



Interest in going off grid, being a survivalist growing during the pandemic

Connecting with nature, being self-sufficient has restorative health benefits, says expert

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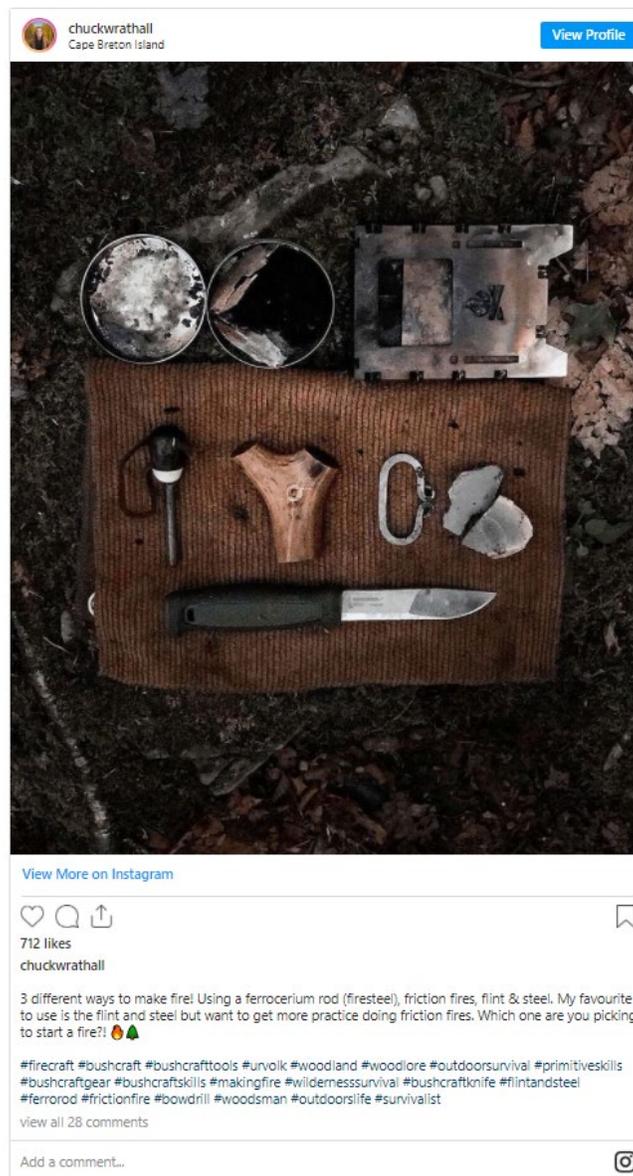
Chuck Wrathall documents his adventures in wilderness survival on his Instagram page. (Chuck Wrathall)

As Canadians holed up at home away from family and friends or swept grocery store shelves clean of toilet paper, others took pandemic precautions a leap further this year, turning to living off the grid and learning survival skills.

Chuck Wrathall, a survivalist and photographer from Cape Breton, runs an Instagram account dedicated to his adventures and has received an influx of messages from people wanting to learn the ropes since COVID-19 hit.

"Bushcraft has exploded. People love the wilderness skills. They want to know how to survive, how to forage, how to go out and hunt and gather," he said. "Plus they want to know how to be self-reliant so that could mean off the grid or being self-sufficient, having solar or having water collection."

Wrathall can't say for sure what's drawing so many people to the survivalist community that he's been a part of for 10 years. He frequently heads to the woods where he forages for food and purifies his own water, sets up a basic shelter and cooks over an open flame — outdoor escapades he documents on social media.



Charles Moffat's Facebook group, Off Grid Nova Scotia, had about 300 members before the pandemic. As 2020 nears its end, membership in the group has surged to about 3,000.

Moffat's group focuses on everything that comes along with living off the grid, from farming and water purification to tips on sustainable living.

His group isn't the only one to see an increase in its members lately. Facebook groups like Canadian Prepper, Canada Emergency Preppers, and Preppers & Survivalists of Canada have also seen an uptick since the start of the pandemic.

The International Canadian School of Survival, a Manitoba-based organization specializing in skills like bushcraft, land navigation, wildlife awareness and survival training, said although the pandemic has kept people from taking classes in person, there have been many requests for information.

"There has been an increase in a lot of different areas, from a lot of different people, from a lot of different backgrounds," said Dave MacDonald, the school's lead instructor and president.



Despite not being able to hold in-person classes, the International Canadian School of Survival has been receiving many requests for information from people wanting to take survival courses, says Dave MacDonald, the school's president and lead instructor. (Submitted by Dave MacDonald)

MacDonald, a former search and rescue technician with the Royal Canadian Air Force, said there's been a lot of interest in the school's wilderness safety and survival course. The course focuses on first aid, injury avoidance, foraging for food and shelter construction. He's also seen growing interest in navigation and using maps, compasses and GPS.

Besides being one of the few outdoor activities people can do during the pandemic, Wrathall said being a survivalist teaches resourcefulness — a skill that's always useful.

"Those kinds of TV shows like Domsday Preppers and stuff like that ... made a mockumentary about prepping and stuff," he said. "But then sure enough pandemic hits and who's in the right now? The guys that were prepping."

Domsday Preppers was a reality TV show that profiled survivalists, but was criticized by some for exploiting and ridiculing its subjects.

But preparing for disaster is not an unconventional idea.

Organizations such as the Canadian Red Cross regularly recommend people keep disaster preparedness kits in their homes with enough supplies, food and water to meet their needs for at least three days. Earlier this year when the pandemic intensified, many Canadians found themselves clearing their local stores of Lysol disinfecting wipes, toilet paper and hand sanitizer before quarantining.

Psychologist Simon Sherry said anxiety about running out of crucial supplies might drive some people to practise preparedness.



Prolonged contact with nature has restorative benefits for mental and physical health, says psychologist Simon Sherry. (Submitted photo)

"Not everyone who's stockpiling may be irrational in the face of scarcity," said Sherry, a professor in Dalhousie University's department of psychology and neuroscience.

He said in some cases, post-traumatic stress disorder could lead to a person going off the grid or engaging in survivalist behaviour. Likewise, fear and anxiety may lead people to behave differently than they normally would, including engaging in more excessive buying to quell their fears.

Sherry said examples in popular culture like Doomsday Preppers have greatly contributed to how people in the survivalist community are perceived. But just like any other behaviour, there are a variety of reasons why people do what they do, he said.

"Well-adjusted humans often have a sense of autonomy and self sufficiency ... More and more we're learning about the importance of time and nature, and the restorative benefits of contact with nature in terms of mental and physical health," he said.

"A self-sufficient lifestyle that involves prolonged contact with nature might very well be better than grinding it out on the 102 on your commute to your nine-to-five."

Wrathall seconds that sentiment, saying for many people such as himself, practising things like bushcraft and survival skills is more than a pandemic precaution — it's a way of life.

"Every time I get out into the woods, it's my escape. After work, you're having a bad day, I can go practise my bushcraft skills," he said. "I'm just completely secluded in the wilderness. There's nothing better than that."