



David Tamowski hikes near his home in Sandy, Utah.



LOST IN THE RAINFOREST

David Tamowski, 58, was alone in the New Zealand bush for 10 days in April 2015. As told to Carolyn Webber

MAYBE THIS ISN'T SUCH A BAD PLACE to die, I thought, looking at the hills and meadows. It was my eighth day in the New Zealand wilderness, and I'd begun to suspect it might be one of my last.

My wife's family lives in Auckland, but I'd flown into Queenstown to squeeze in a hike before meeting up with her and her folks. I was going solo, but with nearly a decade of experience backpacking across the U.S., I wasn't worried.

I stopped by the Department of Conservation office to plan a route and rent an emergency beacon. There, some locals suggested a four-day trek in the Humboldt Mountains. I'd make a 25-mile loop, taking the Rockburn Track to cross Sugarloaf Pass, Park Pass, and North Col. Then I'd follow the popular Routeburn Track down. Easy.

I grabbed a map and made my way to the door.

It wasn't until later, on a bus to the trailhead, that I realized I'd forgotten the beacon. I left my wife's cousin a voice-mail with my itinerary, sure that would be sufficient.

The trek started in overgrown rainforest. The 60°F autumn afternoon felt cooler in the shade of the moss-draped trees. I spent the first two days following the track through thick undergrowth. On day three, fog set in, and visibility shrank to 30 feet. I was nearing North Col, the last pass, and had plenty of time before my day-four deadline. I slowed my pace. Beneath me, the trail grew fainter.

When I crested the pass, the fog lifted and I frowned—I'd known the descent was going to be steep, but I'd expected a visible path down, at least. I assumed I'd been sandbagged—Kiwis are famous for that—but was still on the right track.

As I crab-crawled my way down, I noticed my compass dangling off my belt loop. Balancing on the near-vertical terrain, I fumbled to move it into my pack, but it slipped and disappeared in the underbrush. I reached for the map in my side pocket. Gone, lost somewhere in the rocks behind me.

As the slope grew steeper, I realized I must have missed the descent route. I shook it off, sure I'd find a clear trail at the bottom. Besides, the only way out now was down.

By dusk, I was still crawling, grabbing fistfuls of roots and branches to save myself from an uncontrollable slide into the rocks and vegetation below. I was behind schedule, but I was certain I'd find the trail and make up for the lost time tomorrow. I set up camp on a narrow ledge.

The next morning, the fourth day, I continued my descent. I figured I was a few hours from the valley bottom and from there it would be 4 or 5 miles to the trailhead. *I'll be eating in a diner by sunset*, I thought.

Around 10 a.m., I emerged from the brush on a riverbank, near a small island. I didn't remember any water crossings on this part of the route, so I traced the shore downstream, still sure I'd hit the footpath any minute. But as I walked, the roar of the water grew louder. I turned a corner and found the river seething into whitewater, pouring over a series of cliffs. *Where was the damn trail?*

I ducked into the undergrowth, following a deer path. Six hours later, I was exhausted—I'd only gone about 2 miles through the maze of downed trees and dense branches.

I returned to the riverbank to camp. My wife would expect a call soon. As I ate the last meal I'd packed, I tried not to think how worried she'd be when that call never came.

On day five, I scanned the mountain for a path through the trees and spotted a stripe of rock cutting through.

After hours of scrambling, I found myself gazing up at a sheer rock face. I was hemmed in on all sides by cliffs and waterfalls. That's when it sank in: I had no idea where I was, I had no idea if anyone else knew where I was, and, without a rescue, I wasn't getting out any time soon.

I knew my best chance for rescue was getting out in the open. I spent day six hiking back to the river island, where I made a 12-by-12-foot X out of stones. The next day, I hiked around as I waited, scoping out the area for a better plan.

Day eight. No one was coming. I decided I needed to make at least one more attempt to save myself. I hiked toward the ridge, looking for a way out of the valley. First I hit snow, then yet another wall of rock. I retreated and made it to my previous camp just as the sun set.

That night I looked over my rations and determined that I had enough snacks for a hungry few days. Rescue seemed to be my only hope, but as I tried and failed to build

a signal fire with wet wood, even that hope grew pale. I was out of options. I kicked myself when I thought of that beacon, sitting on the shelf at the DOC where I'd left it.

Backtracking the way I'd come was physically impossible. Even when my food ran out, I'd have shelter and water and could survive for a few weeks. But what then? I turned my phone on and started recording messages. I told my wife and kids I loved them, that I was proud of them. I'm not an emotional guy, but by the last message, I was tearing up

Day nine. I'd spotted a bigger meadow on my foray the day before and packed up to move toward it—clinging to the faint hope of rescue. As I zipped my pack shut, I heard a helicopter, then spotted the SAR craft hovering over the valley rim. I froze, then scrambled to gather tinder. I didn't expect it to light, so when it did, I ran around like mad, sawing off dead branches with my pocket knife to feed the flames as the helicopter started moving again.

I stood next to my fire as the chopper passed overhead and vanished.

I was too anxious to sleep. *What if it didn't return? What if it did and I missed it?*

In the morning, I set off for the meadow. There, I spread my sleeping bag, tarp, and groundcloth and, not long after, a different helicopter appeared, just above the trees, following the river. I waved, half-crazed with relief.

But it flew by twice more. *Was the pilot messing with me?* On the third pass, the chopper landed. Out stepped a man in a long, blood-covered coat, with a knife strapped to his belt.

This is not search and rescue, I thought. I explained my situation, and he looked put out at the inconvenience. I learned he was a deer hunter, and surprised to see me. I also learned, by looking at a map, that I was on the north side of the mountain—after getting turned around in the fog, I'd descended the wrong slope.

After we landed, the pilot's father drove me into town. He told me he knows people who come back to the rainforest year after year to look for friends they've lost. Most of them are never found. I'd just gotten lucky. 🦋



GET FOUND

1. Stay put.

When you realize you're lost and are expecting rescue—or aren't expecting rescue but have exhausted all reasonable leads—find a safe, open place to establish shelter, and stop moving. Fields, hilltops, and ridges are the most visible.

2. Brighten up.

Put on colorful layers and stake out your tent; make sure you stand out from your surroundings.

3. Build a signal fire.

Gather material, and get it ready to light. Wait 24 to 48 hours after you believe you were reported missing (no sense wasting fuel if you don't need the warmth). If fuel is scarce, wait until you hear or see an aircraft (getting to high ground will help you spot a plane when it's still far off). At night, use dry wood for a bright blaze. In daylight, add green leaves or plastic garbage to create dark smoke.

4. Send signals.

Create a geometric pattern like an X with rocks or clothing. See someone coming? Flash a headlamp (at night) or signal mirror (during the day) in the direction of approaching aircraft.