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# Survival of the littlest

Wendy Miller joins a group of 10-year-olds for the ultimate outdoor adventure

It doesn't get much better than this. Not only have the Year Fives of Highfield School spent the entire night out in the woods, sleeping in log shelters, but they are now cooking great big kebabs over camp fires that they themselves have lit.

All right, so if you look a couple of hundred yards in one direction, you can see the reassuring outline of the school buildings. Look in the other, though, and you have got 175 acres of wild, untamed Hampshire woods.

It's been a long 36 hours since the children first set foot in the forest, yet these 10-year-olds are still having fun. They have learnt to find water, bake bread, coax sparks from wooden sticks and build cosy, weatherproof lodgings out of branches, twigs and piles of green ferns (for the roof).

Weren't they scared, though, at having to sleep outdoors in total darkness? "I was too excited to be scared," says fleece-clad Fraser Hutchinson. "We didn't get much sleep; though. Five hours maximum."

"More like three," says classmate Corisand Lyster-Binns happily. "There was lots of talking." And she means lots. Plus singing of Abba songs at three in the morning.

What there wasn't, though, was tears and pleas to be taken home and for this, much credit goes to the five-strong team from the survival course specialists Bushcraft Company. Unlike similar firms, they are not middle-aged ex-Marines, but former public schoolboys and schoolgirls in their early twenties.

"I knew from the start that employing gap-toothed paratroopers wasn't going to work," says the firm's 23-year-old founder Alex McBarnet, who, as a pupil at Cheltenham College, spent his holidays training with survival expert Ray Mears. "I wanted people who wouldn't scare the kids."

And he's got them, judging from



## STAYING ALIVE

If you are lost in the wild:

- ♣ **Do** build a shelter (tie one log between two trees, lean branches against it).
- ♣ **Do** light a fire (for cooking, boiling and drying clothes).
- ♣ **Do** make finding water a priority (try the bottom of a hill).
- ♣ **Don't** smother a fire; wait till flames have risen above one twig layer before adding another.
- ♣ **Don't** drink water without either boiling it or filtering it (through a sock or T-shirt).
- ♣ **Don't** poke a stick into a fire; once taken out, someone might pick up the hot end.

**Going wild: Highfield pupils get survival tips from Alex McBarnet, top, and Joel Andreas, above left**



CLARA MOLDEN

the close attention with which all 46 Highfield boys and girls are listening to bearded instructor Phil Gallimore (just back from sailing the Atlantic). As they sit beneath an atmospherically suspended parachute canopy, he explains the importance of finding drinking water should they ever get lost for real.

"Remember, you can go without food for a fortnight," he says. "But two to three days without water, and you're a goner."

Watching from a tree trunk a little way back are the Highfield staff, who are impressed with what they see. "The children are all completely immersed in the whole adventure," says Year Five teacher Jo Gordon.

That the course has been a success is particularly pleasing to Highfield deputy head Giles Entwisle, who first encountered McBarnet and co at his previous school, Holmewood House, in Tunbridge Wells. "Like a growing

number of schools, this element of broader education is intrinsic to what we do," he says. "More and more, we are trying to think beyond the classroom." So much so that all 230 pupils at Highfield (a co-ed prep school) now get two bushcraft days per year – something that wouldn't even have been contemplated 30 years ago, when woods were strictly out of bounds.

Today, though, an increasing number of head teachers are trying to reconnect their young charges to nature, as a result of which the Bushcraft Company has built up a client list of two dozen schools, all in the independent sector. No question that McBarnet's public school pedigree helps here, but he insists he'd be just as happy working with the maintained sector.

"It's not that we charge a particularly huge amount," he says (£45 per pupil per day). "It's just that

there's so much bureaucracy involved in getting state schools to commit to a course like this."

But, while local authorities may be too nervous to take the plunge, parents are happy to pack their young off, both on sleep-outs like this and on McBarnet's week-long summer camps, in Oxfordshire. There the children learn survival skills in the middle of 900-year-old Wychwood Forest.

"It's marvellous to see young people getting to understand an ancient natural environment," says Lord Rotherwick, on whose estate the forest stands. "And at the same time, of course, their presence here gives us the financial means to care for that environment, on behalf of generations yet to come."

♣ The Bushcraft Company runs courses for all ages, from eight upwards (01865 339591; www.thebushcraftcompany.com)