

# Primitive Shelter Skills

ALIDA MELSE: All right, hello there. My name is Alida.

ELIZABETH (LIZ) WELLS: And I'm Liz.

ALIDA MELSE: And we're from the Outdoor Recreation Center here at Washington State University. Right now we're standing behind that ORC and we're going to be talking today about primitive shelters. So the first thing you want to think about when you might need a primitive shelter is if you're lost in the woods, you're out in the woods, and all you have to help keep you warm and dry is the woods themselves-- so the first thing you're going to want to think about is the placement of your shelter.

So you're going to need a fairly low horizontal something. In this case, we found this nice horizontal branch. It could also be a dead tree that's fallen over and is creating a nice horizontal for you. But whatever you choose, one of the first things you're going to want to do is look above it. If there's like a big dead branch hanging above your shelter, you definitely don't want to build it there. So just find a nice location that has that nice horizontal branch and then you can get started. Yeah.

ELIZABETH (LIZ) WELLS: So some appropriate weather-- there's different kinds of shelters. And so this particular shelter is a lean-to shelter. And it's good for rainy and windy weather, but it's mostly coming from one side. And in another shelter that we'll get to later which is an A-frame. That one is meant to protect you more from both sides.

ALIDA MELSE: Thanks. So let's talk a little bit about the materials you might have. So if you are lost in the woods you're not going to want to walk very far. You don't want to expend any extra energy. So you're going to use the materials that you have on hand and relatively close by. So, for this shelter, we found a whole bunch of sticks-- something like this-- of varying lengths. We have definitely had to have some longer ones and we also had some sort of insulative material. So in this case we had some of this grass that we found or tumbleweeds-- we definitely live in eastern Washington-- and then also some of the branches of these pine trees and various grasses that we could find. And all of these were gathered very, very close to here. So we didn't have to walk very far to get them.

ELIZABETH (LIZ) WELLS: All right, so for at lean-to shelter, construction is going to start with, what Alida mentioned, a horizontal branch or a fallen tree. In this case, it is a branch. And you're going to take some fairly long, thick pieces of wood and you're going to just lean them horizontally. Or, yeah, lean them on the tree branch and then you're going to fill the spaces in with smaller branches. And then on top of that when you have a pretty good coverage of sticks you're going to throw tumbleweeds and branches and whatever you can find around you and that covers the smaller holes and really makes it more weather-ready.

ALIDA MELSE: So one of these shelters won't necessarily keep you completely dry, but if it rains it will definitely slow down that process and will keep you a lot drier. So let's talk a little bit about what you're going to do if you actually have to spend the night in one of these. So we've constructed some sort of a bed-type here and the main point of the bed is to keep you off the ground. If you're laying directly on the ground, all of your heat is just going to go directly into the ground and you're going to be really cold. So what we've done here is we found a whole bunch of dry grasses. The keyword there is dry. And we've made a nice bed. It's something that is a couple of inches high, raises you off the ground, and that would be something that would be relatively comfortable to sleep on.

Alternatively, if you don't have a huge field of dry grass that you can get materials from, you can also use sticks, preferably not too pokey of sticks, and make like a raised platform-- just a line of sticks that you can lay on. And then on top of that you would put some needled branches or some grass, if you could find it, just to make it a little bit softer and my comfortable. So I don't know if you want to get a shot of the bed we made. You can see it? Cool. Are there any questions so far, Andrea? I guess--

ELIZABETH (LIZ) WELLS: Yeah, so, like I said-- so this is a lean-to shelter and another easy shelter to build is an A-frame shelter, which is sometimes called a double lean-to shelter, which is basically-- so as you can see here, the branches are slanted across and leaning against the tree like this. And just to build an A-frame, you would just take sticks and lean them across the other side as well. And this would make a triangle-looking shelter. And to build the other side, you do the same thing. You start with a couple of big, taller sticks, and then fill in with smaller ones, and then go ahead and throw dried grass, branches-- or smaller branches and tumbleweeds-- the smaller things that you can find around just on top.

