

## Make a Garbage Bag Shelter Part of Your Survival Kit

by Leon Pantenburg, Survival Common Sense

I'm not sure how the early settlers along the Oregon Trail or the western frontier got along without duct tape, WD-40 or trash bags, but life surely would have been easier with them!

Trash bags, in particular, are included in all my survival kits. They have a multitude of uses, including being containers for picking up trash! But in an emergency, when correctly used, trash bags can prove a quick, temporary shelter from the elements.

I first noticed this trash bag shelter use at an Iowa State University football game in the early 70s. The weather got really bad during the half, with snow, rain and wind. But one row of die-hard Cyclones pulled out a roll of plastic trash bags, cut holes for their heads and arms, and weathered the storm. I don't recall how the football team did!

Since then, I've taken shelter in trash bags on a variety of outdoor activities. Trash bags are particularly valuable on hunting trips, because a large bag gives you a place to lay meat while you're butchering.



This 55-gallon trash can liner can provide a quick emergency shelter. (All photos by Peter Kummerfeldt)

Obviously, if you anticipate bad weather, be prepared for it, stay home or take along a lightweight, four season backpacking tent. But, c'mon, how many of you are going to lug around a tent on every outing? Most of us will carry it a time or two, and eventually, the tent will end up getting left at the trailhead. Then, some day late in the afternoon, you realize you're lost or in a survival situation. You'll have to build some sort of shelter before it gets dark.

Reality shows to the contrary, you probably won't be able to build a shelter out of natural materials, says survival expert Peter Kummerfeldt.

"I believe it is impossible for the survivor to build a waterproof, windproof shelter from natural materials," Peter writes in [Surviving a Wilderness Emergency](#). "Shelters made from natural materials require time, natural resources, a cutting tool and a fully-functional survivor who has practiced building emergency shelters in the past! The survivor needs a waterproof, windproof shelter now!"

Large, heavy grade (3 or 4 mil) 55-gallon drum liners can make a good short term shelter. But don't just crawl in and hunker down. Like any survival technique, you need to prepare and practice to use this shelter.

"Totally encapsulating yourself inside a plastic bag is not a good idea," Peter advises. "Apart from the need for oxygen, the water vapor in the air you exhale, and your perspiration, will condense on the inner surfaces, and you will get quite wet."

To avoid this problem, cut an opening in the closed end of the bag with your survival knife or the scissors on your multi-tool just large enough to allow you to pass your head through. The bag is then passed over your head until your face aligns with the hole and the moist air is exhaled outside.

To make the hole, Peter advises cutting the plastic at a 90-degree angle along a seam about five inches below one corner. The hole should be just big enough to pass your head through when you are getting too warm.



This shelter technique very well. In Boy Scout Troop 18, we keep a roll of 45-gallon plastic bags from one of the local tire stores. Each scout takes one on hikes or campouts, in case they need to improvise a shelter, rain poncho or pack cover. The smaller bags are just the right size to cover the little guys from head to toe.

Trash bags for shelters are easy to come by. Your local hardware store will probably have contractor-grade 45 and 55 gallon bags. You can also look in the storage area. I found 55-gallon, 3-mil bright yellow bags, designed to cover furniture for long term storage, that will work quite well as shelters.

Include an insulated pad for sitting upon, because the plastic bag doesn't have any insulation.

Color is another consideration. I prefer blaze orange or bright yellow to help rescuers find me. But if you want to avoid being found, just get the standard black color. Get in the shade of a

tree, under a black bag and you will be pretty well camouflaged. A large white bag, also in the shade of a tree, will allow you to blend in well with snow.

I carry several tire bags, along with an orange 55-gallon heavy duty bag as part of my Ten Essentials survival kit and my hunting gear. My orange bag already has a head hole cut. In a pinch, per Peter's advice, I'll stick my feet in a smaller bag, pull it up around my waist and pull the orange bag down over me.

Also, as recommended by Peter, I always carry a piece of insulite foam for sitting upon. The plastic bag provides no insulation, and the cold ground will suck the heat right out of you. The padded, warm seat will make waiting to be found much more comfortable!

Obviously, an emergency shelter is just that. It is designed to be used in an emergency, and nobody ever claimed a trash bag shelter is the best choice under any and all circumstances. But a trash bag is light, will give you a waterproof shelter from nasty weather, and is compact and light enough to be taken anywhere. Remember this thought when you're putting together a survival kit, bug-out bag or a set of wilderness or urban survival tools:

***No piece of survival equipment is worth anything if you don't have it with you!***