

No food. No tent. No toilet paper.

The Camp

**After roughing it with the
Boulder Outdoor Survival School,**

From Hell

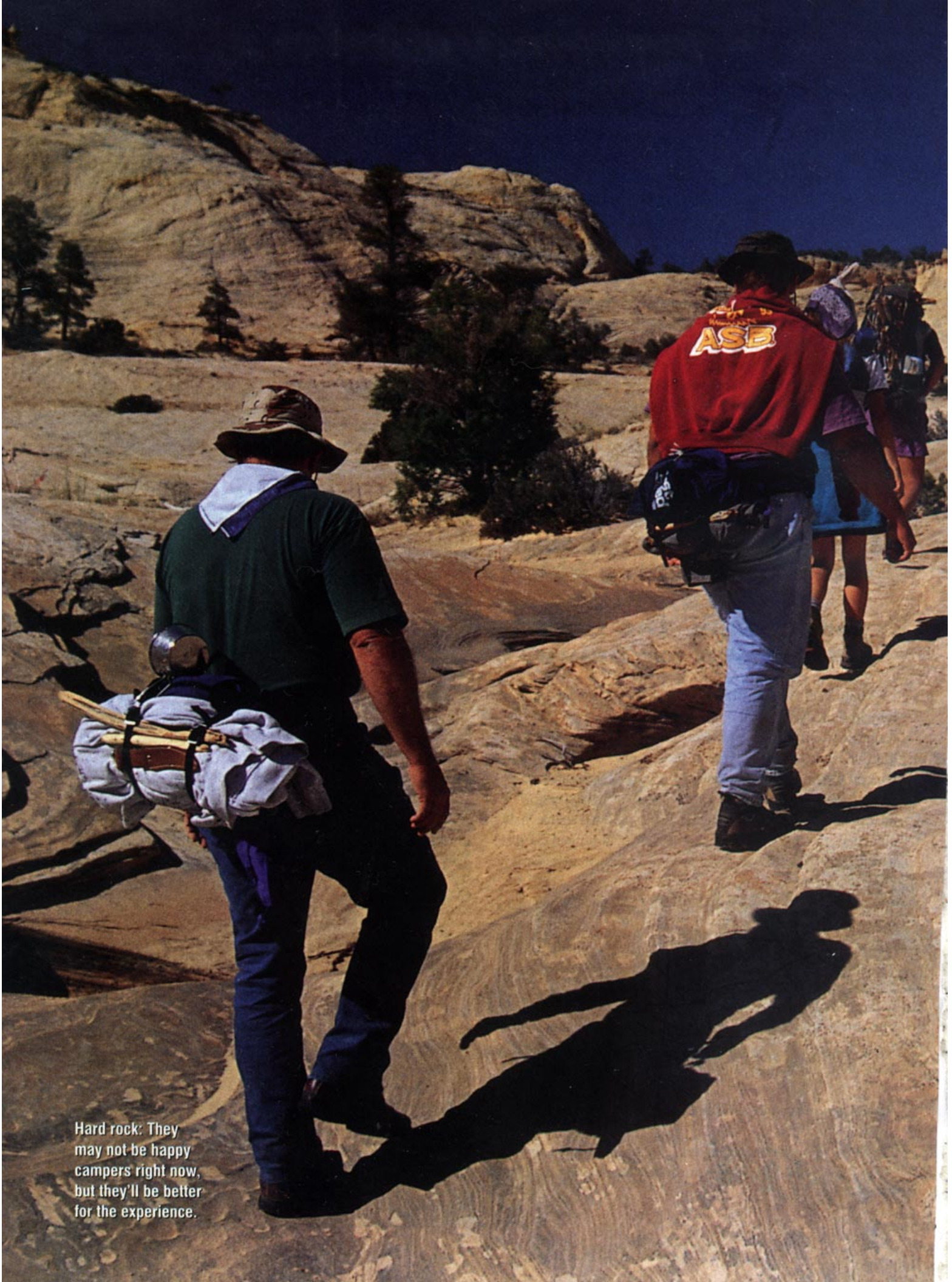
**you'll be ready for just about anything that
might befall you in the wilds**

