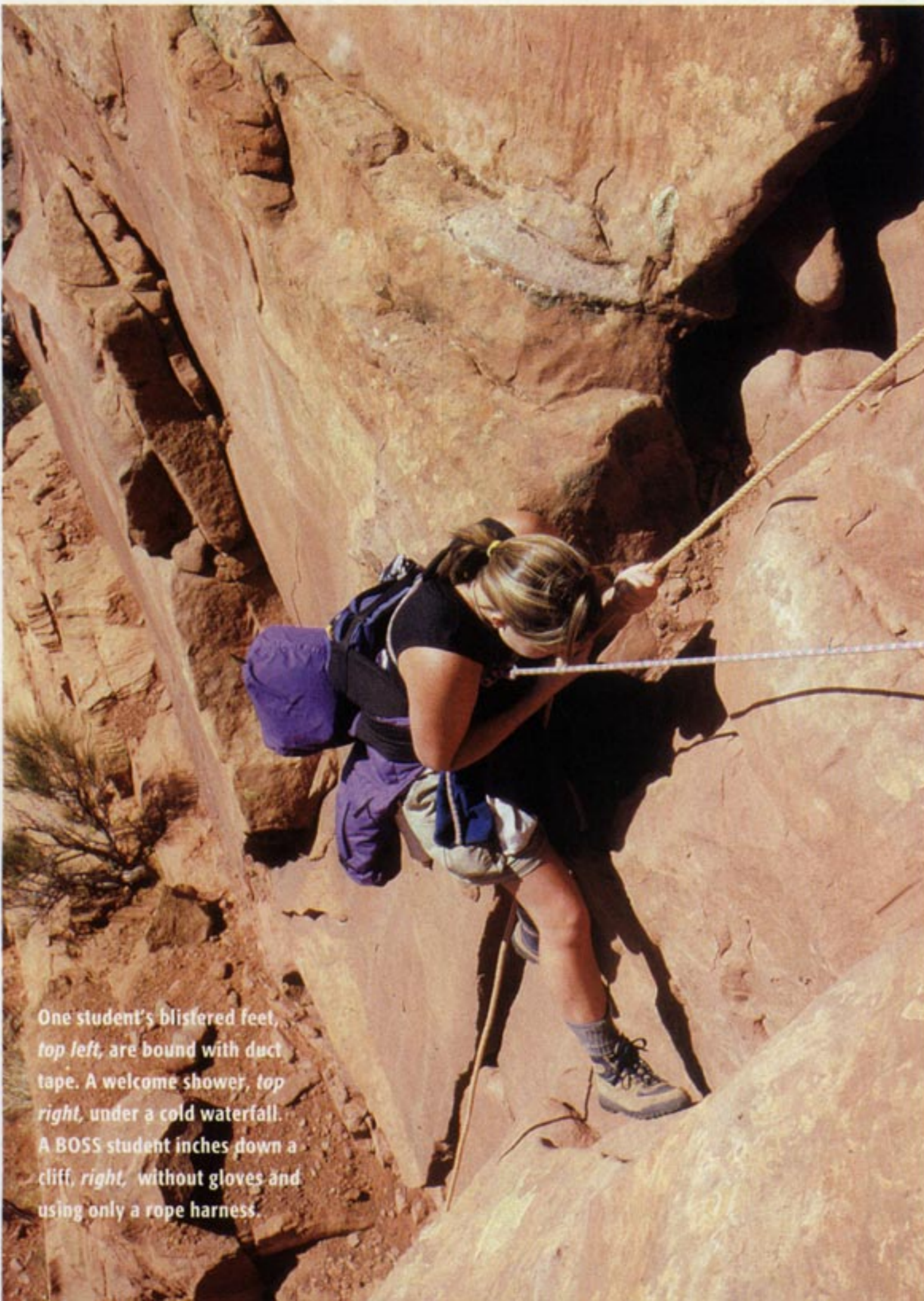




Cutting the Cord

A two week crash course at the Boulder Outdoor Survival School teaches students how to subsist in the wild with nothing but a knife.



One student's blistered feet, top left, are bound with duct tape. A welcome shower, top right, under a cold waterfall. A BOSS student inches down a cliff, right, without gloves and using only a rope harness.

The sun peeked mischievously over the horizon, like a kid peeking over the fence of a nudist colony. I peaked back, happy to see it after a night of shiver-prevention pushups and little sleep. It then tip-toed quietly up into the sky. But nothing tip-toes past our guide, Mike Ryan. "Wakey, wakey!" he says to us.

Thus dawned day two of the Boulder Outdoor Survival School (BOSS) experience. BOSS is a primitive survival school held in the deserts and mountains outside of Boulder, Utah, in the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. Its purpose is to teach students how to survive in the wild with nothing but a knife. "In today's society we use technology to get the job done," says Dave Westcott, BOSS Program Director. "But what happens if you become lost in the wild without that technology. We'll teach you how to create the technology (from nature's raw materials) to get the job done."

