

To My Daughter

*Stuff I've Learned
While Playing Outside*



BY STUART THOMPSON

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words and images by

S t u a r t T h o m p s o n



Pittsburgh

While each of the included stories in this collection is as factually accurate as admittedly faulty memory will allow, some names and accompanying details have been changed to protect privacy where felt necessary.

To My Daughter: Stuff I've Learned While Playing Outside

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It had been a really dry summer, the summer of 2008. Loyalhanna Creek was the lowest I'd seen it in a decade. What little lawn we had—most of the property being, by intent, bushes, wildflowers, grasses and trees—was patchy brown in places. The sump pump hadn't run for more than a month. Still, as I planned for a weekend solo hike on the Laurel Highlands Hiking Trail, I gave minor thought to the issue of water availability on the trek. After all, I had hiked this seventy-mile trail, in whole or in part, solo and with partners, scores of times. Never in thirty years had there ever been a problem with water availability. In the driest of times the hand pumps at the shelter areas had always produced water, if on occasion with no little effort and some grumbling. While many of the smaller streams would dry up in those mini-drought summers there was always a stream or two still running well enough from which to take water.

So it was with complete confidence (hubris, the less charitable might say) that I waved my wife goodbye as she dropped me

off on the start of this relatively short twenty-three mile saunter. My intent was to go about thirteen miles the first day, pitching my tent at a shelter area, and then do the final ten miles on day two. The day started well enough: near full sunshine with a light breeze and with the temperature in the low seventies, though rising fairly rapidly. As I walked I was careful as always to keep taking water from my hydration tube. The day progressed gently, satisfyingly. Occasionally I'd pass a group of folks and we'd exchange greetings. The only incident even mildly out of the ordinary was a close encounter with a bees nest, which I avoided only at the last minute.

If I didn't quickly notice the swarming bees I did notice during the day that not a single stream was running of the many I crossed. I had never seen this. Not even remnant pools of water could be seen in the dry beds. While I did anticipate this low water situation the complete absence of even a damp spot here and there was disconcerting at a subconscious level. Still several miles from the shelter area—and well water—I began to cut back on water intake just a bit. As I approached the blue-blaze trail to the shelter area after thirteen warm miles I was just beginning to feel leg weary. I was appreciative that my hiking day was about over and was looking forward to a relaxing evening in camp. Taking a couple more quick hits from the near empty water bladder I walked over to the hand pump. As I prepared the bladder to accept the outflow I noted that the basin at the base of the pump spigot held very little moisture. This I found mildly alarming, as on virtually every other occasion there was always some water remaining from previous

hikers' pumping efforts. Seeing that no one else had yet arrived at the shelter area I suggested to myself that the lack of standing water in the basin was simply because it had been some time since the pump was last used.

Started pumping. Kept pumping. Kept pumping some more. Now, now my sense of unease spiked. It is true, after all, that one can go many days without food; without water the hiker quickly finds themselves in serious trouble. Pumped some more. After a bit a tiny dribble of water oozed from the spigot, somewhat sarcastically I imagined, like snot from a drunkard's nose. That's it. More pumping and nothing further. I paused and caught my breath from the pumping exertion. What are my options, I wondered?

I listed the facts. Fact one: I was virtually out of water. Fact two: there was no water anywhere on the trail whence I had come, that is, for the previous thirteen miles. Fact three: there was no one in camp from whom I would have even a chance of yogi-ing (bumming) water. Fact four: I didn't know if anyone else would later get into this shelter area for said yogi-ing purposes. Fact five: if I remained in camp I would have no water with which to cook or to drink, and very likely no water for the remaining ten miles of my hike tomorrow. This last fact was *very* unattractive. I checked my map: was there any stream ahead large enough to offer some reasonable hope of showing running water? Answer: maybe one. Any chance of rain in the overnight? No. Did I feel like attempting to extract condensation water from vegetation using plastic and sunlight? No. Dig a hole down near the dried stream, and hope to

hit water? No. The best chance for water was at the next shelter area eight miles distant.

It was back to pumping. And more pumping. And more pumping. Again, the snot-like drivel...then nothing. Decision time. With two swallows of water remaining in the bladder and a really bad attitude in my sweaty body I decided my best bet was to make it to the next shelter and (maybe) water. I reasoned that there was an outside chance that I may get lucky and come across a stream still showing water.

I headed down the blue-blaze and began a long uphill. Halfway up I encountered a young woman coming down. I told her as we passed that there was no water at the shelter below. This registered mild concern on her face but not to excess. I hadn't the heart to ask her for a drink from her water supplies, figuring that she would need all she had.

For the next seven miles I passed no one. For the next seven miles every stream I crossed was painfully dry. With energy running low I was afraid to eat an energy bar knowing that would only intensify my thirst. And boy was I thirsty. If slightly leg weary at the end of thirteen miles I was, at eighteen miles, now running on fumes.

Then, amazingly, two miles before the shelter area, I hit a stream still running. Not at great volume, but running well. Further, as I considered the uphill source of this stream I was not aware of any human habitation nor mining in the area. Should be good water, giardiasis possibilities aside. As I took my pack off

stream-side it now occurred to me that, not only had I not taken my water purifying pump but as well had neglected to throw chemical treatment tablets into the pack. This was incredible. I had always taken water treatment systems on every previous hike over the last thirty years or so. As the contemporary lament goes, “What was I thinking!”

