

# MASTERING THE STONE AGE

TODAY'S HUNTERS AND

FISHERMEN BONE UP ON

AGE-OLD SURVIVAL SKILLS

BY MATT VILLANO

When most people set out to plan a summer vacation, they look for comfy resorts, ample diversions and plenty of great food. Gino Borges, however, was looking for something different.

The year was 2011, and Borges, a self-employed consultant and experienced outdoorsman, was looking to find a summer trip that would teach him fire starting, flint knapping, shelter building and other fundamental skills for surviving in the backcountry. He didn't want to focus on modern techniques — those were too easy, he thought, and relied too heavily on man-made gear. Instead, he wanted a tutorial in doing things the way our ancestors did hundreds of thousands of years ago. »

THINKSTOCK

Archaeologists believe that our ancestors mastered the controlled use of fire about 1 million years ago.

“The more time you spend in the backcountry, the more you realize you’re just one broken ankle away from being meat,” he says. “I wanted to empower myself with the confidence to connect with nature and knowledge of the most basic skills to survive.”

Borges isn’t the only person embracing techniques of the distant past. Across the country, it seems, more and more hunters and fishermen are looking to bone up on these age-old, “primitive” skills. Some of these students are newcomers — laypeople with few or no outdoor skills who want to experience something new. Others, like Borges, are hunters, fishermen or seasoned outdoorsmen, all looking to sharpen their skills.

Whatever prompts these people to sign up, they’re doing it in droves. Anecdotal evidence from outfitters indicates that interest in courses that teach this knowledge is at an all-time high. Some say classes are fuller than ever, while others say they’ve been forced to add more classes to rosters that have remained static for decades.

At Ancient Pathways (apathways.com), a school in Flagstaff, Ariz., founder Tony Nester reports that some of his classes now have a waiting list, something he’s never experienced. “People can’t get enough of them,” Nester says of the time-tested techniques.

In short, it’s the ultimate throwback.

### CLASSIC CURRICULUM

The notion of primitive skills is a bit of a misnomer; the skills are old-fashioned, but by no means inferior. Though curricula vary from school to school, the basic tenets of these courses comprise three critical skills: fire building, flint knapping and cordage (aka making rope or cord out of plant matter).

Primitive-skills geeks consider these to be the “holy trinity.” Technically speaking, these are the skills that have been around the longest. Archaeologists believe the earliest forms of flint knapping occurred about 2.5 million years ago, and that our ancestors mastered the controlled use of fire about 1 million years ago. »



ACROSS THE COUNTRY, IT SEEMS,  
MORE AND MORE HUNTERS AND  
FISHERMEN SEE “PRIMITIVE” SKILLS AS  
A BACKCOUNTRY SURVIVAL NECESSITY.

THINKSTOCK/AT RIGHT FROM TOP: HEATHER MARTIN MORRISSEY; ANCIENT PATHWAYS; HEATHER MARTIN MORRISSEY

### TOOLS FOR SURVIVAL

For primitive-skills geeks, fire building, flint knapping and cordage are considered the “holy trinity” of survival skills. These are also the skills that have the longest history of human implementation.

#### FLINT KNAPPING



2.5 MILLION YEARS AGO

#### FIRE BUILDING



1 MILLION YEARS AGO

#### CORDAGE



28,000 YEARS AGO



Courses sometimes include training in trapping and building shelters and incorporate lessons on edible plants.

### SURVIVAL SCHOOLS

Pricing for these programs varies, but most experiences cost \$50 to \$75 per student per day.

**ADVENTURE OUT**  
Santa Cruz, Calif.  
[adventureout.com](http://adventureout.com)

**ANCIENT PATHWAYS**  
Flagstaff, Ariz.  
[apathways.com](http://apathways.com)

**BACKTRACKS**  
Teton, Idaho  
[woodsmokeusa.com](http://woodsmokeusa.com)

**HANK FANNIN'S GREEN  
EARTH SURVIVAL SCHOOL**  
Port St. Lucie, Fla.  
[greenearthssurvivalschool.com](http://greenearthssurvivalschool.com)

**PRACTICAL PRIMITIVE**  
Great Meadows, N.J.  
[practicalprimitive.com](http://practicalprimitive.com)

**PRIMAL-KNOWLEDGE**  
Woodsboro, Md.  
[primitive-skills.com](http://primitive-skills.com)

This trio also forms the basis from which most other primitive skills stem. Case in point: Some primitive-skills courses include lessons on trapping and hunting, but you can't trap without knowing how to use cord to bind together sticks, and you can't hunt without knowing how to whittle a stick with stone tools (which you create through flint knapping).

