STORY BY **CLAIRE DUNN** PHOTOGRAPHY BY **BEN EY**

Bush survivor

Claire Dunn left behind her comfortable life as a writer to make a home in the Australian bush for one year.

"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach."

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

AFTER CHOOSING the straightest grass-tree stalk from the bundle hanging to dry, I begin to spin it between my palms, grinding it down into a notch carved on a board secured underfoot. Wisps of smoke curl up as I increase the downward pressure. I keep my hands 'floating' up the top of the stalk, trying to conserve energy as the heat builds. "Greater the need, the greater the result," I remind myself, gritting my teeth as my arms and shoulders ache. Hot dust has filled the notch and I increase speed, moving my hands as fast as I can. Smoke starts to billow. Yet, as I have learnt, smoke doesn't mean fire. Forearms shaking, I collapse, exhausted, as the sun melts into liquid gold on the horizon.

The prospect of a dark and hungry night suddenly seems real. Only hours earlier, I had surrendered all my matches and lighters, part of the deal I signed up for as one of six participants in the year-long Independent Wilderness Studies Program. Held on a 40ha bush block on the edge of Sherwood Nature Reserve, 25km south of Grafton, on the NSW north coast, the program combines survival and naturalist training, and is the first of its kind in Australia, a kind of cross between British TV show *Man vs Wild* and the solo wilderness reverie elucidated by American poet and naturalist Henry David Thoreau in his book *Walden*.

We were initially required to build our own primitive shelters, and are now getting instruction from a range of experts in skills such as fire making, hunting and trapping, skinning and tanning hides, bush food, basketry, rope and string making, primitive pottery, tracking, awareness and navigation. Over the next year, ecologists will teach us how to read the landscape and weather, interpret birdsong and identify plants. Local Gumbaynggir elders will impart their knowledge of Aboriginal land use. It won't be a survival-training experience. The majority of our food will

New skills. Participants in the Independent Wilderness Studies Program, in northern NSW, learnt traditional crafts, such as weaving coil baskets (above), shown sitting on a tanned deer hide.

Hunting instinct. Time is of the essence as writer Claire Dunn (opposite, top) transfers a tiny coal from her fireboard into a pre-prepared tinder bundle. Bushcrafts such as fire making and trap building (opposite, below) were essential knowledge. Eels are lured into this lawyer-cane trap by meat placed in the base. Unable to swim backwards, they find themselves trapped.

Bush tucker. Claire plucks waterlilies (opposite, bottom) from a nearby wetland for a bush tucker stir-fry (above), served with a side of freshwater mussels gathered from Dundoo Creek. Most parts of the lily are edible, but the delicacy comes at a cost – several millilitres of blood, taxed by the pond's voracious population of leeches. Nikki Brown (opposite, top) gathers blady grass, which was dried, bundled and used as a thatching material.

come from the local supermarket, and we'll supplement it with bush food and produce from a communal garden. The program sets few constraints, other than a limit of 30 days out of camp, so we have the freedom to choose our own adventures – where we go and what we do. This is my 40th day at the camp and I get the feeling that the other students will all pick adventures very different from mine. I'm joined here by three men: Dan, a public servant; Ryan, a Rocky Mountains, USA, native and yoga enthusiast; and Shaun, a young army recruit with more knives than a chef; as well as two other women, student and spiritualist Zoe; and Nikki, an environmental educator and athlete.

It's comforting to know there are five others just a short distance away, all desperately rubbing sticks together. I wonder if the fire gods have smiled kindly on them. I turn to my back-up method, the 'bow-drill', which uses a stringed bow to spin the stalk. Within minutes I am gratefully crouched next to a smoking ember. I carefully transfer it to a nest of dried bracken and grasses, lined with crushed banksia flowers and stringybark, then begin to blow. The ember grows until, at last, a strong breath ignites the bundle of tinder into flame, which I then hurriedly poke inside the door of my kindling teepee. I have fire.

