



# How to Build a Fast Shelter in the Wilderness

Three Methods: [Building a Shelter in a Wooded Area](#) [Building a Plastic Sheeting Shelter](#) [Building a Snow or Sand Shelter](#)

If you ever find yourself lost or stranded in the wilderness, one of the essentials for safety and survival, even for a short amount of time, is a makeshift shelter. A shelter protects you from the elements: it keeps you warm in cold and snowy areas to prevent hypothermia; it shades you from extreme sun and heat to prevent dehydration and heat stroke; and it shields against wind, rain, or snow in a storm. Learn how to quickly put together a basic shelter that will protect you in the wilderness.

Method  
1

## Building a Shelter in a Wooded Area

- 1 Look for natural shelter features.** Search in your immediate wilderness area for land features that could act as shelter. These will be the fastest forms of shelter you can make.
  - Caves or rock outcroppings that hang over your head are simple natural shelters. Build a fire in the entrance to a rock dwelling, to both smoke out any critters living in it and to warm rocks in the fire that you can then put around your body for warmth while sleeping.<sup>[1]</sup>
  - Look for large fallen trees, which can offer shelter if there is space between the trunk and the ground. Prop branches against either side of the trunk like a tent for more protection. Cover the branches with leaves and brush for more warmth.
- 2 Look for two close trees for a lean-to.** Build a classic lean-to shelter by first finding two trees that are growing close together, about the height of your own body or slightly longer. Then put a long branch between the trees, or a rope if you have one.
  - Look for a tree with low “forks” where the trunk or larger boughs branch off from one another. The ideal situation is a tree that forms a “Y” shape with its trunk and branches, where you can simply rest your branch, called a “ridgepole,” into them.
  - If you cannot find two close trees, you can rest one end of the ridgepole on the ground and the other in or against a tree.
  - Lay branches at a 45° angle onto the ridgepole on one side. Then cover crosswise with more branches, brush, leaves, snow, etc. until the wall is several inches or even feet thick.<sup>[2]</sup>
- 3 Build a small a-frame or debris hut.** Find a tree with a low crook, a sturdy boulder, or a stump to create a small shelter just large enough for your body. Rest one end of a large branch onto the tree, rock, or stump, with the other end on the ground.
  - Make sure your main branch (ridgepole) is long enough that it will create a space large enough for you to lay down once it is leaned against the tree or rock.
  - Lay branches at an angle against the ridgepole on both sides. Then cover with smaller branches, leaves, and other brush, laid crosswise on the first branches so they don't fall through. The thicker the walls the better. Keep a pile of brush outside the entrance that you can use to partially cover the opening once you're inside.<sup>[3]</sup>
  - As a fast last-resort shelter, you can also create a debris hut by simply piling debris from the forest floor, then creating a hole in it that's large enough for your body. Partially cover the entrance once you're inside to create warmth.<sup>[4]</sup>

Method  
2

## Building a Plastic Sheeting Shelter

- 1 Build a tarp tent or lean-to.** Construct the base of a regular lean-to by finding two close trees and resting a long branch in between them, or tying a rope across if you have one. Then drape a tarp over the branch on one or both

sides and weight it down on the ground with rocks, logs, dirt, or snow.<sup>[5]</sup>

- If you don't have a standard tarp, you can also construct a shelter with a poncho, garbage bags, a space/emergency blanket, or other plastic sheeting available.
- If you have enough tarp material, lay the tarp over the ground inside the shelter for better protection. For an a-frame tent in this way, the tarp would form a full triangle with the ridgepole at its top point.

**2 Make a small a-frame with a tarp or blanket.** Construct a typical a-frame by propping one end of a large branch against a low crook of a tree, rock, or stump to make a shelter just large enough for your body. Then drape plastic sheeting of any kind you have over the ridgepole with equal lengths on either side, and secure to the ground with heavy objects.<sup>[6]</sup>

- Small a-frames are suited to one person for maximum warmth, so they also work well if you have a smaller poncho, garbage bags, or space blanket rather than a large tarp.
- You can also construct an a-frame with branches and brush for the walls as you would if you didn't have any other materials, then use a tarp or other plastic sheeting to cover them for extra warmth and protection.

