

THE EXPLORER'S GUIDE TO THE WILDERNESS

v2.0



RULES AND GUIDELINES FOR RUNNING OVERLAND
TRAVEL IN 5E DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS



WILDERNESS TRAVEL

Whatever plane you're on, adventurers need to travel in order to complete quests and find epic loot. The wilds are dangerous and unpredictable, and simply getting where you want to go can be an adventure itself.

TRAVEL PACE

The traveling day can be broken up in many ways, but this document assumes you are using the Travel Pace rules presented in the *Player's Handbook* as a base system.

Hex maps make it easier to keep track of environment and location. This document assumes a hex scale of 1-hex per 24 miles, but the base rules work for travel of all kinds.

A day is normally 24 hours. These hours are separated into six 4-hour periods as described in the Time of Day table.

TIME OF DAY

Period	Hours
Morning	6am to 10am
Midday	10am to 2pm
Afternoon	2pm to 6pm
Evening	6pm to 10pm
Midnight	10pm to 2am
Predawn	2am to 6am

Most parties will travel for 8 hours during two of these periods, with the rest of the day taken up by preparing camp and resting. Be aware of when a party chooses to travel as this could affect navigation or encounters along the road.

ACTIONS WHILE TRAVELING

Traveling characters need not focus their sole attention on walking; some tasks can be performed on the move, such as keeping a lookout or foraging for food. Unless otherwise stated, a character can only focus on one activity at a time while traveling. This is their Traveling Action.

FORAGING

The default Traveling Action is for characters to keep an eye out for potential resources while on the move. This action represents the character's success at finding food or water while traveling, and also after setting up camp. When a character forages they make a Wisdom (Survival) check against the environment's Foraging Rating. On a success, they find enough food and water to sustain a single creature for a day. Rolling higher than the DC means they find enough resources to feed multiple creatures; if they beat the DC by 5, they find enough food and water for an additional creature. If they beat the DC by 10 they find enough food for two additional creatures, beating the DC by 15 finds enough food for three additional creatures, etc.

At the end of the day, an individual who does not have enough gathered resources must expend a ration and drink from carried water, or else they begin to suffer from exhaustion as described on page 185 of the *Player's Handbook*.

Characters can also use their Traveling Action to forage for specific resources while in an environment, such as rare herbs or resources specific to the area.

NAVIGATING

Unless the party is on a road or some other obvious path of travel, one character in the group must spend their Traveling Action navigating. At the beginning of every day of travel, and at any other point that the navigation factors change (such as after reaching a new landmark, or if the environment changes), one person must make a Wisdom (Survival) check versus the environment's Navigation DC. It is recommended that the DM make this check in secret using the individual's Survival bonus. Success means that the group makes progress toward their destination. If the check is failed, the party instead becomes lost.

KEEPING A LOOKOUT

Every character remains alert to danger while traveling, and doing so requires no special effort on the character's part. When a party begins travel, assemble their passive Perception scores. These will be used for a group check (described on page 175 of the *Player's Handbook*) to determine if the party spots danger before stumbling upon it, or noticing things in the environment. A character can generally only stay alert to danger if they are in a position where they can reasonably do so. If one decides to take a nap in a cart, for example, their passive Perception isn't added to the group check.

However, a character can choose to use their Traveling Action to keep an active lookout and scout ahead for danger by making a Wisdom (Perception) check. The result of this check is used in place of their passive Perception for the group check. If they roll lower than their passive Perception, use the value of their passive Perception instead, but their Traveling Action is still used keeping a lookout.

OTHER ACTIONS

Characters can use other actions while traveling not described here, provided they have the means to do so. With access to a cart or horses a character could read a book or study a magic item, and there are many other possible actions. The DM is the final arbiter on what actions can be taken while traveling.

ADVANCED TRAVEL RULES

Travel, especially through the uncharted wilds, is dangerous and difficult. There are many complications which can arise while on foot.

GETTING LOST

Going off course by even a few feet can have disastrous consequences for an adventuring party. Landmarks can be missed, compasses and other tools can be read incorrectly, and poor decisions can be made by the one leading.

If the character navigating fails their Survival check, randomly determine a direction (you can roll a D4 for the cardinal directions, or a d8 for cardinal and intercardinal directions). This is the direction the party moves in for the day.

Don't reveal whether the party is lost until some outside influence makes it known. For example, a character with a high enough passive Perception (or a player asking smart questions) may realize that they passed a particular outcropping a few hours ago. Or the characters might hit a river which they know shouldn't have been in their path. Or they could hit day 6 of an expected 4-day long trip and still not be at their destination. If their status is not obvious, the next time someone makes a Navigation check and succeeds the character will realize that the party is lost. If they fail, the party continues in the wrong direction.