Soon I'm sitting smug as a Cheshire cat under the paperbark roof of my open kitchen, a hot cuppa in hand, watching the waning light stain pink the ghostly glow from the gnarled scribbly gums. This has been a dream for many years. I barely hesitated to leave friends and family, and a growing career as a writer, to spend a year immersed in the bush. I want only to apprentice myself to Mother Nature, to steep myself in the raw reality of survival, and, like Thoreau, to wander without time or destination, a hawk-eye witness to the unfolding of four full seasons.

SUMMER

"Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!"

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

THE FIRST PRIORITY of survival is shelter. My home is a canvas of bristly bushland, girt by tall grass trees. I've never sunk a post into the ground before, and the concept of designing and building, without power tools or nails, a natural shelter to keep myself warm and dry is mind-boggling. I start with the only structure I can visualise – a simple lean-to for my kitchen, walled with stringybark sheets and roofed with thick paperbark collected from the nearby swamp. Three weeks and three layers of paperbark later, I take "simple" and "shelter" out of the same sentence and have a new appreciation for water's ability to obey gravity. "Watertight" now seems like an oxymoron.

I rein in my grand designs, realising that it needs only to provide protection from rain and cold and will be used for cooking and sleeping. The other rooms in my house are provided by the forest. I decide on an igloo-shaped dome, framed with eucalypt saplings that are bent and lashed with string I make from wattle bark. An underground channel provides airflow to a central sunken fire pit; smoke escapes through a rickety circular chimney. I raise the floor with six inches of dirt and gravel from an old quarry. Reluctantly, I concede that grass thatching is the most viable means of waterproofing, and begin the formidable task of uprooting mountains-worth of wide blades of grass, tying them in bundles and lashing them to horizontal runners.

Shelter-building progresses slowly in the searing heat, especially for Ryan, who left behind blizzards in North America and spends most of the first month comatose from the heat. The quest for grass and endless thatching binds the group together and we dub ourselves the "blady bunch". In the heat of the day we retreat to the sandy bank of the tannin-stained billabong, and pass the time swimming, swatting biting flies and mosquitoes, flicking leeches, and trying to hear each other talk above the shriek of cicadas.

Tribal dynamics unfold, with two tight duos forming, one of them romantic. For me, the priority is perfecting my shelter. The first test of our thatching efforts rolls in on a spectacularly loud clap of thunder, followed by the first torrential rain in weeks. I run to my shelter, hardly able to look up for fear that my primitive technology would fail. It doesn't, so I dance for joy in the rain. But Shaun's tree house has not fared so well. "If it wasn't raining I'd burn it down," he thunders.

Nymphaea nouchali

Claire Dunn *is a freelance writer based in Bellingen, NSW. She is working on a book about her bush year and this is her first story for AG.*

Ben Ey *is a freelance photographer who lives in Sydney. His last journal assignment was* Slippery subject *(AG 101).*

Despite the harsh heat of summer, I have relished the challenge of building and then falling down exhausted into my swag next to the dying embers of my fire. After 10 weeks of building and improving, I am finally finished. On the first night in my new home, the forest puts on a magnificent welcoming ceremony: yellow-bellied gliders yelp and gurgle, and one lands with a thud against the trunk of the tree nearby; an owlet nightjar flutters silently to a perch on my igloo; and a majestic powerful owl blots out the stars as it takes wing from a high branch.

AUTUMN

"You only need sit still long enough in some attractive spot in the woods that all its inhabitants may exhibit themselves to you by turns."

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

WITH MY SHELTER taken care of, I can start to explore. The land is scarred by quarrying and logging. It's on a prickly arm of dry sandstone that extends to the coast, and it doesn't fit my towering, old-growth-forest ideal.

A slow courtship with the land ensues as I open up to the charms of bushland dominated by flowering banksia and blood-wood. I begin to reap the rewards of patient hours spent atop the root ball of a large fallen tree on the edge of a gully. I come to know the clockwork routine of families of resident birds, mice and wallabies, as well as the thrill of drop-in predators such as the collared sparrowhawk.

