

SURVIVAL STORIES

Never underestimate the power of the human spirit.

TIMBER!

If a tree falls on you and there's no one around to hear your cries for help, will you be rescued? Jonathan Ceplecha knew he would be found eventually—he just had to stay alive. In August 2020, a large oak tree fell on Ceplecha while he was cutting it down on the outskirts of his Redwood Falls, Minnesota, property, where he lived alone. The tree broke both of the 59-year-old U.S. Army veteran's legs and twisted his back, leaving him pinned in an awkward, painful position. With no phone and no one even close to earshot, Ceplacha spent the next four days (and cold nights) stuck there. He ate any insects that got too close, and drank sweat and rainwater to stay alive. To stay sane, he prayed a lot, and, as his son later wrote on a GoFundMe page (for his medical bills), he “tried to distract himself from panic by meditating and inventing rhythms to follow from dawn to dusk.” Four days after getting stuck, Ceplecha was found by his ex-wife, who searched the property after he'd been reported missing from work. It took rescuers two hours to extract him from the tree, but at last report he was going to make a full recovery.

HAVE A NICE FALL

In November 2019, Ryan Cairnes did a few things right and a few things wrong when he went rock climbing in Washington's Cannon Mountains. His first goof—even though he's an experienced climber with sturdy gear—was going to the remote and rugged area by himself. So there was no one there to grab Cairnes's line when “something just let loose” and he started sliding down the steep, rocky mountainside. “There was no part me inside that said I was going to live,” the 36-year-old Microsoft manager from Seattle later told reporters. “I just said, I'm falling off a cliff. And people die when they fall off cliffs.” Cairnes didn't die, but after the minute-long fall of 300–400 feet that ended with him landing on a boulder, he'd fractured his neck, sternum, kneecap, and left ankle, and he'd injured some ribs. Fortunately, his head was okay (though his helmet did take quite a beating). Cairnes's second big mistake: He didn't have an emergency beacon. Unable to walk and in excruciating pain, he spread out his orange tent on the ground, hoping a helicopter would fly over and see it. No one came. One of the things he did right was to bring a zero-degree-rated sleeping bag, which kept him from freezing to death at night. The next day, a helicopter did fly near Cairnes, but it kept going. That's when he realized he'd have to get out of there on his own. Using a walking stick to pull himself along the ground, he traveled about 200 feet per hour, at around a 6,000-foot elevation, until he finally

No Major League Baseball player had worn the jersey numbers 86, 89, or 92 until the 2020 season, when all three were issued for the first time.

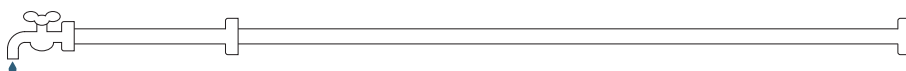
made it to a trail. The other thing he did right: He'd texted his mom in Pennsylvania before he left, telling her the general area he was going to be in, and when he'd return. So when he didn't text her, she called the authorities, who sent out a search-and-rescue team. They found Cairnes weak but alert on the trail. Remarkably, he only had to spend a few days in the hospital, but he's still perplexed by his survival: "I hit it with so much force," he said, "I don't know why I'm here."

THE MISSING WEEK AND A HALF

Having been diagnosed with dementia, Linda Field was not supposed to be driving. In October 2019, the 62-year-old grandmother was sitting on her porch in Porter, Texas, while her daughter, Laura Bereta, warmed up her Ford Explorer, getting ready to pick up her son from school. Bereta went back in the house for a minute, and while she was gone, Field got in the car and drove away. With little fuel and no money, Bereta thought her mom would return soon. But minutes turned to hours, and then to days, and then she remembered her mom saying she wanted to go to Montana. A Silver Alert was issued (for missing people with a medical condition), and the search area grew wider. After a week of sleepless nights for Bereta, her mother's whereabouts were still unknown...even to her mother. When Field regained her senses, she was alone in a strange forest with no clue how she got there. She wandered until she found a creek, and—to this day, it's unknown exactly what she did with her time, other than praying and drinking creek water—she spent the next ten days there until someone spotted the Ford Explorer on the side of the road, about an hour north of Porter. A few hours later, search-and-rescue dogs located Fields, weak but alive. The dogs pulled her on a sled a mile back to the road, where she was transported to a hospital. "I knew I was going to be found," Field later said. "It was God's time." But Bereta still wonders what her mom did in those woods for a week and a half. "I don't think we'll ever know the whole truth."

