

VIPUL NEGI

# WILDERNESS IS US

HIKING, THRIVING AND LEARNING  
IN THE GREAT OUTDOORS

An initiative of the Indian Council for Outdoor Safety

All Rights Reserved.

Except for brief passages quoted in newspapers, magazines, radio, television, or online reviews, no portion of this book may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or information storage or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner/author.

Copyright © 2020 Vipul Negi

Every reasonable effort has been made to contact copyright holders of material reproduced in this book. If any such holders have inadvertently been overlooked, the publishers would be glad to hear from them and make good in future editions any errors or omissions brought to their attention.

You are most welcome to email [info@icos.org.in](mailto:info@icos.org.in) any input, correction or addition you wish to bring to the notice of the author.

**‘WILDERNESS IS US: Hiking, Thriving and Learning in the Great Outdoors’** books are available at a special discount when purchased in bulk for sales promotion, fundraising or educational use.

In association with the Indian Council for Outdoor Safety,  
an initiative of the Accreditation & Standard Foundation.

Published in India by:

**The Browser**

(an imprint of J.G.S. Enterprises Pvt. Ltd.)

SCO 14-15, Sector 8-C, Chandigarh 160 009

Email: [service@thebrowser.org](mailto:service@thebrowser.org)

ISBN 978-93-88150-07-1

Printed in India

THE  BROWSER

# CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

INTRODUCTION

## **PART I—WILDERNESS LEARNINGS** **Leadership, Ethics and Resilience**

- Two Impeccable Life Skills—9
- Foundational Traits—14
- Enhancement Traits—23
- Counter-Intuitive Traits—30
- Philosophical Traits—34

## **PART II—READING NATURE** **Signs, Clues and Observations**

- Nature's Wonders—43
  - Flora—47
  - Fauna—58
  - Rainbows—65
- Patterns in Snow and Sand—69
  - Weather Phenomena—73
- Stars, Sun and the Moon—88

**PART III—WILDERNESS MEDICINE**  
**First Aid, Emergency Care and Procedures**

First-Aid and Medical Safety—103  
Fractures and Dislocations—112  
    Athletic Injuries—117  
Skin and Soft Tissue Injuries—122  
    Burns—128  
    Cold Injuries—134  
    Heat-Related Injuries—140  
    Altitude Illness—145  
    Toxins, Stings and Bites—148  
Water Disinfection and Hygiene—155  
    Allergies and Anaphylaxis—160  
Common Non-Urgent Medical Problems—163  
Other First-Aid Cases in the Wilderness—171

**PART IV—WILDERNESS TRAVEL**  
**Techniques, Principles and Knowledge**

From Planning to Packing—179  
    Clothing Stratified—185  
    Footwear for Camping—191  
    Backpacks—195  
Pioneering: The Art of Knots—202  
    Map Reading and Terrain—207  
    Hiking Rules & Technique—222  
    Setting up a Camp—231

## **PART V—EPILOGUE**

Wilderness Ethics—249

## **PART VI—APPENDICES**

The Physics of Lightning—255

Storm Distance and the 30/30 Rule—257

The Physics of Fronts—258

Puddles as Our Navigational Teacher—260

Core Temperature—262

Current—263

Leave No Trace—264

Stinging Nettle and Fiddleheads—265

Medical Supplies and First-Aid Kits—266

Trees: The Four-Season Resource—273

## Acknowledgement

There is something irresistible about the power of nature in its raw, pristine form which draws us towards it, and our first wilderness experience is unforgettable because it evokes new feelings in us. Not only do we reconnect with our inner selves, but we also impose fresh challenges on our physical and mental faculties, immerse in the beauty of nature, and come back feeling transformed for the better.

Nature is enthralling, bountiful and nurturing; but it is also an unforgiving teacher. There is an important caveat for a first-timer—go with preparation and knowledge, and that caveat is the *raison d'être* of this book.

As a wilderness and risk-management expert, I have spent over two decades in the operation and supervision of outdoor activities. Sharing great life experiences with my students while hiking on uncharted trails and backpacking in the wilderness, I have come to develop a deep love, understanding and respect for nature and everything it stands for. And I have realised that, as humans, we have much to learn from her.

