THE THINGS YOU CARRY CAN KEEP YOU ALIVE. HERE ARE THREE SURVIVAL KITS PERFECT FOR OUTDOORSMEN, PLUS A STEP-BY-STEP PLAN TO BUILD YOUR OWN by John D. McCann

Your life is on the line. Would you rather trust a storebought survival kit, one in which the components were selected to apply to the greatest number of people while maintaining an affordable price, or a custom collection of equipment that you selected, tested, and assembled yourself? I know what I’d rather have.

In the survival courses I teach, I always recommend that students build their own kits. By doing so, you can ensure that quality and utility are the biggest priorities for individual components. You also get to tailor it to your specific activities and locations. And when you pick your own survival tools, the items become familiar before you need to rely on them in an emergency.

Don’t be overwhelmed by the amount of survival gear out there. The following three kits of mine will give you a good idea of what to carry, and the worksheet at the end of the story will teach you three easy steps to building your own.
The Pocket Kit

FITTING INSIDE AN ALTOIDS TIN, THIS KIT IS EASY TO KEEP ON HAND AT ALL TIMES

This is ideal for anyone who wants to have the essential survival gear along each time they head into the field. Everything fits in the Almonds tin. It fulfills all the component groups (see “Make Your Own,” page 77) except for shelter and protection, but add a survival blanket to your pocket and you’ll be covered.

Fire and Light
Mini-Match magnesium fire starter (8) with steel striker (9). One side is magnesium and the other is flint. You scrape shavings off the former and then light them with a spark from the latter. Waterproof windproof matches (4) with a striker (3), placed in a mini zip-seal bag, then rolled and taped.

Water and Food
Water bag (7). A Reynolds Oven Bag does the trick, cut down to fit in the tin, with a 1-quart marking as a guide for using iodine tablets. 20 Potable Aqua water purification tablets (26), repackaged in a mini glass vial. 50 feet of braided fishing line (27) wound on a round sewing-machine bobbin.

Fishing tackle kit (13) in a plastic tube. Inside are assorted hooks (14), swivels (15), and split shot (16). 10 feet of 24-gauge snare wire (2).

Navigation
20mm AA liquid-filled button compass (21). It’s the best-quality instrument that will fit in the tin.

Knives and Tools
Commando Wire Saw (5), a small survival cable saw. 2 X-Acto knife blades (20), without the handle. You should always have a real knife on your person; these blades are for backup.

Signaling
Custom-made signal mirror (29). Commercial versions are all too thick to fit in this kit. I used a durable, ultra-thin piece of plastic called mica (rocksmiths slide this between a door and jamb to push the lock back). I glued on a piece of Mylar film, rounded the corners, and made a sighting hole.

Medical
Small packet of antibiotic ointment (23). 2 butterfly closures (11).

Multipurpose
Several yards of nylon string (10). 2 magnetized sewing needles (18) for sewing or making an emergency compass (float on water in a leaf, the needle will face north). Small piece of glue (28), cut off a glue-gun stick.

Small laminated card (10) for the water purification tablets and fishing knots. Fresnel magnifier (24). This lens can start a fire by magnifying the sun’s rays to a point on your tinder, causing combustion. Safety pin (19), for repairing clothes and straps. 2 feet of aluminum foil (25) for making a cup, signaling, cooking fish, etc.
The Day Hunter

This kit, designed to ride on your belt, is ideal for most deer hunting trips.

This holds more and larger components than the pocket kit, and you can carry it on your belt. The pouch (1) is 6 x 4 x 2 inches, with a zipped compartment inside and another on the flap. And many of the small items are packed in a tin (14), which is bigger than the Altoids tin used in the Pocket Kit, measuring 4 3/4 x 3/4 x 1 1/8 inches.

Fire and Light

Water and Food
24 Potable Aqua water purification tablets (20), repackaged in a small glass vial. 24 P.A. Plus tablets (21) to neutralize the iodine taste from the above, repackaged in a glass vial. Small water bag (31) as in the pocket kit but not cut down. 50 feet of 20-pound braided fishing line (15). Fishing tackle kit (2) in a tube containing 12 assorted hooks, 6 swivels, 6 split shot, and a small jig or lure. 20 feet of 24-gauge snare wire (5).

Signaling
StarFlash signal mirror (17) by Survival Inc. It floats and is enclosed in an unbreakable Lexan polycarbonate.

Navigation
Liquid-filled, fixed-dial compass (24) by Brunton.

Knives and Tools
Partially serrated Spyderco folding wallet knife (16) (chosen for size and shape of kit). Survival cable saw* (23), 2 X-Acto knife blades* (9).

Medical
Small packet of antibiotic ointment (13), 2 butterfly closures (6).

Multipurpose
Thread (19) for making repairs on clothing. 2 magnetized sewing needles* (29), Fresnel magnifier* (22), Tick tweezers (27), Small golf pencil (18), 3 sheets waterproof paper (32) (for leaving notes). Laminated instructions (10) for water purification tablets and fishing knots, 6 safety pins (8), 2 feet of heavy-duty aluminum foil* (26).

* SEE EARLIER KIT FOR DESCRIPTION
The Wilderness Hunter

This fanny pack could save your life on extended hunts in remote country.

A medium fanny pack carries larger components and includes all the basic groups. It also lets you carry 32 ounces of water. I picked this particular model because it holds a bottle on each end, which helps balance the weight. I packaged some components together so little things don’t find their way to the bottom of the bag. Several of the small items are shown in the bin.