I'm attuning to the rhythm of the forest, but my mind continues to resist, compiling to-do lists and planning my days. My hammock swings unused, despite my intentions to let go. I do, however, grow resentful of things that tie me to the outside world. Shaun's propensity for hunting and gathering in town saves me the bother – by giving him a list, I only have to leave once a month.

I judge the others' focus on the bonds of human relationships – Dan and Zoe's daily coffee club, Ryan and Nikki playing Tarzan and Jane – as a distraction from the main game. Proximity does prompt cooperation, however, and we gather to make eel, turtle and fish traps, set snares, and collect food. But it's when the "coo-ee" goes out, signalling that fresh 'roo roadkill has been brought into camp, that we become a tribe: skinning and gutting this much-needed source of protein, and heating rocks for a traditional pit cooking.

I embark on a home-improvement blitz, feathering my nest with grass mats, makeshift bookshelves and a slat bed made of wattle. Woven-vine baskets soon swing with drying tinder and sweet potatoes. Timber bowls and cutlery and palm-leaf utensil holders decorate my kitchen.

The intimacy with my environment that bushcraft demands gradually melts my sense of being simply a visitor here. As a group, we embark on a two-night survival trip in rainforest adjacent to Nightcap National Park, 200km away, hunting and gathering, and huddling in a cave to stay warm at night. In one mock emergency exercise we make fire in 45 minutes without any pre-harvested materials, scavenging a successful combination of grass-tree stalk and a dead banksia branch for the fireboard. As the days quickly roll by, I feel increasingly like I'm reclaiming a birthright that was daily life for many of our human ancestors.

Wanting to deepen this growing sense of kinship and independence, I strand myself on a deserted beach near Yuraygir National Park, 50km away, for three nights with little food. I know that foraging from the land is the surest way to feel part of it, but I am a reluctant hunter. I'm secretly relieved to find my deadfall trap has snared only a puff of fur. On the last evening of the adventure, I literally stumble upon my prey, a seabird with a badly injured leg. I cry and steel myself for the kill.

Home, sweet home. Claire relaxes by the fire (opposite, top) to work on her coil basket. Making and keeping fires alight took up a lot of the day. Warm, dry shelters were essential. Claire usually escaped the weather on her wattle dowel slat bed (opposite, bottom); here, she's sewing a kangaroo raw-hide pouch. Foraging for food – and knowing what's edible – was a daily mission. They look good, but these seeds (above) aren't for consumption.

CLAIRE'S MOST WANTED

Writer Claire Dunn craved everyday comforts – more so as the year went on. Here's her list of most missed items:

Matches, gas stove, kettle, flyscreens, refrigeration, a comfy couch, a hot shower in winter, a big brekkie at a cafe, Thai takeaway, a car, a Sunday night DVD, clean flannelette sheets on a big bed, red wine, an occasion to wear a dress (and having a dress).

That night, as winter's first southerly blows a chill warning through the hanging leaves of my pandanus shelter, I feast on spit-roasted bird, with pipi and seaweed stew.

WINTER

"I have a great deal of company in my house, especially in the morning, when nobody calls."

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

ONE BY ONE the fair-weather birds disappear. Everything seems to be slowing down, contracting – apart from the wattles, which rebelliously let loose masses of flowers. I too feel a pulling inwards, and roll down the grass shutters in readiness for hibernation. I shun all offers of visits, even from good friends. After years of being the hub of work and social networks, I become fiercely protective of my solitude.

The necessity of feeding, watering, warming (and occasionally washing) myself commandeer a large chunk of the short days. As insurance against fire failure I experiment with keeping embers alight as Aboriginal people have done. Banksia seedpods prove to be a natural glow stick. Mornings involve a tough choice between walking with freezing hands until the lazy sun appears, or the rigmarole of making a fire for a cuppa. Of all modern appliances, I miss an electric kettle the most.