MODIFYING NAVIGATION

Navigational aids exist which can help make travel easier, such as a map of the area, a compass, or a large and obvious landmark (such as distant mountains). Such aids grant advantage on Navigation checks so long as they are available for use (and the characters know how to use them).

Other factors can hinder a character's success, like inclement weather, unclear directions, or even magic. Traveling at a fast pace also makes it more difficult to keep to a proper path as the character hurries along. Hindrances such as these cause Navigation checks to be made with disadvantage. It is possible for a character to have both an aid and a hindrance when traveling (for example, moving quickly, but knowing to keep the mountains to their left), and in such a situation they cancel each other out.

PATHS

Man-made roads, geographical features such as rivers, and certain spells can make navigation simple to the point of absolute ease; just follow the path. When following one, characters do not have to make navigation checks so long as they have the path to follow, provided they have the information needed to know they are using the path correctly (for example, they'd need to know that the stream before them runs north/south to use it to travel in either of those directions). Once characters leave the path behind they must make Navigation checks as normal.

TRAVELING STEALTHILY

Unless the players say otherwise, assume that the party always uses stealth when it is available, such as when traveling at a slow pace. Have each character roll a Dexterity (Stealth) check when travel starts. Other creatures only notice the party if they fail a contest between a Perception check (passive or active, as determined by the DM) and the party's group Stealth check. The party is seen if the Perception check equals or exceeds more than half of the party's Stealth checks.

Similarly, other creatures attempting to be stealthy might be missed by the party. In such a situation, compare the party's various Perceptions checks to the Stealth checks of the other creatures; a party member spots the oncoming danger ahead of time if their result equals or beats the Stealth check.

CONTESTED GROUP CHECKS

Contested checks can get confusing if you have two groups attempting to spot each other; in such a situation, half of the Perception checks would need to beat half of the Stealth checks, and this can bog down the process as you try to determine who beat what. If possible, try to stick to one Perception check and one Stealth check for your NPCs, taking the highest Perception check and the lowest Stealth check from among the creatures in the encounter to determine if anyone is spotted. If you want to make things more interesting, however, you can separate the encounter into creature types and determine awareness in that way. For example, an encounter of 3 worgs and 5 goblins could result in the party spotting the goblins but not the worgs, allowing the worgs to get the drop on them. Use your best judgement.

ENVIRONMENT STATISTICS

Like creatures, environments have stat blocks which contain information about the environment, such as how difficult it is to navigate through them and how many resources they have.

NAVIGATION

The difficulty in traversing an environment depends on two factors; the relative flatness or openness of the environment, and the presence of landmarks or other navigational aids. Gently rolling hills, for example, are generally easy to navigate, as the openness of the environment makes it easy to spot landmarks. A forest is more difficult to traverse, as the dense foliage makes it harder to determine where you are going. All environments have a Navigation Difficulty which determines the DC for the Survival check.

NAVIGATION DIFFICULTY

Difficulty	DC
Simple	5
Easy	10
Moderate	15
Complicated	20
Extremely difficult	25
Nearly impossible	30

RESOURCES

An environment's Resource Rating describes the availability of things like food and water, firewood for making camp, and other supplies. Most animals can survive in bountiful, abundant, and sustainable locations without much difficulty, while locations with scarce resources (or worse) tend to have fewer inhabitants. See the Resource Availability table for the DCs for various Resource Ratings.

RESOURCE AVAILABILITY

Availability	DC
Bountiful	5
Abundant	10
Sustainable	15
Scarce	20
Inhospitable	25
Desolate	30

SPECIAL RESOURCES

Some locations have different Resource Ratings for different kinds of resources. Deserts, for example, normally have a rating of Inhospitable (DC 25), as there is not much game or edible plant matter to eat. However, finding water is even more difficult (Desolate, DC 30). When a character makes a check to forage, compare their result to all DCs to determine what they can find, giving them results based on each DC individually. A character in the desert who manages to roll a 30 on their Wisdom (Survival) check, for example, would find enough food for two people (25 + 5) and enough water for just one person.

ENCOUNTERS

An environment's Encounter Rating measures how likely it is for a group to encounter an obstacle or creature while traveling through that environment. Within this document, we assume you are using the random encounter tables found in *Xanathar's Guide*, and list possible encounters by the names of those tables. However, you are free to use whatever tables you like. *Special* denotes a Special Encounter later described in the stat block.

An environment's Encounter Rating is measured from 1 to 5. Rating 1 applies to civilized areas (which are generally well-patrolled and thus safe for travel) and barren or desolate locations with few inhabitants.

Most areas of the wilderness have a Rating of around 2, representing various wild beasts or other hostilities you wouldn't expect to run into near towns or cities.