Fire and Light
Princeton Tec Attitude flashlight (8) with 3 ultrabright LEDs. 25 waterproof/windproof matches (11) in a waterproof vial. Don’ magnesium fire starter (6) (it’s much larger than the one described in the previous kits but easier to use). Pink Lady candle (9) (sold at most camping stores). Waterproof match case (10) filled with cotton balls (not shown) soaked with petroleum jelly for use as tinder. They light with one spark. 2 small green Cyalume light sticks (7).

Shelter and Personal Protection
Heavy-duty all-weather space blanket (12). With grommets around the outside, it can be used as an emergency tarp. Emergency poncho (19). Lip balm (26). Pack of antibacterial wipes (24). 40-foot hank of parachute (a.k.a. 550 cord) (14). This has the greatest utility for survival purposes. Just 1/8 inch in diameter, it is a nylon shroud with seven inner nylon lines. These strong lines can be separated and used for building shelter, for making nets and snares, as fishing line, etc. Forty feet provides you with 280 feet of the inner lines plus the shroud. Waterproof pouch with 1 extra pair of socks and 1 extra pair of underwear (27).

Water and Food

Signaling
StarFlash signal mirror (15). Skyblazer signal whistle (16).

Navigation
Suunto Woodsman A-30-L orienteering compass (17) (this type of compass is for navigating with a map).

Knives and Tools
SOG SEAL Revolver knife (32). It has a large clip-point blade on one end and a saw on the other. This is not a folder but a fixed-blade knife in which the handle covers the end not being used. U-Dig-It folding trowel (4).

Medical
Small medical kit (26). I started with a 7x4-inch first-aid pouch from EMS and organized the contents in zip-seal bags, putting bandages and wound-management items in one packet, medicine in another.

Multipurpose
Various sizes of zip-seal bags (30). 2 garbage bags (31). Fresnel magnifier (131). Bandanna (22), which can be used to prefiltor water, as a pot holder, or even as a bandanna. Several feet of heavy-duty aluminum foil (28). 1 travel roll of toilet paper (25). Magnetized sewing needles (18). Several safety pins (29).
HOW-TO

Make Your Own
THREE STEPS TO A LIFE-SAVING KIT

THINK ABOUT SKILLS
Focus not on the components but on the tasks you'll want them to perform. In a survival situation, you'll need to do most of the following: build a fire, construct a shelter, get and purify drinking water, gather food, signal for help, navigate back to civilization, and administer basic first aid. Once you know what types of functions you must be prepared to carry out, you can select the proper items.

PICK YOUR TOOLS
Choose at least one component from each of the groups below. Some items can meet the requirements of more than one. Fine-tune your selection to match your location or the season, and remember that you may want more than one item from certain categories. For example, I always bring at least three ways to start a fire.

FIRE AND LIGHT
For the former: matches, disposable lighter, flint and striker, magnesium fire starter, tinder, candle, and a magnifying lens. For the latter: flashlight, headlamp, and chemical light sticks.

SHELTER AND PERSONAL PROTECTION
Survival blanket, poncho and rain gear, tarp, tube tent, parachute cord, headnet, hat, extra clothes, sunglasses, sunscreen, lip balm, and bug repellent.

WATER AND FOOD
Basic needs are water purification tablets or a filter, and a water container. Add snare wire and fishing kits for food collection, plus emergency rations, a small cup or pot, and a small stove.

SIGNALING
Signal mirror, whistle, smoke signals, flares, dye markers, and emergency strobe.

NAVIGATION
Compass, maps, and GPS unit.

KNIVES AND TOOLS
Knives, saw, trowel, and shovel.

MEDICAL
First-aid supplies for wound management, like bandages and first-aid ointment. Plus antibiotics, pain medicine, and personal medications.

MULTIPURPOSE
Aluminum foil, wire, duct tape, large garbage bags, bandanna, surgical tubing, zip-seal bags, dental floss, sewing thread and needles, glue stick, and safety pins can all fill more than one function. Miscellaneous items include a survival manual, knife sharpener, thermometer, pencil and paper, toilet paper, and a cellphone.

BUILD YOUR KIT
Determine what size kit you want to carry, then decide on what you'll pack everything into. This can be a tin, a waterproof container, or a soft case such as a belt pouch, waist pack, or backpack. For mini kits, I usually prefer a tin, like the kind that Altoids come in; since you don't have room for a cup, you can use it to boil water. To make a mini kit, select the smallest components from each group. Be innovative when choosing items. Repackage them compactly if necessary, and whenever possible, select things that can perform more than one function.

WARNING: KIT CANNOT SAVE YOUR LIFE IF IT'S BACK AT CAMP, SO KEEP IT WITH YOU AT ALL TIMES.

RESOURCES

For more survival equipment, including larger kits for use on expeditions or with offroad vehicles, check out the author's book, Build the Perfect Survival Kit ($13; 888-457-2873; krause.com).

You can buy most of the items featured in this article from sporting-goods stores, hardware stores, Army surplus stores, and the following sources:

Adventure Medical Kits, 800-324-3517; adventuremedicalkits.com

Brunton, 307-896-6559; brunton.com

Campmor, 888-226-7667; www.campmor.com

Eastern Mountain Sports, 888-463-6367; ems.com

Nalgene Outdoor Products, 800-625-4327; www.nalgene-outdoor.com

Snow Peak USA, 503-697-3330; www.snowpeak.com

SOG Specialty Knives and Tools, 425-771-6230; sogknives.com

Survival Resources, 845-471-2434; www.bepreparedtouse.com

Suunto USA, 800-543-9124; suuntousa.com

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