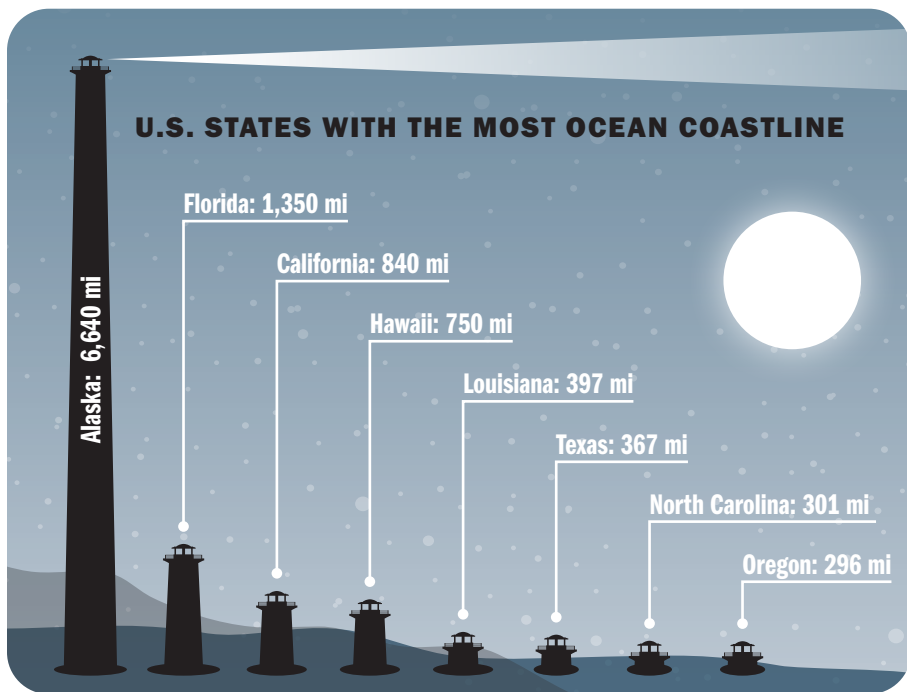
GRAB A CHAIR AND POP OPEN A COLD ONE

On September 8, 2020, Don Myron was one of millions of Oregonians displaced by catastrophic wildfires that were fed by a historic 36-hour windstorm. Myron, who lived along the Little North Santiam River in a forested canyon near Salem, was faced with a choice: evacuate that afternoon, even though the fire was still 15 miles away, or stick around and try to save his home. In a decision he now regrets, he stayed. He watered everything he could and braced himself. Day turned to night. Still no flames. Just when he thought he might be okay, the sky turned orange. With burning branches starting to fall on his house, Myron, 56, could see that both sides of the river were burning, so he jumped in his car and drove the opposite way...and was soon blocked by fallen limbs. He returned home—on a flat tire—and got there just before the flames did. He got back in his car and looked at his home in the rearview mirror



Goats are immune to poison ivy and poison oak, and love to eat both.

for the last time. He made it a little farther before getting blocked again. As he later told the *Salem Statesman Journal*, he said to himself, “Don, you’ve got to pull over and get the hell down to the river and under the bridge.” Standing under that bridge in waist-deep water kept him safe for an hour until the vegetation caught fire and forced him out. Surrounded by intense heat and flames, and with incessant winds howling all around him, Myron was able to reach a wide part of the river, where he came across three chairs and a case of Rolling Rock beer on the bank. There was one beer left. He grabbed one of the chairs (and the beer) and made his way to a rocky outcrop in the middle of the river. For the next few hours, Myron used the plastic chair to shield himself from the torrents of flying embers. Then the smoke started to overtake him, so he had to crouch down under the chair at the water’s surface and breathe through a T-shirt. He did that for several hours until he saw what he thought was the fire surging again, but it turned out to be the light of dawn. With the flames still smoldering in the burnt-out forest, Myron made it back to his car, which was charred but drivable, and found his way to safety. He later learned that if he hadn’t been stopped by the downed branches, he would have driven right into a firestorm that had killed two people in their car. Myron credits that plastic chair with “saving my butt.” When asked about the beer, he replied, “Hell yeah, I drank it.”



As a kid, Christopher Walken worked as a lion tamer in a circus.
He says his lion, Sheba, was tame “like a dog.”