By Catherine Fredman

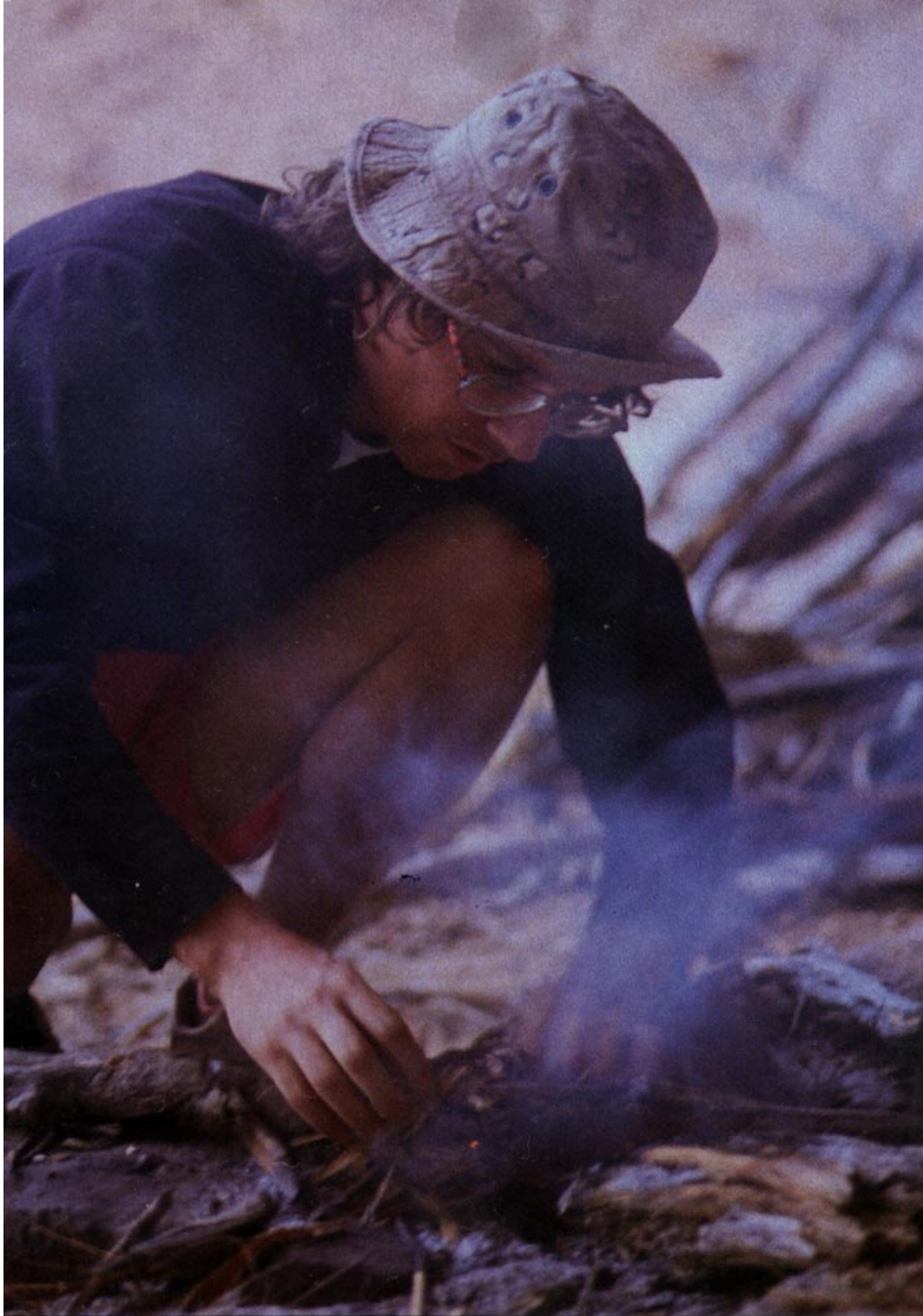
When I signed up with the Boulder Outdoor Survival School (BOSS) for a seven-day course in aboriginal living skills, I didn't know its nickname, "The Great Rocky Mountain Diet." But I soon found out.

Lunch was a handful of milkweed pods, a few petals of Indian paintbrush and a cup of water. Breakfast hadn't been much heartier, and dinner looked to be . . . water. Rob, one of our instructors, explained: "We're living a paleo lifestyle. Think of our time back in Boulder as celebrating a kill. Now we're on the move again, being nomadic, en route to the next kill. Then we'll feast." And when would that be? "It could be tonight; it could be tomorrow. I can't tell you that."