David Wescott, owner of Backtracks ([woodsmokeusa.com](http://woodsmokeusa.com)), an outdoor survival outfitter in Teton, Idaho, says other skills taught at many programs include lessons in bow making, trapping, building shelters and making clothes from buckskins, noting that some people call these skills "bushcraft" because of the way they mix creativity and necessity into one.

"Once you learn the basics of a lot of these skills, you really can turn the application of them into art," he says.

Of course some programs are more involved than others. Practical Primitive ([practicalprimitive.com](http://practicalprimitive.com)), a survival school based in Great Meadows, N.J., offers day- and weekend-long courses that focus on one or two specific primitive skills at a time. Other schools incorporate lessons about edible plants or local cultural history.

At Ancient Pathways, the school that Borges ultimately attended, experiences can run much longer. Nester offers programs during which students "go back 20,000 years in four weeks" and work their way up to living independently in the backcountry for up to five days at a time. »

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP, ANCIENT PATHWAYS; HEATHER MARTIN MORRISSEY; ANCIENT PATHWAYS

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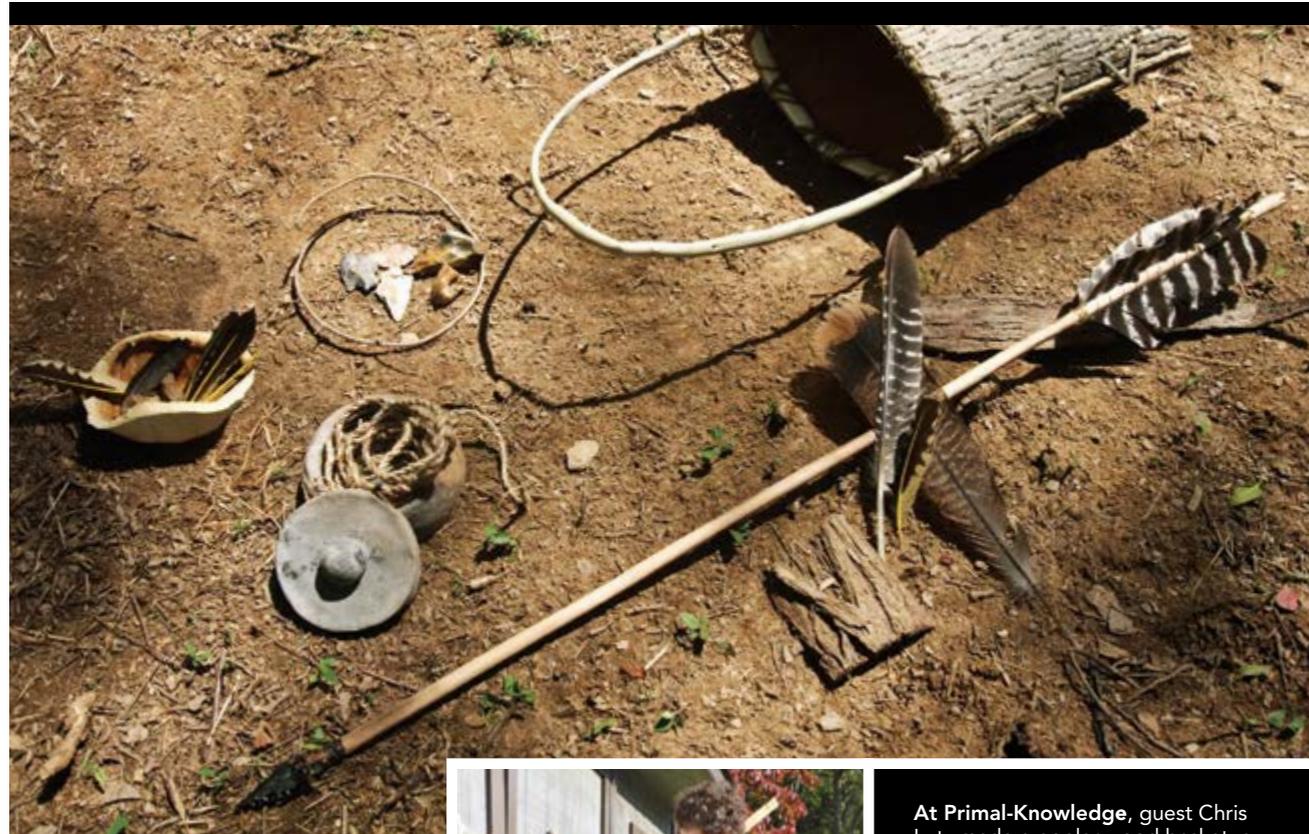
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At Primal-Knowledge, guest Chris Lutz made a poplar wood basket, a viburnum wood arrow with a flint tip, a clay bowl, and dogbane and stinging nettle cordage, above. Tanning, left, is part of Practical Primitive's program.