We understand that when our children learn to ride a bicycle, they must suffer the occasional fall. We can't enjoy the sweetness of hard labour until we have failed a couple of times. I believe the fantastic part of any hike is neither the bottom nor the summit; it is what lies between these points. The sweat, cramps, breathlessness, self-reflection, teamwork, lending a helping hand to others and believing in yourself are the things that make the summit worth enjoying.

Fortitude, resilience, courage and discipline are everyday qualities that our children must acquire, much as they learn to walk. So when nature herself offers the best tutorial and an opportunity to learn essential life-skills, why ignore it? This belief led me to dedicate the years of my life to researching and honing my understanding of the wilderness, and this book is a culmination of that

effort. My students are my inspiration, and I cannot thank them enough.

As a profession, imparting and learning wilderness skills remains as yet nascent in India. Little has come from its practitioners in terms of the design of curriculum, techniques and new research. Instead, it is the amateur enthusiasts who have contributed a lot more by refining existing methods, developing new ones, and sharing them with the rest of us. I have always encouraged my students to maintain a journal on their field trips, howsoever rudimentary. Their little notes and observations scribbled hurriedly, in the field, on paper, often soiled with dirt or stained with food, have added to my knowledge and contributed to this book. To all of you who help the rest of us learn and advance, I thank you.

I also thank my fellow field-instructors, my back-office associates and my former students who have supported me as interns in these camps. Without you, my efforts would fall short.

Most of all, I thank nature itself for being a constant source of awe and inspiration. It is to her that we owe our very existence, a debt which we can only repay by preserving the wilderness through our knowledge, awareness and mindful actions. The epilogue dwells on our moment of truth vis-a-vis nature.

Vipul Negi  
July 2020

## Introduction—Wilderness is Us

I ardently believe, say and advocate that if there is anything which teaches us what life is all about, it is the wilderness—big, boundless and majestic. It offers joy, challenges and invaluable survival skills. And all it asks by way of admission is the willingness to strap on a backpack and step out on a trail with a never-give-in attitude. Welcome to nature's school of life and learning, aka The Great Outdoors.

Our stories of trysts with wilderness and nature are sometimes full of fun and adventure, sometimes dark and sinister, and many a time spiritual and uplifting. All emerge from a deep connection that our forbears had with nature, which the march of modern civilisation has steadily eroded. Even as early as in 1862, American poet and philosopher, Henry David Thoreau lamented that:

*“A town is saved, not more by the righteous men in it than by the woods and swamps that surround it. A township where one primitive forest waves above while another primitive forest rots below—such a town is fitted to raise not only corn and potatoes, but poets and philosophers for the coming ages. In such a soil grew Homer and Confucius and the rest, and out of such a wilderness comes the reformer eating locusts and wild honey.”*

We, humans, have colonised planet earth with a strong sense of false entitlement. Stripping it bare in large patches to grow crops and build our cities, we have, in the process, lost contact with the nurturing life-giver that is nature. Even a lion cub in the African



Savannah is not born a hunter. It must learn from its mother over the years the art of catching its prey and surviving predators. Human children are no different, and although it is a cliché that nature has much to teach us, how do we learn what she has to teach? Well, we have already answered that bit—join the school of wilderness, by losing yourself in it, you will find yourself, and life will never be the same again.

So what exactly constitutes wilderness? Is it the Amazonian jungle, a wooded hillside, a patch of grass or something else? How about a snow peak, a desert or a beach? Can it even be in a town or city?

Dictionaries define wilderness as an uncultivated or uninhabited region, or inhospitable terrain, or even a wasteland. The simplest way to put it, however, is that wilderness comprises parts of the earth where nature reigns over humans instead of the other way round. In this age of the Anthropocene, that's less than a fourth of the world's area. Many such spaces are ceded voluntarily and protected, as in the case of biodiversity hotspots, reserves and national parks. Nonetheless, there is a continuing, and catastrophic decline in the extent of wilderness that has severe bearings on our future on earth. Open spaces across towns and cities are continually caving-in to the march of iron and concrete. But all this can be the subject of another book. Our purpose here is to goad you into stepping out there, wood or grassland, jungle or desert, knowing that by the time you return, you will be ready to cast a vote for conservation. To love nature, we must experience it first-hand.

I spent my early childhood days in the Doon valley with my classmates. Our daily walk of about six kilometres to and from our school would meander through the heavily-wooded military cantonment. Shuffling at our own pace without an adult in sight, we explored and played in that patch of wilderness that was ours. I do not doubt that my ability to lead from the front originated from these sojourns in the woods.