A Rating of 3 applies to environments with abundant dangerous wildlife, while a 4 usually applies to environments with commonly-encountered hostile contacts who will attack on sight. This could be an area with particularly dangerous animals or monstrocities, or the territory of an enemy nation or organization.

Ratings of 5 are reserved for the most hostile of locations, where death is almost certain without the best precautions. Many environments with a Rating of 5 are supernatural in their nature or exist on other planes, such as the Nine Hells or the Shadowfell.

When characters begin a day of travel, roll the number of d6s indicated on the environment's Encounter Rating. Every result of a 6 results in a random encounter during that day. The DM can roll 1d6 to determine which period of the day the encounter takes place in, or choose it themselves. If the characters are traveling along a "safe" road, reduce the number of dice by 1 (to a minimum of 1).

Remember, not every encounter has to result in combat; creatures could be friendly, or the party could be well-prepared and avoid the incoming danger.

SPECIAL ENCOUNTERS

Some environments have notable inhabitants which occupy them, such as particularly powerful monsters, and parties venturing through them have an above-average chance of running into those creatures. When an environment includes a Special Encounter it will include a percentage chance of running into that encounter. Whenever you roll for a random encounter, roll a d100. If the result falls within the Special Encounters's range, the encounter is that special encounter. Otherwise, roll on the random encounter table as normal. Most Special Encounters have a 10% to 50% chance of being encountered, depending on the size of the environment and the creature's wandering habits.

FEATURES

Most environments have a special feature which alters travel within it in some way, and the feature describes how it affects travel through it.

NOTABLE LOCATIONS

Some environments have a special location within them, usually with notes that pertain to it. Some notable locations can be environments themselves with their own stat blocks.

EXAMPLE ENVIRONMENT

Below is an example environment using the rules presented in this document; the Briarwood, an old forest infested by will-o'-wisps that live within the adjacent swamp.

THE BRIARWOOD

Navigation	Resource	Encounter
15	15	3

Encounters forest, special

Poor Visibility. The dense foliage and low light make it difficult to see within the forest. Creatures have disadvantage on Wisdom (Perception) checks that rely on sight within the Briarwood.

Strained Resources. The actions of a hydra have starved the Briarwood and its inhabitants of resources, making foraging for food more difficult (included in the Briarwood's stat block).

Notable Locations

The Helmsburne. The Helmsburne is a large river which courses through the heart of the Briarwood, providing power to the mills at Helmsfirth and a source of fresh water and fish.

Briarwood Swamp. The Briarwood Swamp is a large region of the Briarwood located to the south. As the Helmsburne courses south from the Adamant Peaks it eventually floods a low region near the coast, resulting in a large hundred-acre swamp.

Special Encounters

Hydra. There is a 15% chance to encounter a hydra with 6 heads within the Briarwood.

Wisps. There is a 5% chance to encounter 1d4 will-o'-wisps within the Briarwood. This increases to 25% in the evening, midnight, and predawn.

BRIARWOOD SWAMP

Navigation	Resource	Encounter
15	25	4

Encounters swamp, special

Difficult Terrain. The mire and unstable ground make travel difficult. The swamp is difficult terrain.

Strained Resources. The actions of a hydra have starved the Briarwood Swamp and its inhabitants of resources, making foraging for food more difficult (included in the Briarwood's stat block).

Swamp Gas. The rot and decay within the wetland creates naturally occurring flammable gas. The use of fire or attacks which cause fire have a 50% chance to react with this gas. If it does, the fire explodes, dealing 1d10 fire damage to any creature within 10 feet of the flames.

Special Resources

Water. The stagnant waters of the swamp are unsafe for drinking, and a source of fresh water can only be found in certain special plants. The Foraging DC to find water is 30, but purifying the readily available swamp water makes it potable.

Special Encounters

Hydra. There is a 25% chance to encounter a hydra with 6 heads within the swamp.

Wisps. There is a 25% chance to encounter 1d4 will-o'-wisps within the swamp. This increases to 50% and 2d4 wisps in the evening, midnight, and predawn.

APPENDIX A: ENVIRONMENT STATISTICS

Adventurers explore deep forests, climb the crags of mountains, wander the endless sands of deserts, and sail the broad expanse of the ocean. Statistics for some of these environments are grouped here for your convenience. While most locations in your world will be textbook examples of these environments, you should consider how they are different and thus how their statistics would change. Just like monster statistics, these are just guidelines.

ARCTIC

Navigation	Resource	Encounter
20	30	1

Encounters arctic

Difficult Terrain. The thick snow and icy ground make travel difficult. The arctic is difficult terrain.