### EXPLAINING A TREND

What has sparked this renewed interest in primitive skills? According to experts and industry insiders, a number of factors.

The top motivator: reality television. Cliff Hodges, founder of Adventure Out (adventureout.com), an outdoor school in Santa Cruz, Calif., says television shows such as Discovery Channel's *Survivorman* and CBS's *Survivor* undoubtedly have inspired general interest in these obscure-yet-good-to-know skills, admitting that some customers clearly and openly sign up just to say they did.

Another impetus: social media. Just as people love to run obstacle course races and post pictures to Facebook of themselves slithering through muddy bogs, so, too, do people gain pleasure from taking a primitive-skills class and posting pictures of themselves wearing a deerskin shirt they made from hide.

A more metaphysical reason for the recent spike in primitive-skills students: a desire to reconnect with

nature.

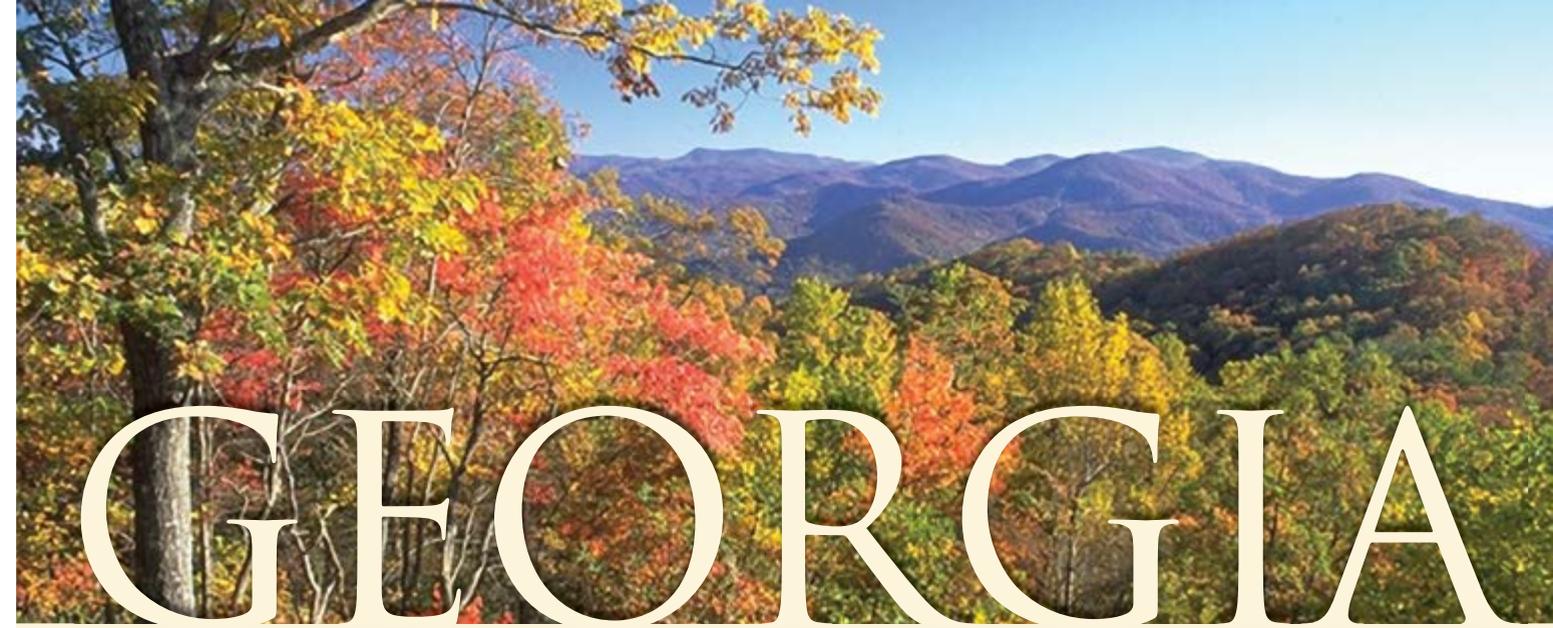
This is what drove Borges into primitive skills — the notion of eschewing technology and \$500 sleeping bags for increased self-reliance on the natural world. It also is what appears to motivate students at Hank Fannin's Green Earth Survival School (greeneearthurvivalschool.com) in Port St. Lucie, Fla. Here, depending on the class, students might make their own arrows or atlatls (spear throwers) with glue that they create exclusively from natural materials.