**3 Make a tube tent out of trash bags.** Build a simple tube tent if you have at least two large trash bags. Split the bottom of one bag, and slide it partly over the open end of the other bag to make one longer tube.

- String up the tube between two trees, rocks, or other structures with a long branch or a rope if you have one.
- You can also prop the tube open with branches and brush, or simply crawl into it for sufficient protection.<sup>[7]</sup>

Method  
3

### Building a Snow or Sand Shelter

**1 Dig a shelter into the snow around a tree.** Build a tree-pit snow shelter if you are in a wilderness area with deep snow and evergreen trees, and you have a tool to dig with. Dig around the tree to the ground level to create a shelter where the branches act as a roof.

- Look for an evergreen tree that has thick, bushy branches that extend wide from the tree for the best overhead coverage.
- Dig down in a circle around the trunk, no wider than the tree's branches. Dig to a level you can comfortably sit or lay down into, or until you reach the ground.
- Pack down the snow at the top and sides of your hole to prevent any caving in. Cut or break off evergreen branches to line the bottom of the hole and provide thicker overhead coverage if needed.<sup>[8]</sup>

**2 Build a snow cave.** Mound up snow and carve out a space big enough for your body to create a small cave that will insulate you from wind and snowstorms. Make a snow pile a few feet longer than your body height and tall enough that you can dig into it without the top collapsing.

- After building a mound of snow, let it sit for several hours or pack it down so that it is solidified and will be easier to dig a cave without snow collapsing.
- Dig down and into the snow until you have a corridor long and wide enough to fit your whole body inside. Make sure all walls of the cave remain about a foot thick to prevent them from collapsing.
- Line the inside with evergreen branches for insulation and comfort. You can also close the entrance with more branches.
- For this and any other snow shelter, a shovel is best used for digging, but a cup or bowl, ski or snowshoe, or other sturdy item can be used in a pinch.<sup>[9]</sup>

**3 Dig a pit in a desert or beach.** Access cooler temperatures in the sand and protect yourself from the sun and wind by digging a trench into the sand. Cover the pit with any plastic sheeting you may have, or sand supported by driftwood or branches.

- Dig out a trench long enough for your body and as low as you can, running north to south so it gets as little sun as possible throughout the day.
- Mound up sand on three sides of the trench to make a deeper pit. Then lay a tarp or other plastic sheeting over the mounds and weigh down with sand, or lay down driftwood, branches, or another flat material to support

sand for a roof.

- Make sure you build your sand pit well above the water line or high tide mark if you're on a beach.<sup>[10]</sup>

## Tips

- The smaller the shelter, the warmer it will be, as there is less air to warm with your body heat.
- In any shelter, use extra branches, leaves, and brush to create a “bed” for resting or sleeping. This creates more insulation against the outside cold/heat, as well as more comfort.
- Make your shelter visible if you want to be seen by potential rescuers by attaching any bright-colored items you might have to the outside of your shelter.

## Warnings

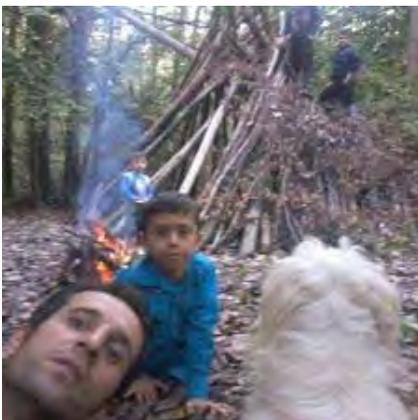
- Survival shelters are used for dangerous emergency situations in the wilderness. While you may choose to build a rough shelter recreationally, you should never plan to rely on one. Always bring maps, adequate clothing and water, and all other materials necessary to navigate wilderness in any weather, and prevent a situation for which you'd need to build a shelter quickly for survival.
- Use sturdy branches that are not wet or rotting when constructing wooded shelters.
- Be aware of potential dangers in the area you plan to build a shelter. Don't build in an area prone to a rockslide or avalanche, or under trees with dead or loose branches.

## Sources and Citations

1. <http://www.practicalsurvivor.com/shelter>
2. <http://www.fieldandstream.com/photos/gallery/survival/shelter/2006/10/seven-primitive-survival-shelters-could-save-your-life/?image=2>
3. <http://www.wilderness-survival.net/shelters-2.php>

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