Exploring the dissonance between modern and ancient living is one reason people sign up for a "field course" with the decade-old Utah-based organization. Some want to test their limits in the tough landscape southwest of Canyonlands National Park. Others want to confront personal demons or live a *Rambo* fantasy. Me, I just wanted to learn how to survive when the truck won't start, a bear shreds the tent, the supply raft overturns or some other camping-trip nightmare comes true.



Hard rock: They may not be happy campers right now, but they'll be better for the experience.



much later. “You don’t know where you’re going, what kind of food you’ll have, whether there’s any water, when it will all end.” With three instructors for eight students, BOSS calls it survival with a safety net. I called it boot camp without food.

Live through this

We started under a cottonwood tree at base camp. “All you *really* need to survive in the wilderness with grace and comfort are a blanket, a water bottle and a knife,” Dave said. “Actually, the knife is redundant.” It looked as though we wouldn’t get the blanket for a while, either. We rolled our meager belongings into the BOSS-supplied army blanket, leaving out only what could be tied around our waists. Meanwhile, our instructors ferreted out contraband—raisins, Milky Ways, flashlights, matches, watches, sunglasses, toilet paper.

I asked what sort of clothes to bring. “With the weather out here, you just don’t know,” Scott answered. “We’ve had 110-degree days and had canteens freeze on us at night.”

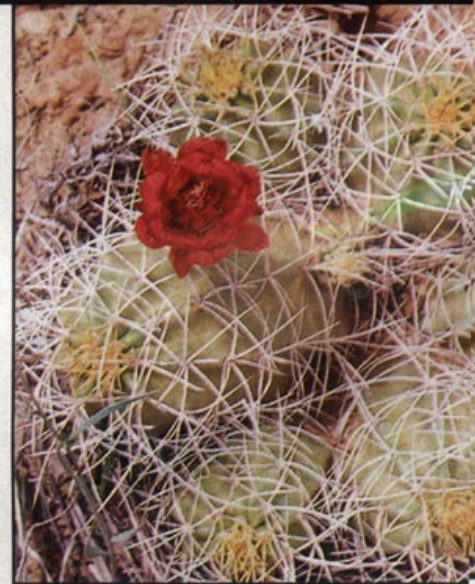
I stuffed the sleeves of my down

Trailblazers: Except for an occasional oasis, Utah’s desert remains a prickly, unforgiving place. This forces BOSS disciples to relearn the rudiments of living, like making a fire from scratch.

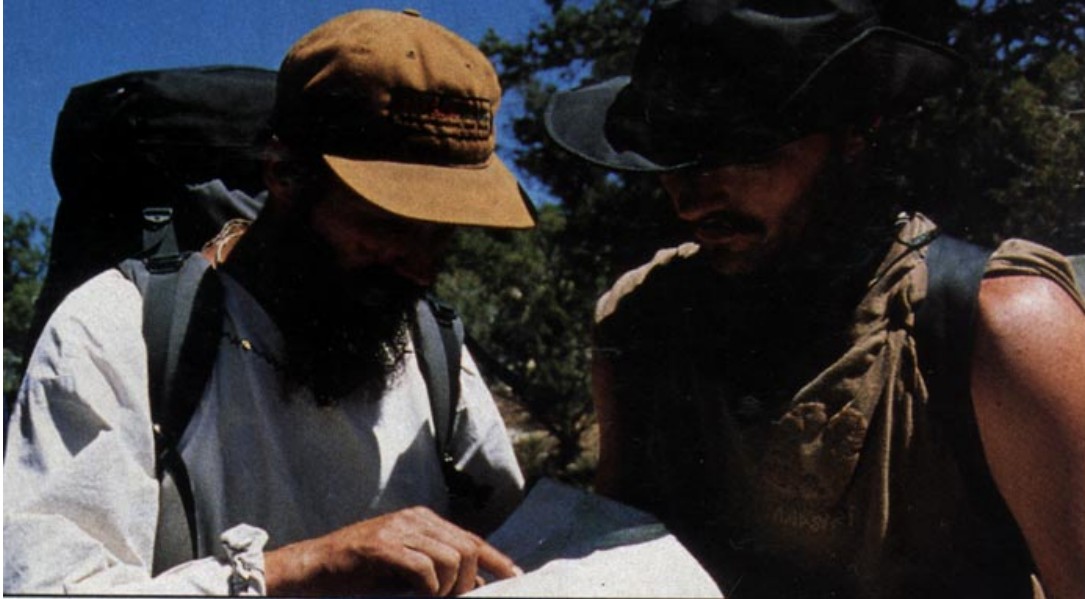
More than that, I wanted a snack. “There have been instances where people have survived mainly on thistles,” Rob said ominously. Scott, another instructor, whipped out a wicked-looking knife. “Thank you, brother,” he said to the thistle and gave it the *coup de grace*. After scraping off the fibrous outer layer, he sliced the stalk into two-inch sections, one for each of us. It tasted . . . green. “I thought we were supposed to get 1,500 calories a day,” said Dick, a financial analyst from Pittsburgh, who