I was one of 17 students and six leaders on the course. During the first week, we split into two groups. Each group covered between eight and 15 miles per day and met back at base camp at the end of the week.

The first three days of the course are called Impact. We carry only a knife, a buttpack with journal, camera and first-

aid kit and the clothes on our backs. We have no tents, sleeping bags, backpacks, canteen or food.

The purpose of Impact, as Dave puts it: "...is to sever the umbilical cord between ourselves and society." If technology is the umbilical cord, then Impact is the scalpel."

We do not linger in our camp among the junipers. Any chance we have of finding food and water are on the trail. We haven't had water since early the night before so finding water is prime priority. Mike leads us out of the junipers into the dry red rock desert. Along the way he stops to point out some fragile crypto-biotic soil. He explains that it takes several years for this type of soil to grow in the arid desert environment but can be destroyed in a matter of seconds by a hiker's careless footsteps. "The desert grows by the inch," Mike explains, "but is destroyed by the foot."

The terrain gradually descends. We do not follow a trail but simply Mike's

knowledge of space. We pass Brigham Tea, rabbitbrush, low-lying manzanita bushes, white oak trees and foot-high volcanoes of gravel and sand erupting with red ants. Black, green and rust-colored lichen cover flat gray rocks in a splotchy rash.

I walk past some sagebrush, pull off a sprig, crush it and rub it over my cheeks, neck and arms for no other reason than it smells better than sweat.

Several hours later we reach a bony red-rock promontory known as Impossible Peak. From atop it we see a green vein in the desert floor. Water?

We switchback single file across narrow ledges down the mountain. About three-fourths of the way down, the trail ends abruptly at the edge of a cliff and begins again thirty feet below us. A rope, anchored into nearby rocks, hangs to the bottom. We have no rappelling gear so must go down hand over hand. With a belay rope around my chest just under my armpits, I take hold of the rope and scoot over the edge. I am care-

ful not to go too fast because if I start slipping, I won't be able to stop myself without burning through the flesh of my hands. We all make it down safely.

The terrain slowly flattens into foothills. Mike leads us closer to the green vein at the bottom of the desert. The sun sneers, leans into us with its full weight. Cottonwoods and pinions appear among the sagebrush, the air seasoned with humidity, the smell of decomposition. And then, there it is. Water.

It sludges along in the bottom of a swampy ravine scarcely bigger than a ditch. We drop our backpacks in the shade of some junipers. I drip in some purification drops. It's more moss and bugs than water, like drinking shag carpet. I strain out the chunks through closed teeth. Not just closed, I realize, but gritted.

With our thirst satisfied, we scan the terrain for edibles. Not far from the watering hole, Mike overturns a rotting log. Underneath we find ants and ant

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larvae. The ants, which are small and black, taste like chlorine. The larvae taste surprisingly like almonds.

I notice thick cumulonimbus thunderheads moving towards us from the west. A lizard skims across the Navajo sandstone. Locusts take short flights from the junipers and sagebrush, their ratchety wings sounding like playing cards stuck in bicycle spokes. Pretty soon, the thundercloud rumbles overhead. At first the drops are small and feel good but they soon get larger, splattering fatly onto the dry ground. It's what the Navajos call a female rain: soft, warm, undamaging. We're wearing the only clothes we have and none of us wants to spend a long night sleeping in cold, wet clothes so we take shelter under the river birch trees, tucking back in as close to their bases as possible. Legs itch in the tall, wet grass. Empty stomachs rumble. The rain doesn't quit but lessens enough for Mike to head out again.

I am feeling tired, hot and a little

Only low-lying, drought-resistant vegetation—like Brigham Tea, rabbit-brush, manzanita bushes, and scrub oak—thrive in the dry, red rock desert.

light headed. My legs start feeling tingly, like dozens of ants are crawling up and down them. I look down and notice that dozens of ants are crawling up and down my legs. I started eating them. This is, after all, a survival camp. I even get bit on the tongue by one of the ants. I admire that ant. He had guts.

We hike along like tired mules, no longer curious, our eyes no longer darting to the scenery ahead or beside us, but focus only on the trail, the next step, thoughts turned inward. I wonder when we'll stop for the night, when we'll find water. I think about hamburgers, banana shakes, peanut butter, water. The wind blowing through the trees sounds like running water.

Finally we reach the top of Dry Bench and make camp. We scrape together piles of pine needles to insu-

