

# Surviving New Jersey

BY SANDY LAWRENCE EDRY

Hunched beneath a large blue tarp that keeps out the steady drizzle but not the humidity; a twentysomething woman with long hair furiously moves a bow stick back and forth against her cedar spindle as she tries to turn friction into fire. Not far away, a small crowd gathers to watch as someone scrapes the hair and skin off a deer hide and a few amateur trackers spend some "dirt time" looking for animal prints on a nearby trail. All the while, I stand next to a pile of armlength wooden boughs, flicking my wrist sideways as I practice my throwing technique – just in case one day I might need to kill a bunny for dinner.

No, this isn't training camp for the next season of "Survivor," but maybe it should be.

Forget those sissies who sat in the Australian Outback and complained that they had no food. At Tom Brown's Tracker School, students spend an intense week – in tents – learning how to live primitively and love it. The school, located on a wooded farm in northwestern New Jersey, teaches how-tos on everything from making a fire with sticks and building a cozy debris hut to tracking rabbits and mice across a dirt trail and cooking them. At the Tracker School, animals are never harmed, in any way. (Fortunately, we didn't actually have to hurt any animals or eat any mouse stew, but it's reassuring to realize that I'd know how to do it if I needed to.)

And all this comes wrapped in an American in Indian-flavored philosophy that teaches people to leave the land in the same shape – or better – than when they found it.

Let me explain one thing: I'm about as much an outdoorsman as Liberace was a ladies' man. I never joined the Boy Scouts, never did much hiking and, until about two years ago, the only time I had ever slept outdoors was on a chaise lounge in Palm Springs. So I went to the Tracker School thinking that if these folks could teach me some skills, they can teach just about anyone.

During a very rainy week in May, I was one of about 70 students taking the basic class, known as The Standard. Joining me were a diverse lot that included some hunter types, some college-age neohippies and lots of nature lovers. About a quarter of the class was female.

## APACHE TEACHINGS

Almost all came because of the legendary Tom Brown Jr., a larger-than-life character who founded this school in 1978 to pass on the teachings of an Apache warrior called Stalking Wolf. Brown spent much of his childhood in the New Jersey Pine Barrens with Stalking Wolf – or "Grandfather," as Brown and his team of instructors often refer to him.

Brown has written more than a dozen books describing Grandfather's methods and philosophy and has become one of the country's foremost trackers, is called on by the FBI and local

## Forget taming the Outback: Experience the wilderness of the Garden State

authorities in missing-person cases and fugitive hunts.

Brown no longer teaches most of The Standard classes, ceding that role to a group of his most talented students. And teach they do. On most mornings, wakeup call was before 7:30 and programs often did not end until well past 10 or 11 p.m. In between, the days were jam-packed with lectures and hands-on demonstrations.

## THE BASIC FOUR

The coursework revolves around the Sacred Order: shelter, water, fire and food. According to the instructors, this is the sequence of necessities that must be obtained if a person wants to survive in any unexpected wilderness situation.

One of the first things we learned was how to make and use a bow drill. For some folks, this covered ground they had learned as children, but it was all new to me. Using an ax and my new knife, I managed to carve from a cedar log the three pieces I needed – without severing a finger! Then I bent down on one knee, just as they had shown us, and started working the bow I had picked out back and forth, back and forth. Nothing. Nada. Around me, several students quickly got the necessary heat to form the powder that set their tiny tinder bundles aflame. As they each basked in a feeling of accomplishment, I nearly took someone's eye out when my spindle flew out from its place and landed several feet away. It was time for a break – after all, I had a whole week to get it right.

I found somewhat more success in the next workshop: trap-making. We were taught how to build a figure-four trap, which is made with three notched sticks and a heavier log. A piece of bait is skewered on the end of one stick, luring in the unsuspecting critter. After accidentally breaking my first stick in half, I was able to whittle the pieces properly and prop them together to form a nearly perfect figure four. I touched the bait stick just so and – wham! – Wile E. Coyote, eat your heart out.

Not all of the classes were as hands-on. Instructors who specialized in skills such as stone-tool making, primitive cooking and pressure tracking, gave lectures and demonstrations in the school's converted barn, while the students furiously scribbled in their notebooks. One of the more popular – and grossest – classes was on "brain tanning." It started with an instructor taking us outside, and showing how to skin a dead deer (The unfortunate animal had lost a one-sided argument with a moving vehicle.) An incision was made along the belly, the underside slit open and most of the skin peeled back and removed in one piece. At least this is what I heard was going on, since I was standing way,



**TOM BROWN'S SCHOOL DAYS** Tom Brown's Tracker School in northwestern New Jersey offers a week-long course in survival skills, from building shelter and fire to trapping animals, preparing them for food – and even tanning hides.

way in the back, trying to make sure I had at least one person's body blocking my view at all times.

We then moved back inside the barn to hear about the tanning process. Assuming the worst was behind me, I followed. The teacher, a young woman dressed in a buckskin dress she'd made herself, spent a few minutes describing the various ways to preserve the hide. Next thing I knew, someone else brought in the deer's severed and cut-open head – and Wilderness Girl pulled out Bambi's brain! Apparently, smearing the mushy, gray stuff onto a hide is one of the best ways to preserve it. Vegetarianism suddenly seemed very appealing.

## SPIRITUAL ANGLE

As a vacation destination, this school isn't for everyone. The superlong days sitting on backless wooden benches in a drafty barn weren't easy and the subject matter isn't always appealing. On top of that, the pseudo-mythical trappings of the school's philosophy might turn off some people – especially when the instructors start offering thanks to the fish-people and grass-people. (According to Grandfather's philosophy, all objects – animate or not – harbor a life spirit and we should give thanks when they sacrifice themselves for us.)

But if you are into spirituality – or can get past it – the school certainly doesn't short-change its students. I came away from my week with 2½ notebooks crammed with material and more than 30 hours of lectures on tape. And while I may not be ready to enter the woods armed only with my wits, on the fourth day at the school I did manage to achieve fire.