was there with his wife, Evy. “We will,” wisecracked Tom, a computer troubleshooter from San Diego. “They just didn’t say *which* day we’re supposed to get that much.”

Our instructors weren’t telling us much of anything, but that’s par for “impact,” the first part of any field course. Impact aims to test your endurance with a constantly changing environment, minimal instruction, no information and even less sympathy. “Impact mimics the situation you’d be in if you got stranded in the wilderness,” was how Dave Wescott, the director of BOSS, explained it to me



The Camp From Hell



(Continued from page 95) us much more than a blanket, a water bottle, a knife and some texturized vegetable protein (TVP). Mother Nature would still be our major supplier. Since you never knew whether you'd pass another cottonwood tree, whose chewed-up twigs make good toothbrush substitutes; or a milkweed bush, whose waxy, pink flowers are as filling as a handful of raisins, we learned to grab as we went.

Lost and found: BOSS instructors make enrollees use their instincts to live in the harsh environment.

from hiker to hunter-gatherer changes the way you walk. You look around more. You learn to let your feet instinctively find the right placement. You notice more things. I wasn't yet ready to call the thistle my brother, but maybe a distant cousin.

Lesson 3: In the wilds, everything

Chewed-up cottonwood twigs make a good toothbrush. Milkweed flowers are as filling as raisins.

We drank water whenever and wherever we could find it. "Your best canteen is your belly," the instructors intoned. The problem was finding the stuff. Cottonwood trees were a good indicator. So were animal tracks, which are most easily seen in early-morning or late-afternoon light. But if you squinted, even the most barren hill would reveal a network of faint trails. Eventually, the dusty lines would converge, form a more visible track and lead to water.

That's how we found a veritable oasis one day—a spring-fed pond, surrounded by AstroTurf-green grass, in the shade of two leafy cottonwoods nestled under the shoulder of a cliff. It took up no more space than my New York studio apartment, but it was paradise.

Lesson 2: The metamorphosis

takes much longer than you think it will. Though we spent a morning twisting milkweed fibers into cordage, I had barely two feet to show for it. Want a spoon for your nightly TVP-vegetable-bean stew? Find a flat piece of wood or bone, preferably with an "elbow" to form a handle, then whittle out a bowl. Every day, we secured our blanket packs with a cat's cradle of intricately knotted rope.

The painstaking deliberation involved in just about all aspects of primitive life attunes you to the vibrations of the land. Nothing short of such an intimate connection will net you a trout dinner. To earn one, start by taking off most of your clothes, so you'll have something dry to put on afterward. Splash noisily through the stream, tossing some dirt as you go, to scare the trout into the cutbanks and

create a little camouflage. Find a cutbank nicely overhung with swift water outside and still water inside. Crouch down in the water and reach underneath, wiggling your fingers so that any trout you encounter will think your fingers are minnows.

Now let's say you touch a trout and don't jerk your hands away or otherwise startle it. With one hand, you're supposed to tickle its belly down to its tail. With the other hand, tickle it up from its belly to its gills. Then grab the trout with both hands—which isn't easy because brown trout are often 12 inches or more of slippery, desper-



ately flopping muscle. Take it to the bank, where you left a rock. Bash its head with the rock, and string it on a pre-gathered willow branch. You can gut it back at camp with the sliver of obsidian you spent the morning honing. Then you can try to build a fire and cook.

