying to say; Take some time to learn the skills you are teaching well and stay open enough to have your perceptions of what you are seeing, doing or believing challenged. Look for the guidelines don't expect formulas. ■

Author's Notes

Dave Watson LPIOL set up Woodland Survival Crafts in 1995 following 10 years in Outdoor Activity Centres mostly as a Chief Instructor.

He is very much a pioneer and was strongly involved very much in the development of two of the Centres he worked at in the 1980s and 90s. Before this he had gone through several years trying to get to grips with living off the land, which although was largely unsuccessful did lead him to discover his faith which has held him ever since. Over the years Dave has worked with a huge variety of clients including schools, families and businesses as well as individuals. His courses range from surface fun days to in-depth training and mentoring.

Photographs: all from the author and Ian Cresswell