ALIDA MELSE: So if it's really cold, you might want to think about building a fire. So you can probably imagine that putting your fire inside the shelter might not be the best idea when you're living inside a little house that's made of dry wood on top of dry grass. So if you do choose to build a fire, you'll definitely want to do it outside. So, in this case, I'm going to put it right here. It's a little bit to my left of this branch so you don't get too many sparks up there. But it's still close enough to you that you'll be able to get some of the heat from it. And Liz is going to talk about a way to really make the most out of your fire.

ELIZABETH (LIZ) WELLS: Yeah, so one way you can really maximize the heat that you're getting from your fire is by doing a fire shield, which is basically you can use what you have-- your pack or something. So, like Alida said, if your fire is here, you want to put the shield or object on the opposite side of you. So you don't want to put it between you and the fire because that's going to block the heat and it's going to reflect it the other way. But if you put it on the opposite side of your fire, whenever it hits this object the heat is going to-- some heat from this side is going to flow back that way so you'll get-- you'll maximize the heat that you can get from your fire and keep the warmest. Yeah.

ALIDA MELSE: And, again, if you have any questions, just feel free to type them in as we're talking. We'll address them in the video.

ELIZABETH (LIZ) WELLS: Yeah.

ALIDA MELSE: Ready to move on to tarp shelters.

ELIZABETH (LIZ) WELLS: Yeah.

ALIDA MELSE: Sweet. So we're just going to go right over here. So a lot of the times you won't want to spend the hour-- however long-- however long it takes to build this lean-to. And instead a much better-- and also a lot nicer for the environment-- type of shelter would be a tarp, that where you're not tearing up the forest to gather materials. It's going to actually be waterproof instead of mostly waterproof. And they're pretty quick to build.

ELIZABETH (LIZ) WELLS: Yeah.

ALIDA MELSE: So let me go grab some of our materials. So we've got right here our trekking poles. We're going to use this to give the tarp the structure. If you have trees, you can definitely use that. That might be a lot easier. And, alternatively, you can use trekking poles, which we're going to show you right here and that way you can build a tarp shelter with nothing.

ELIZABETH (LIZ) WELLS: And you can--

ALIDA MELSE: Yeah.

ELIZABETH (LIZ) WELLS: --build it anywhere too.

ALIDA MELSE: Definitely. So we're just going to go ahead and build this for you. Talk through how we're-- what are process is.

ELIZABETH (LIZ) WELLS: Uh-huh.

ALIDA MELSE: Let's see. Here you go. So one of the first things you're going to want to consider is what is the wind is doing. The tarp is going to have the A-frame shape and you don't want the wind blowing right through your tarp. So you can either make it so that the wind is coming to the side or, alternatively, you can make it so that one side is up and then the other side is completely on the ground and then the wind will go right over you and your tarp shelter. So we'll just assume for now--

ELIZABETH (LIZ) WELLS: That we have no wind.

ALIDA MELSE: Which we don't. OK. And this tarp is nice because it already has some of the chord attached to the side. There we go. Maybe? OK. So your first step is going to be to lay out

the tarp where you want to build it. Cool. So I'm going to go ahead and start securing some of the corners. These are just regular tent stakes.

ELIZABETH (LIZ) WELLS: Yeah.

ALIDA MELSE: If you don't have tent stakes, you could definitely tie it around a rock or on a tree.

ELIZABETH (LIZ) WELLS: Mm-hmm.

ALIDA MELSE: But stakes are pretty easy for just building your tarp anywhere.

ELIZABETH (LIZ) WELLS: Yeah.

ALIDA MELSE: I'll just put that into the ground right here.

ELIZABETH (LIZ) WELLS: And we're using a couple of different knots when building tarps. And one of the easiest ones are slip knots. And it's easy to-- you can put it on a rock. You can use it to stake things in. And they come undone really easily. So if you need to break camp quickly or anything like that, they're super useful. Yeah.

