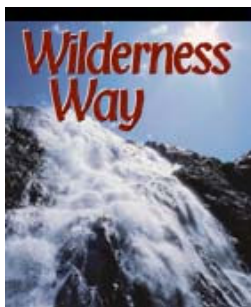


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Realities of Going Primitive

by Brent Ladd

So, you have been considering a change of pace? Want to leave the rat race behind? Possibly even bypassing the cabin on the hill with sheep, chickens, and an organic garden, and diving head long into that wild lake of your dreams called Primitive Lifestyle? Great! I welcome the company. You see, I took the plunge two years ago, and I am still swimming with my head above water, though just barely at times.

I am now living in northern Michigan, together with a few others who have also heard the call of the wild and have answered it.

I want to be as encouraging as I can be to those of you seeking this way of life. However, I am also going to tell it straight up, just like it is.

Having been through what I have in the past several years, I have developed some sense of what is going down in the world. I believe there are many wonderful human beings that are depressed, devastated, and overwhelmed by the crazed society that surrounds them. Their true desire is to live as close to the land as possible. Perhaps no one else knows that they feel this way and they tell no one for fear of rejection and ridicule. So their secret consumes their thoughts and dreams and they continue going through the motions of crazed society, living the way they really want to only in their heads. I know what this is like and maybe some of you reading this also know. Also, I hope readers can learn from mistakes I have made. I refuse to write a flowery, buttered-up story of living native, but I will say that the joys, rewards and freedom I have experienced are well worth any hardships encountered. So, this is not a blueprint for going primitive, just the human side of my attempt thus far.

What is it like to live primitive, the difficulties, the compromises, the progressions and rewards? I will finish by relating what I feel to be the two most important aspects of living primitive. They are not found in any wilderness skills book, but can determine one's success at living in the wild.

Sometimes I think I was predestined for a primitive life way. As a youngster I was fascinated with all things "Indian." I spent long hours exploring the tall grass pastures of our farm, shooting arrows and throwing spears. Perhaps I was also influenced by books I read, like Island of the Blue Dolphins. In some ways, I have come full circle back to my early days.

Not unlike many of you, I was raised in a rural farming community, Indiana to be exact. As a young boy I was responsible for looking after the pigs, cows and occasionally the horses. I enjoyed being around the animals and thought I would probably end up farming for a living. When graduation came, the right thing

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to do was to get that college education, because after all, farming was becoming more complicated every year. Living in the city at the time was not a great idea, and, oh yeah, the occasional beer party... After two years of majoring in agribusiness and animal science and belonging to a large fraternity, I was disgusted with myself and the college scene. I moved back home and commuted to class, determined to finish what I had started.

Since my weekends were no longer filled with parties and women chasing, I had more time to think about what I was doing with my life. Even then, I had begun to doubt my interests in a career, especially in the agribusiness. On a whim, I enrolled in an elective, Forestry 240 "Wildlife in America" with Fred Montague. Little did I know at the time that this was a pivotal decision in the path I would later take. Dr. Montague is one of those unique professors that goes far beyond the prescribed course text; in fact, pretty much throwing the text out the window. Not only did we have discussions on wildlife, but we were challenged with every factor that affected wildlife: pollution, habitat destruction, mindless capitalism, our very civilization itself.

By the time college graduation rolled around, I had done a 180 degree turn. Wanting nothing to do with agribusiness, I had thoughts of starting a small farm or going to California in search of the music business (at the time I was lead guitarist for a small time rock-n-roll band). I was depressed with no job. It is funny how, when you think you have hit rock bottom, things can change in a flash. Something had clicked. I liked animals and liked observing them. I had loads of experience with farm animals. I would become a farm animal behaviorist! Was there such a thing? A phone call and a few days later, I found myself in the office of a premiere farm animal behaviorist who actually had a graduate student studying the effects of music on farm animals. The professor put me on the payroll. I did not blink an eye. My duty was to assist his student in her research. Soon I was enrolled in a graduate program of my own with my own research projects.

By this time I was heavy into the environmentalism scene. I had become a vegetarian, except for occasional pork raised back home on the small farm. I began putting more and more pressure on myself to make a difference within the system.

After passing my thesis defense, I headed to a large university in the south to study behavior and consciousness in animals. Things fell through, and I got a job with the U.S.D.A. studying animal welfare.

It was a dark time for me. I took a week off from work and went on a humanitarian mission to the slums of Juarez, Mexico, a border town. If one could major in primitive living, I think I would make as a pre-requisite that one visit a "third world" country. One's ideas on materialism and what one can do without quickly become solidified.

I felt very positive about my decision to leave the material/civilized way of existence behind. I just was not sure where I would be going to leave it behind.

A friend loaned me a packet of information on outdoor survival schools. In the packet, I came across one that gave me goosebumps. I wrote a short note saying I wanted to attend the gathering. They responded by saying "glad to have you, and by the way we have a few staff positions open. I felt caught to say the least.

Within a month, I found myself in the north woods of Wisconsin at

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the outdoorschool. I felt that this was the beginning of making
go at living the early ways.

I gained primitive living skills. I had also learned to canoe, and had lived in a primitive shelter. It was my first taste of what living primitive might be like, and I was still hungry for more.

Being restless, I moved around the north woods of Wisconsin. I built a camp of my own consisting of a birchbark covered wikiup, by a small bass filled lake. Having no cash and wanting to make my own deer skin clothes, I bartered my services. I did ceiling dry-wall work, a tough job, for a local butcher remodeling, and received a decent pile of deer skins in exchange. At this time, I did not know enough about hunting and trapping to procure a food supply, and so it was quickly looking like either food stamps or a job. I took a temporary, low paying farm labor job for a month. Again it was either divine intervention or dumb luck. It happened to be a diverse farm, and I was able to take home several bags of great apples, and all the squash and pumpkin I wanted, as well. These were a boon to my diet.

Not long after, I retrieved a road kill deer in fine shape that gave me meat through the winter. I was coming to believe that prayer did work after all!

At this point, I had left a decent paying research position, paid off my debts, and with a few hundred dollars left, had wandered through the north woods of Wisconsin, gradually gaining confidence in my abilities to survive. I was an opportunist doing whatever I had to to survive without going back to civilization. I was, in effect, making a break from civilization at the mental and emotional levels. I was trusting more in myself and discovering my true heritage. Knowing that 99.95% of my ancestors had lived a hunter-gatherer way of life made my heart grow stronger. My dreams began changing from being chased by gunmen in city streets, to scenes of ancient landscapes with ancient people.

The deep snows off of Lake Superior made the woods even more quiet. I had heaps of time alone to reflect on my past, the present and the unknown future. This quiet time helped me to heal from past emotional wounds. The days and nights spent out by my wikiup camp were incredibly awesome for me. The first night in the wikiup was late in the hunter's moon (late October). Frost was in the air; my favorite season. I came clear up out of my balsam fir bed when a banded owl landed in a nearby tree and gave a blood curdling yowl! If you've heard this at close range, you know what I am talking about. The very next evening, a few coyotes came down to the lake and were letting everyone know they were there with sharp, cackling vocals, and howls. "Now, this was the wildlife!" I thought. A few weeks later, I heard my first wild wolf howl. There were a pack of wolves in the vicinity, though few people have heard or seen them.

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