Lesson 4: Just because there's smoke doesn't mean there's fire. "Trying to find a straight piece of sagebrush is one of life's more frustrating experiences," Rob warned. But that's what you need, a kink-free sage spindle about eight inches long, plus a cottonwood fire board, a stone or bone hand-held anchor, a bowdrill and a pile of crushed sage bark cradled in a juniper-bark nest. Using the spindle as the fulcrum of the bowdrill, Rob produced a coal with as much grace as Yo-Yo Ma playing Bach. Then he

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flicked the coal into the bark nest, blew through it and, *whoosh*, held fire in his hands.

I, on the other hand, sawed away gracelessly, the string slipping off the spindle. I created piercing squeaks and copious smoke, but no coal. I ground down one spindle after another. No coal. I tried Rob's prized elderwood spindle. No coal. An instructor suggested I wasn't putting enough elbow grease into it. "Or maybe you lack the will to succeed," he added. Great. I was failing a course in Darwin's Law of Survival; not an auspicious way to approach my upcoming solo.

Soul survivor

The day and night you spend on your own is the culmination of the course. "This is your space, your time," Rob said. "You'll never have that in the real world, so be here in the here and now." With that, he left.

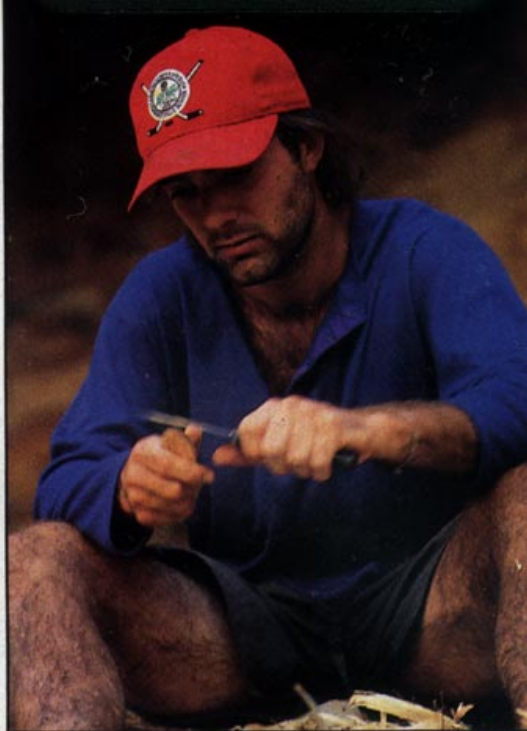
By this point, I knew I could easily endure 24 hours of privation. And as kingdoms went, mine wasn't bad. It was set on the southern bank of the Escalante River, bordered by a tamarisk tree to the east and an eruption of red rock to the west and sheltered by a cliff at my back. Further exploration revealed shady stands of cottonwood, plenty of blooming milkweed (lunch!) and sage (post-lunch!), as well as a little hill from which to observe it all.

I had planned to do all sorts of activities—improve my whittling skills, twist cordage from dried milkweed

School for survival

Boulder Outdoor Survival School offers courses ranging from week-long primitive skills techniques taught at a base camp to field courses that range from one week to 27 days. A seven-day field course costs \$725. Summer courses are given from June through August.

BOSS provides a list of required equipment, most of which you can rent or buy through the school's store. Call or write Boulder Outdoor Survival School, Box 1590, Boulder, CO 80306, 800-335-7404; or at field headquarters in Boulder, UT, 801-335-7404.



Spoon man: Whittling your own utensils is standard BOSS fare.

fibers, peck out a stone bowl, go fishing. Instead, I sat on my hill, watched the shadows shift on the red rock wall and listened to the humming insects and twittering swallows. To my surprise, I felt a tremendous sense of peace and contentment.

I had learned to push beyond what I considered my physical limits and discovered an unsuspected well of inner strength. And, for the first time in my life, I felt at ease in the wilderness. I could survive. I may prefer a mattress pad to dirt or brush, and toilet paper to sagebrush, but I know now that I could live comfortably without them if I had to.

When the sun slid below the cliff rim, I effortlessly started a fire with a nest of sagebrush fibers and my bow drill. Crouching by the coals, I ate my rations: a soup of lentils and rice that I'd spiked with sharp cresses, ash cakes (patties of flour and water that you cook directly on the coals) and milkweed blossoms for dessert. The stars pricked through the velvet vault above, and the moon soared. I felt suspended in time.

It was then that I heard the faint roar of a jet far overhead, the first harbinger of returning civilization. □

Catherine Fredman, a frequent contributor, shudders when she sees sagebrush.