Ruskin Bond, my compatriot from the valley, whose close bond with nature (pun unintended) is suffused in his writings, such

as *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra* and *A Book of Simple Living: Brief Notes from the Hills* puts it elegantly:

*“Tiring of walking in straight lines, I took to going off at tangents—taking sudden unfamiliar turnings, wandering down narrow alleyways, following cart tracks or paths through fields instead of the main roads, and in general making the walk as long and leisurely as possible.”*

Now, even after so many years of learning in the great outdoors—walking with students on wilderness trails as their mentor, crossing streams, hiking, diving into forests and camping under the stars—I still feel the surge of adrenalin and the joy it brings. But this book is not about me.

The rewards of nature are yours to seek, if you choose to venture out, prepare well and adapt. Because of our feeble interaction with our natural habitats, a trek in the wilderness today can be a bigger challenge than it otherwise should be. Making a Walden-like journey and following in the footsteps of Thoreau may never be an option for many of us who are now, sadly, urban creatures. Our encounters with nature have become restricted to our city gardens or countryside farms. Mitigating risks on the trail requires prior preparation and sound knowledge—not doing so entails disappointment and sometimes danger.

This book is a guide-cum-inspirational manual for amateur hikers, or nature lovers, who are ready to shed their big-city comforts and inhibitions to engage with nature and its raw, unadulterated power and beauty. I have broadly divided it into four parts; and based each part on a set of beliefs gathered from my practical experience.

**Part I** is titled *Wilderness Learnings: Leadership, Ethics and Resilience*. Being “tough” in the wilderness is more about the mind than it is about the body, and mental preparation is as necessary, if not more, as physical preparation. This part of the book is geared towards uplifting your spirits and motivating you to keep going in the face of the inevitable drawdown when your body wishes to give

up and return to its comfort zone. Not only that, I draw inspiration from every challenge that the wilderness throws at us to demonstrate how to overcome adversity and acquire the life skills crucial for our daily existence, how nature moulds our character for the better, making us stronger and more fulfilled. Young adults at the formative stages of their character-building can glean much wisdom from wilderness sojourns. What can be more pleasurable for parents than to see their timid cub taken from the city and into the wilderness coming back a lion in character?

**Part II** is about *Reading Nature: Signs, Clues and Observations*. To enjoy nature, you must make an effort to learn about it, and then you will never cease to be amazed in the great outdoors. It is all about falling in love with nature—about the small observations which invoke our sense of wonder and curiosity to learn more. It reinforces the feeling that we too are apart of this beautiful creation (something we may have forgotten over the years) which is harmonious, and which conceals deep laws of order and rhythm beneath a chaotic surface.

**Part III** talks about *Wilderness Medicine: First Aid, Emergency Care and Procedures*. Sound knowledge of our body and first-aid helps us tackle many adverse situations with ease and confidence. It emphasises what I cannot emphasise enough—that reasonable knowledge about our bodies and medicine relieves the sense of dread that hangs over us when we know there is no one to call upon for medical help at short notice. Being able to tackle all but the extreme medical eventualities is an excellent life-skill that can be used to help yourself and others in distress, not only in the outdoors but in everyday life as well.

**Part IV** is *Wilderness Travel: Techniques, Principles and Knowledge*. You require a minimum skill-set of knowing what to pack and how to pack, set up camp, navigate and read the weather, and tie a few knots when required. This section offers you a treasure trove of practical advice on all these topics and suggests tools and techniques that will prove to be a boon in the wild.

At the end in **Part V**, we devote a chapter to preserving our

wilderness and the wilderness ethics we should follow. The epilogue features a beautiful letter penned by American writer and environmentalist, Wallace Stegner, in December 1960 called the *Wilderness Letter* which is a call to awaken our hearts and minds. If there is one takeaway from it, it is that we need to reconnect with our true selves and realise that wilderness is us.

**The Appendices (Part VI)** offer valuable support material.

Finally, this book is my sincere, humble and dedicated effort to reveal wilderness as the grand experience and teacher that it is, and the ample reasons why we should love, respect, understand and preserve it.

The joy of reaching a summit, any summit, is incredible. So keep moving, take rest and move on, stay the course. The journey will always be worth your while!