

I've got this

Outdoor magazines regularly provide backcountry survival advice. Tips like how to avoid dehydration, freezing, hypothermia, lightning strikes, drowning, and bear attacks.

But I've yet to read about what may be the biggest threat of all: overconfidence.

Overconfidence has put me in peril more than once. Like the Sunday afternoon I set out to hunt elk in the Little Belt Mountains. I'd planned to follow a simple route I'd found the previous weekend: up a drainage then back to the vehicle by sundown. I didn't bother bringing a compass, much less a GPS. It was a straightforward out-and-back hunt.

Except it wasn't. The trail imperceptibly circled around a small mountain. While I thought I was heading east, I was actually going northeast, then north, then northwest. When it came time to turn back, the location of the setting sun completely threw me. Instead of backtracking, I panicked and scrambled uphill to see if I could spot the logging road I'd driven in on. By the time I reached a place where I could see anything, it was dark. I was completely lost.

As I sat in the snow pondering my ability

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to survive the cold November night, I saw headlights below in the distance. A pickup seemed to be driving down the mountain-side, miles from the road. Then I realized that *was* the road. My bearings readjusted, I made my way down the mountain, found my vehicle, and arrived home just as my wife was considering a call to search-and-rescue.

Recreating outdoors requires some amount of confidence—that you won't fall off a cliff, for instance, or step on a rattlesnake. Otherwise you wouldn't set foot out the front door. But overconfidence? That can be as dangerous as a startled grizzly with cubs.

Cockiness in the natural world usually comes from a delusional sense of our own abilities. We guys are especially prone. Here in the West, we're supposedly born able to ride a horse, shoot a gun, win a fistfight, and run a rapids. Real men face uncertainty with, "I've got this."

That was my thinking one Saturday in June when my wife and I set off for our first float down the Dearborn, said to be one of Montana's prettiest rivers. The previous week the flow had been about 400 cubic feet per second (cfs), ideal for canoeing. But it rained hard on Friday night. By the time we reached the put-in, the river was the color of chocolate

milk and cranking at over 900 cfs.

Piece of cake, I said to myself. I'd been canoeing most of my life. I'd paddled the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness many times, often traversing the wind-tossed, sealike lakes bordering Canada.

But a lake is not a fast-moving river.

On the Dearborn, I managed to negotiate the first several 90-degree bends and standing-wave rapids, although we took on water and had to pull over to bail. "Are we okay?" Lisa asked after the third stop. By then we were about five miles in and had no way out of the steeply walled canyon except to carry on downstream. "Sure," I said, confidently, though by then I knew we were not okay.

About 30 minutes later, while rounding a bend, we could hear the dull roar of a major rapids. With no time to stop and scout a safe route, we plunged straight into the first standing wave. It hit Lisa square in the chest, knocking her overboard and flipping the canoe. I tumbled through the rapids, bouncing from boulder to boulder in the icy water. I hit one rock so hard I thought my leg was broken.

I crawled to shore and yelled for Lisa. She isn't a strong swimmer, so I imagined the worst. Thankfully, after several excruciating minutes, I heard her reply from downstream. She was shaken and cold but otherwise okay.

The canoe had been swept away, so we climbed out of the canyon and began a five-mile hike back to the car. As I hobbled along after Lisa, using my paddle as a crutch, I wanted to kick myself. My cocksure attitude had put not only my own life in danger, but hers, too.

Then I noticed we both had our life jackets on, and had been wearing them the entire trip. Thankfully, we'd not just stowed them in the canoe—as required by law—but actually put them on. That may have saved our lives.

Some men view wearing a life jacket as an unmanly indication they can't swim or handle a boat. That they in fact haven't "got this."

I'll admit I was foolishly overconfident on the Dearborn, and I definitely learned the limits of my whitewater canoeing skills. But at least I wore my life vest. I'll take wearing a bit of extra bulk over drowning any day. 🐻