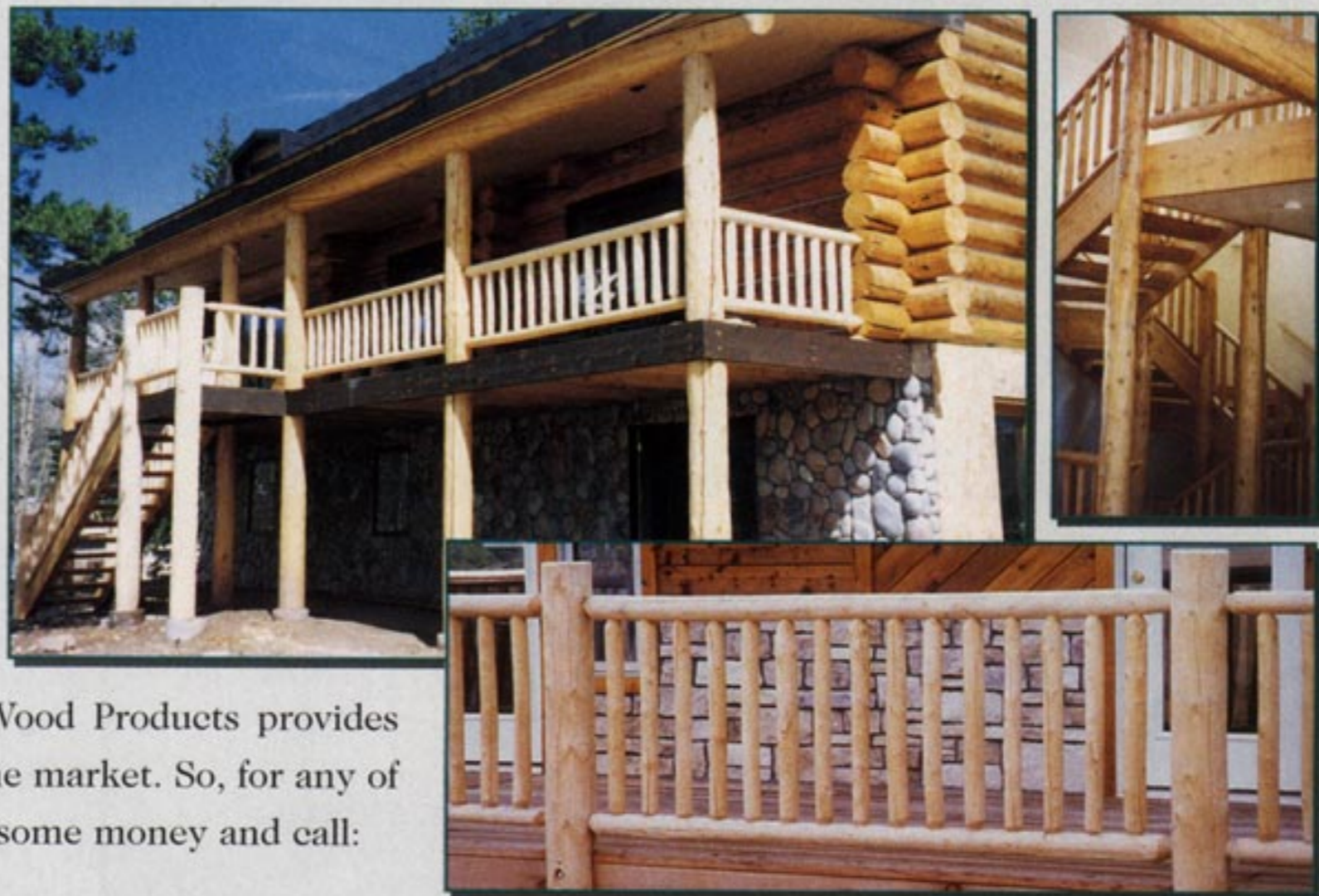


late us from the cold ground. It's the only layer we have between us and the cold. Stomachs growl. Muscles sigh. Sleeping on the Brrr! trail again.

But, we awake the next day feeling refreshed and cautiously optimistic.

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We scatter out our pine needle beds and move out. We come upon the first water of the day when the sun is a handspan east of zenith, a small, fresh stream that looks promising. We follow that stream for most of the day which means we don't have to go for long, body-shocking stretches without water.

After Impact (the first three days), we are each given 1,500 calories of food per day in the form of oatmeal, rice, legumes and trail mix. We also get a poncho and wool blanket which made the nights a lot more bearable.

Over the remaining eleven days, my group endured more hunger, thirst, aching muscle, frustration. One of us passed out from fatigue. One of us got foot blisters so bad they had to be superglued shut and bound with duct tape. One day, we hiked through the desert for 20 hours straight, covering 32 miles. We survived days of eating ants, yucca fruit (believe me, they don't call it yucca for nothing) and ash cakes smeared with wild currant jam. We endured cold nights without tent or fire.

The purpose of BOSS is to teach its students how to survive in the wilderness long enough to be found or better yet, to find their own way out. During those two weeks we learned how to build a shelter, to make fire with a bow and drill, to navigate with map and compass, and to identify edible plants and bugs.

Since history began, men and women have gone into the desert to test, prove, tempt, find and lose themselves. They have gone to look for answers, to divine their place in life, to prove themselves, to seek miracles.

What lessons did I learn? I gained a new attitude, new confidence, a new outlook regarding daily life's challenges and obstacles. After surviving a night of rain without shelter or a hot desert day without water, facing a disgruntled boss, an angry client or a rush-hour flat tire doesn't seem so intimidating.

You could say that the desert and I exchanged footprints. I left a signature of footprints in its red hill sand. It left its own footprint tattooed in my memory. ▲