Finding Yourself

The best advice about getting lost is: do not. Follow your progress on the topo and use your compass to stay oriented. Be aware of landmarks and their relation to one another; look backward from time to time to memorize the terrain from the other direction.

But suppose you do become disoriented? Resist the impulse to panic. Resist all impulses. Stop, relax for a while, and think. You have three choices: you can retrace your steps, stay where you are, or reorient yourself and proceed.

If you have become separated from a group, stay where you are, signal your position in some way, and wait to be found.

If you are alone, or if the whole group is lost with you, first orient yourself to north and south. Look for landmarks—if you can see none, seek high ground or climb a tree. Then decide whether to go back or go forward. At the very least, use the knowledge of which way is north to move in a straight line.

Orienting yourself without a compass, Sun or moon.

Insert a short stick in the ground and mark where the tip of its shadow falls. One hour later, mark again. The line between these marks is roughly east-west; the stick is on the south side of the line.

North Star. First find the Big Dipper. Trace an imaginary line between the two stars that form its front lip and extend this line five times its own length to locate Polaris—never more than one degree from true north.

Watch.

Insert twig into level ground. Place watch with hour hand pointing toward twig, aligned with its shadow. If watch is set to standard time, halfway between hour hand and 12 o'clock is south.