ALIDA MELSE: All right. And as I set up the top part of this shelter, I'm going to use something called a clove hitch. Essentially, it's, again, a knot that's really easily adjustable. If you have some time, I'd suggest going onto YouTube. YouTube can probably explain it a lot better than I can. But I'm just going to tie a quick clove hitch around the top of my trekking pole. Yeah, I think we have a question.

ANDREA: Going back to the topic of fire, do you suggest bringing a flint or matches, or just using what you have in the area, or both?

ALIDA MELSE: I would definitely bring something. I always keep a lighter with me when I go in the back country. You definitely could go the flint and steel route if you'd like to. But I would suggest just always bringing a lighter and matches.

ELIZABETH (LIZ) WELLS: Yeah.

ALIDA MELSE: Yeah.

ELIZABETH (LIZ) WELLS: It's way safer.

ALIDA MELSE: Definitely. And you can get water proof or storm proof matches, too. Cool. So as you build the tarp, we're essentially going to stake down all of our corners, and then we're going to go on a gigantic adjustment marathon to make sure that everything is nice and taut. So again, I'm using a clove hitch here. And staking this one down.

So if some of you watching have ever set up a tent and needed to stake it out, a nice little nifty trick for making sure that your stakes really stay into the ground is to put them in an angle pointing towards your shelter. That way, when the string is pulling on it, instead of just pulling right there, where it could pull it right out of the ground, it will pull against the ground. And it'll be a lot more sturdy.

So go ahead and stake this corner out. [? Sweet! ?]. So you can see right here, for the trekking poll, I made a little guideline that will help this stay upright. If I didn't have it, it would probably still work, but this is definitely just going to keep everything more stable, especially if it gets windy.

ELIZABETH (LIZ) WELLS: Trekking polls are super versatile. You can use them either way. So Alida turned hers upside down and has the handle on the ground. I have mine handle up with the point in the ground like a stake. It works either way.

ALIDA MELSE: Definitely. And really up to you how close you want the trekking pole to be to the actual tarp shelter. In this case, I had it out a little bit. And that way, the tarp shelter will actually start a little bit below the length of the trekking poll. Alternatively, I could make it closer. And that way, especially if I wanted to make this really tall, I could utilize the entire length of the trekking poll. So this is our tarp shelter. At this point, if something wasn't taut, we could definitely move the stakes around. I would sleep in this.

ELIZABETH (LIZ) WELLS: Yeah.

ALIDA MELSE: Yeah. Are there any more questions about tarp shelters?

ELIZABETH (LIZ) WELLS: Same thing with a tarp shelter for weather you would use it for. So one that's a little bit lower to the ground like this is where the corners, or the edges, are pretty much touching the ground. This would be for really heavy rain or wind. But you can definitely-- these tarp shelters can also be used for if it's super sunny. You can store all your stuff in here. Give it a little shade. So they're also versatile in that way. You can kind of change them to what you need them for.

ANDREA: We have a question. Would you suggest creating another bed cushion for this type of shelter as well?

ALIDA MELSE: Yeah.

ELIZABETH (LIZ) WELLS: Yeah.

ALIDA MELSE: Definitely. If you're going backpacking, then you'll probably bring some sort of Therm-a-Rest. But if you just want to be more comfortable, then you could definitely do that.

ELIZABETH (LIZ) WELLS: Yeah.

ALIDA MELSE: Yeah. Oh, one thing that I realized I forgot to mention is that, when you are choosing a location for your tarp shelter, part of what applies is what I already described. You don't want to be next to any trees that look like they might fall over. But you also want to make sure you're on a relatively flat area.

Here, it's a little bit sloped, but that's just because this is where the camera was. So you want something that's relatively flat, and ideally not in a divot. That's a good way to wake up in a puddle. But yeah. Cool. If we don't have any other questions-- we'll give you another 10 seconds if you have any more that you want to type it. Cool. All right. Well, thank you for tuning in.

ELIZABETH (LIZ) WELLS: Yeah, thank you.

ALIDA MELSE: Again, I'm Alida.

ELIZABETH (LIZ) WELLS: And I'm Liz.

ALIDA MELSE: And this is at the Washington State Outdoor Recreation Center.

[MUSIC PLAYING]