The water at my knees was cold and clear, running swiftly in this shaded, cool spot. I was unbelievably thirsty. I dared not drink it. Not yet. Fighting the impulse to drink I decided to fill the water bladder half full of water and carry that to the shelter, now only about two miles distant. In the event there was not water in the well at that shelter at least I would have the option of using this water, boiling it...and chance the nasty little critters that may have lurked in this clear, liquid gold. Fighting that impulse to drink from that crystal-clear water, burbling teasingly at my knees, took everything I had.

Leg-wobbly entering the shelter area I slipped the pack from my back in an open area and continued on toward the water pump, water bladder in hand. As I approached I was excited to see much dampness around the base of the pump. This was a good sign, a really good sign. Grabbing the pump arm as if it were the door handle to ultimate wisdom I commenced the familiar metal-on-metal squeak of extracting water from deep within the earth. I was rewarded! Beautiful, cold water gushed forth. Yes, a bit rust-laden, but never had water looked so sublime, red-brown or not. I drank without ceremony, without the slightest pretense at decorum. Who

cared about red iron “floaties” in the water! Filling the emptied and now flushed water bladder I headed back up to my pack and grabbed an energy bar. For the next few minutes I gobbled and gulped. It was not pretty. I also took time now to muse on just how was it that I could, possibly, have forgotten to bring water treatment means. What an idiot!

Other than wallowing in my sense of poor planning the remainder of the evening passed without incident. I looked forward to an easy three mile hike in the morning to meet my wife.

The morning dawned clear and mild. As anticipated it was a ridiculously easy three mile hike. Even with taking my time leaving camp and walking at a pace resembling that of teenagers killing time at a shopping mall, I was way ahead of schedule. I decided to continue on past my pickup point and check out Beams Rock, a local rock climbing site. On top were two folks, a young man and woman, finishing their simple lunch. We chatted a bit as we all took in the view. Not wanting to unnecessarily intrude on the couple’s quiet moment with a view, I shortly decided to backtrack to the pickup point.

And very quickly I was there, at the agreed-upon pickup spot. Though my wife had traveled this dirt road perhaps only twice before in her life I was confident that, with my careful directions, she would be able to meet me at the right location. Being early at the rendezvous point I knew I was in for a bit of a wait, but made peace with that notion and settled in, leaning comfortably against my pack. After a bit a couple Pennsylvania Department of

Conservation and Natural Resource (DCNR) personnel rattled by in their pickup truck. Thoughtfully, they stopped and asked if I was OK. I replied that I was waiting for my ride, but thanks for stopping. To pass the time I ate something and occasionally got up and walked around. Our appointed pickup time arrived...and passed. Infrequently a vehicle could be heard through the forest heading toward my location and I anticipated the arrival of my wife, only, of course, to see the noise maker disappear on down the road in a cloud of grey dust.

I was growing mildly concerned: had Nora run into trouble? I waited some more. DCNR passed me again; we exchanged greetings of recognition. I pulled out the map. (When all else fails, revert to the map). I checked again our agreed-to rendezvous location. I reminded myself that I did tell her, “exactly three miles in from the main road,” and that that was fully acknowledged.

OK. It was at this point that I realized my second horrendous mistake of this fiasco called an overnight hike. Stunningly, I had misread the mileage scale at the bottom of the map. Incredible. How many times have I read maps, noting, always carefully, the mile/kilometer scale? Probably a gazillion times. If “map fetish” were truly a disease, I was probably terminal.

But here we were: I had instructed Nora to meet me three miles in. Well, guess what: it was six miles in. I had no choice. Throwing the pack back on I headed down the road to close the three mile gap. As I walked, again cursing myself for my idiocy, I was hoping that Nora, being on time and herself waiting for a

no-show, would decide to head on down the road and hope to cross paths with me.

In the dusty, summer haze distance a car approached. I squinted to see if it was Nora. No such luck. More road walking, more grumbling. Finally, in the distance, came my salvation. Bundling my pack into the car, I apologized for the miscommunication, and we headed home.

What did I learn? Pretty simple, really. No matter how many years you have hiked, no matter how many hikes, prepare for the coming hike like it's the first hike you've ever undertaken. Use your equipment check-off list. Literally, put your hands on everything you will need. Assume nothing. Or, if assumptions are to me made, ignore favorable weather forecasts and assume worst case scenarios: high winds, heavy rains, freakishly plummeting temperatures and... all together now, no water or limited water.

There remains, of course, the old saying, "familiarity breeds contempt." Should anyone doubt the veracity of that observation, with the above debacle I prove it beyond any reasonable argument.

One can extend this notion of assuming nothing to most of life. For example, do not assume that someone you love will be there tomorrow. For multiple reasons—all bad—they may not be. Do not assume good health. Take care, *now*, of both those you love and your health.

To My Daughter: Stuff I've Learned While Playing Outside realizes some truths learned while doing outdoor activities—hiking, cycling, rock climbing and canoeing. This letter to a grown daughter becomes now an open letter, a collection of short stories. The stories have a clear, unmistakable relationship to all of us. Encountered in this collection of thirty-two tales are strange lights, strange sounds, and—occasionally—strange people. Always encountered is the familiar made a bit more meaningful.

The book stands as a contribution to outdoor education and, by extension, experiential education. There is stuff to be discovered—by all of us—by playing outside. Thompson embarrasses himself with the telling of some of the stories. So be it, he sighs. Sometimes it's important to laugh at one's own foibles.



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