The days are gloriously still and fragile, and I wander the land with the curiosity of a child, allowing myself to be lured by a new bird call or a pattern of tracks. This bush idyll is marred by my frustratingly consistent fear of getting lost or coming to some tragic end alone. I am dogged by the feeling that I am somehow failing. Every wandering seems neither far nor free enough. Every link to society becomes a guilt-ridden blight.

Trying to make fire with a hand-drill becomes my greatest teacher at letting go. Mastery of this traditional Aboriginal skill is something I want badly. The more I try, the harder it gets. Huge blood blisters form on both palms, hampering my efforts. One night, after hurling away my kit in anger, I take the instructor's advice and don a blindfold, so I can't focus on progress. Breathing deeply, I concentrate instead on the sticky feel of the stalk between my palms, the rhythmic movement of my shoulders. All tension in my muscles disappears, and when I take off my blindfold, I'm humbled to find a glowing red ember.

SPRING

"...alone in the distant woods or fields, in unpretending sprout-lands or pastures tracked by rabbits...I come to myself, I once more feel myself grandly related."

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

LIKE THE FIRST SLOW and staggered drops of storm rain, the signs of spring appear gradually – the call of the rose robin high in the canopy, the pregnant buds of the glory pea, the soft downy new growth of banksia leaves – before exploding in a torrential waterfall of colour, song, and stirrings from inside hollows and under logs.

Around the time the koel elbows its way back into the dawn chorus I emerge from hibernation. I greet returning feathered migrants like old friends. The wall of green around me is feeling increasingly like a supermarket and pharmacy, as I uncover more bush tucker and medicine at my doorstep. Green all-day-sucker fruits of the geebung carpet the forest floor, while the berries of the sour currant bush provide a tangy snack. Brilliant blue bunches of dianella berries demand to be munched. Nikki and I return from one morning of combing the beach and bush, our baskets brimming with a rainbow feast of fruit including pandanus, coastal scaevola, lilly pilly, bearded heath and pigface. We also have salad greens, such as New Zealand spinach; edible flowers; wattle seeds to roast; waterlilies to peel and stir-fry; palm hearts; fern roots; and young bulrush stems.

Back at the camp, spring also heralds change. Shaun joins the army, and Zoe leaves for the arms of our bird expert (I'm amazed by the tenacity of humans to find a mate, despite obstacles such as almost complete isolation). The reduced bunch decides to try the challenge of tanning animal hides. It takes us days of scraping, stretching, soaking, sewing, softening and smoking, before the mess of hair and skin has transformed into durable soft suede. Sheep brains from the butcher provide the key ingredient, penetrating the fibres to prevent them from stiffening (I struggle to imagine by what accidental process brain-tanning was discovered).

As the evenings warm again, I make friends with the night, listening for the hollow hour when night insects shift tempo sensing first light is near. Padding around barefoot, I'm literally coming to my senses. I'm rewarded by seeing more than just tracks: platypus, echidna and pademelon make themselves known, as do water dragon, land mullet and long-necked turtle. The more I see, the more I realise how much I must usually miss.

The rapidly passing weeks intensify for me the sting of fallen ideals. Although I'm much more at home in the bush, I accept that this year was as much about exploring my inner landscape. While the six of us all chose very different adventures, our overall experience is uncannily similar. Stripped of our usual anchors, we dissolved somewhat, emerging considerably lighter in spirit. While I feel more independent, confident, and less identified with what I 'do', it takes a note left by a friend – "you've come back really honest, with a joy shining through" – to clarify what I look like on the outside.

I'm beginning to yearn for cafes, culture, couches (and kettles) and realise it's time to go. Like a teenager sneaking out the back door, I am crossing the bridge to leave without so much as a backward glance, when I step through a rotten plank and plunge into the flooded creek. I can't escape that easily it seems. Giving in to the swirling current, I let myself be carried one last time down the paperbark-lined watercourse. When I wash up on the "big toe" tree, I thank the land for this reminder to always keep one foot in the wilderness. AG

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