"The reason people like this is because it offers them the ability to create something," says Fannin. "Especially for people who don't have much experience making stuff with their hands, you wouldn't believe how satisfying that is."

Julie Martin agrees. She founded Practical Primitive in 2007 with her husband, Eddie Starnater, and says she sees students expressing wonder and satisfaction every week. Because their school specializes in shorter classes, the duo teaches as many as 12 classes per month. And because the thrills of self-reliance and primitive craftsmanship are so exhilarating, most students become repeat customers.

"People get here, they make a pot from earth they've dug out of the ground that day and they get hooked," she says. »

HEATHER MARTIN MORRISSEY, PRACTICAL PRIMITIVE

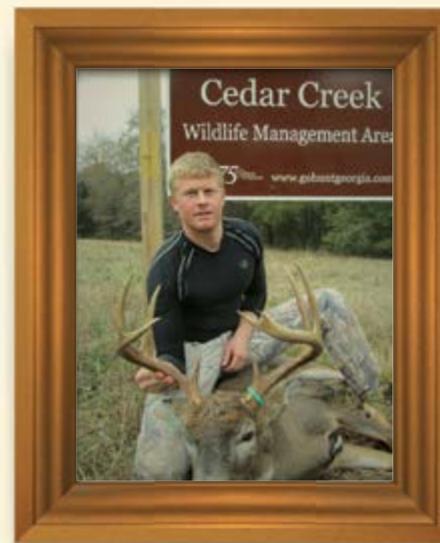


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“AS A HUNTER, I WOULD WANT TO KNOW

HOW BEST TO EXIST IN THE BACKCOUNTRY

IN CONCERT WITH THE LAND INSTEAD

OF IN SPITE OF IT.”

— DAVID WESCOTT, BACKTRACKS



Guests enjoy the sunset, top left, at Ancient Pathways.

The prickly pear's prickles, above, cause irritation if they are not peeled properly.

Practical Primitive's courses include tracking, left.

Archery practice, far left, keeps Practical Primitive's guests' skills on target.



### WHAT'S NEXT

For these reasons, many outfitters see customer interest in primitive skills continuing to increase over time, and specifically among hunters and fishermen, who rely heavily on nature and the land when they are out and about.

There may be more primitive skills to embrace soon, too. In addition to running his outfitting company, Wescott, the owner of Backtracks in Idaho, doubles as the managing editor of the *Bulletin of Primitive Technology*, a journal that chronicles the ongoing reclamation of age-old sciences.

According to Wescott, modern researchers continue to examine how ancient humans performed certain tasks, offering up new answers to riddles about the application of primitive skills. Two particular areas of emphasis right now are pottery and cordage. Over time, he says, as these researchers establish “best practices” to the skills that have existed for tens of thousands of years, modern humans likely will want to learn them to make their lives even easier.

“As a hunter, I would want to know how best to exist in the backcountry in concert with the land instead of in spite of it,” he says. “Understanding what bushes will feed you, what trees will provide you with materials to make things and what rocks break and work in certain ways can be the difference between life and death. If you're spending any amount of extended time in the woods for any reason, why wouldn't you want to know this stuff?” ●

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: ANCIENT PATHWAYS; THINKSTOCK; PRACTICAL PRIMITIVE



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