

Where the Bloody Hell Are You? - Navigation Tips

Aunty Rata (who knows I get lost more regularly than most) asked if I had any tips to share on navigation. Although the website is not the place to learn a practical skill like navigation and there are lots of great written resources already that people can read, here are a few random thoughts on basic things people can do that they might not think of when venturing out.

1. Practice, practice, practice

Navigation is a practical skill that you will only really learn by doing. You might think navigation is for those wanting to go off-track or trip leaders. Not so. Every trumper will need to navigate at some time. Knowledge is not a dangerous thing here, quite the reverse. The more you do, the better you will get.

2. Location, location, location. The technical term is Location Awareness

Location awareness is the critical skill and requires no tools other than your brain, observation (looking and seeing) and (maybe) a map. The goal is to know where you are at all times. Sometimes this won't be exact, but at those times you'll be looking for your next point where you can confirm you are where you think you are again. As clear as mud? An example might help.

Suppose I am walking along a track following a contour in a narrow valley. I will have moved on from my last "know exactly where I am" point (track intersection, creek crossing, etc.). My altimeter won't help me and my GPS isn't getting signal so it is back to basics. I have to use what I can see around me with what's on my map along with some distance travelled estimate. I might be looking for a creek, a slip, counting ridges, any peaks I can see, vegetation changes marked on the map, direction changes, or maybe a track intersection (hopefully you were looking out for that anyway!). I'll track time from the last known point, or count paces – this distance estimate can be used to help 'find' the spot or at least to let me know if I have gone wrong. Basically look on the map to plan ahead for some things to expect and keep an idea of the distance travelled. When the next know exactly where I am point turns up you can sagely say "I think we are here" and point to the spot on the map (ignore any unbelievers who aren't trying to be location aware themselves).

I set up the example so that newer technology wasn't involved, but location awareness is essential even when electronic gadgets come in to play. You can discover why for yourself! You can practice location awareness on any trip at any time. You should work towards being able to pull out your map at any stage and know about where you are and whether there is time to stop for tea or not. When you are looking for particular points for some reason - like where you are going to go up a ridge or cross a river, you need to pay special attention. At such times I will carry my map in hand with a thumb on exactly where I think I am at any time.

Also whenever you are at a good spot, pull out the map and take a look at the land in reference to it too. I see too few people looking at their map and the landscape when they stop for lunch on a top. Becoming familiar with the features takes time, so make the most of those opportunities you get. I also take notes on water spots, camp sites, secondary tracks and places to never go back to. Treat it like a big backyard – the more you know about it, the more you can do with getting around it.

3. Navigation is not needed for track trampers - WRONG.

I suspect that track trampers get more lost than non-track trampers. And tracks are the number one best place to start learning how to navigate. If you can't work out 'about where' you are on a track, there is not much point going off-track. It is important for planning while on your trip too for answering questions like "do we have time for a tea break", "what's coming up next", "do I really need to ration my chocolate" and the all time classic "shall I keep on tramping or just lie down to die here" (just joking). If you are awake, you'll realise I am talking about location awareness again. If you stick to tracks, you should still practice it. No excuses.

4. Oh no, I have no idea where in this big wide world I am!

Getting lost isn't usually a big deal. I know of no-one who suffered serious harm from realising they were lost. The serious harm came from what they did next. The most trouble is probably caused by not realising you are lost as you tend to get yourself in to a much worse pickle. If you are awake and alert... yes that's it, I am talking about location awareness again. If you are going along and what you are expecting doesn't fit with what you see and map, you can quickly realise, go "hmmmmm" and stop and think it through. This happens to me quite a lot as Aunty Rata knows! If it seems bad, sit down have a little snack and collect your thoughts as calmly as possible. If you decide you really are lost, and alone, then bunk down and engage survival mode (not discussed here, but there

are many good sources for information – with common sense you can be quite okay on what the bush provides, despite the lack of tim tams.).

Lots of people don't stop and think, but carry on getting themselves more lost, more tired, more strung out and eventually end up having to bunk down and engage survival mode in the dark or worse. Now is also not the time to think "I should have left information with a reliable friend". Have a basic trip plan and leave it with someone reliable - again seek out further information if you need to.

5. Compasses are complicated - WRONG!

Surfing looks easy, but it is hard. Compasses might look hard to use, but really it is easy to pick up and there isn't that much to know. The problem is just a lack of practice. If you only pick one up once a year, why would you be surprised you can't use it? Why not drag it out of the bottom of your pack and give it a go on EVERY TRIP. That might sound odd, but if you need it, it is better to be good and familiar with what you are doing (things are generally unpleasant when you really need your compass, so one less stress factor would be the way to go).

Sum-up

This hasn't really said anything about how to navigate, but that you should give it a go no matter what kind of tramping you do. One way to improve quickly on map and compass use is to do some rogaining – there are regular fun after work events in Wellington which you can take as seriously as you like.

You can't always expect to rely on others, even the trip leader may be tired or may even not know that much – all people are fallible after all and accidents do happen. For one thing your silently elected navigation person might become your injured party and you may need to find your own way to get help. Plus trip leaders always appreciate help – it is not okay to treat them as your tour guide and if you do expect to not be invited to join trips! Also people do get separated from their party more often than you'd think. And there are advantages to sharing the load which allows for double checking and discussion. There are even some navigation techniques that require working as a team, with each person needing the basics to do their bit to make it work. And the big one is that you'll learn best and fastest from someone with experience in the field – but not if you let them do all of the driving!

There are many great resources around on navigation. For example MSC have books and courses, people in the club, and looking online. A list to get you started is below. Also check your library for any of the books listed.

1. MSC Bushcraft – Basic Navigation Course (next course for Wellington is in August 2010) www.mountainsafety.org.nz/Training/training_results.asp
2. MSC, *Bushcraft Manual – Outdoor skills for the NZ Bush*, www.mountainsafety.org.nz/Resources/
3. New Zealand Orienteering (links to rogains and other events) www.maptalk.co.nz
4. @home in the hills, Navigation, <http://www.homeinthehills.co.nz/hnavigation.html>
5. Navigation FAQ (Australian) http://www.bushwalking.org.au/FAQ/FAQ_Navigation.htm