Extreme Cold. Creatures traveling through the arctic suffer the effects of Extreme Cold as described on page 110 of the *DMG*.

Special Resources

Water. Fresh snow and ice can be melted to create potable water. Creatures who drink arctic water without warming it have disadvantage on any saving throw made to resist the extreme cold until they either drink something hot, spend a long rest in warmer comforts, or move into an area where the temperature is above freezing. Any beverages brought into the Arctic gain this property if they have been exposed to the cold for longer than an hour.

DESERT

Navigation	Resource	Encounter
25	25	1

Encounters desert

Extreme Heat. Creatures traveling through the desert suffer the effects of Extreme Heat as described on page 110 of the *DMG*.

Special Resources

Water. The lack of rain makes it nearly impossible to find water, even if you know where to look. The Foraging DC to find water is 30.

FOREST

Navigation	Resource	Encounter
15	10	2

Encounters forest

Poor Visibility. The dense foliage and low light make it difficult to see within the forest. Creatures have disadvantage on Wisdom (Perception) checks that rely on sight within the forest.

HILLS

Navigation	Resource	Encounter
15	20	2

Encounters hill

Difficult Terrain. The rocky ground and broken hills make travel difficult. The hills are difficult terrain.

Elevated. Due to the higher elevation afforded by hills, creatures can see objects and other creatures twice as far away as normal.

JUNGLE

Navigation	Resource	Encounter
20	10	4

Encounters forest, swamp

Difficult Terrain. The dense foliage makes travel difficult. The jungle is difficult terrain.

Extreme Heat. Creatures traveling through the jungle suffer the effects of Extreme Heat as described on page 110 of the *DMG*.

Poor Visibility. The dense foliage and low light make it difficult to see within the jungle. Creatures have disadvantage on Wisdom (Perception) checks that rely on sight within the jungle.

OCEAN

Navigation	Resource	Encounter
25	25	1

Encounters coastal, underwater

Exposed. The endless ocean grants very little in the way of protection. Creatures traveling through the ocean have disadvantage on Dexterity (Stealth) checks, and disadvantage on Wisdom (Survival) checks made to find shelter.

Water. The complete lack of fresh water at sea means that the Foraging DC to find water is 30. Boiling or purifying salt water provides a source of fresh water.

MOUNTAINS

Navigation	Resource	Encounter
20	15	1

Encounters mountain

Difficult Terrain. The rocky ground, high walls, and common cliff edges make travel difficult. The mountains are difficult terrain.

High Elevation. Due to the higher elevation afforded by mountains, creatures can see objects and other creatures four times as far away as normal.

Extreme Cold. Creatures traveling at altitudes of 10,000 feet or higher through the mountains suffer the effects of Extreme Cold as described on page 110 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*.

High Altitude. Creatures traveling at altitudes of 10,000 feet or higher through the mountains suffer the effects of High Altitude as described on page 110 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*.

PLAINS

Navigation	Resource	Encounter
10	15	2

Encounters grassland

Exposed. The flat rolling grasslands offer very little in the way of protection. Creatures traveling through the plains have disadvantage on Dexterity (Stealth) checks, and disadvantage on Wisdom (Survival) checks made to find shelter.

WETLAND

Navigation	Resource	Encounter
15	20	2

Encounters swamp

Difficult Terrain. The mire and unstable ground make travel difficult. The wetland is difficult terrain.

Swamp Gas. The rot and decay within the wetland creates naturally occurring flammable gas. The use of fire or attacks which cause fire have a 50% chance to react with this gas. If it does, the fire explodes, dealing 1d10 fire damage to any creature within 10 feet of the flames.

Special Resources

Water. The stagnant waters of the wetland are unsafe for drinking, and a source of fresh water can only be found in certain special plants. The Foraging DC to find water is 30, but purifying the wetland water makes it potable.

PLAYER FEATURES

There are a number of features within the game which grant characters certain boons in the wilderness. Outlanders, for example, can automatically find food for a certain number of creatures when traveling. However, with the system presented in this document such features trivialize travel and the complications therein. If you plan on making travel a more complex and dangerous affair, you should consider replacing certain features in your game with the ones below.

PHB RANGER

The following feature replaces the Natural Explorer feature in the *Player's Handbook*.

NATURAL EXPLORER

You are particularly familiar with one type of natural environment and are adept at traveling and surviving in such regions. Choose one type of favored terrain: arctic, coast, desert, forest, grassland, mountain, swamp, or the Underdark. When you make an Intelligence or Wisdom check related to your favored terrain, your proficiency bonus is doubled if you are using a skill that you're proficient in.

While traveling for an hour or more in your favored terrain, you gain the following benefits:

- Difficult terrain doesn't slow your group's travel.
- You gain a +5 bonus to Navigation checks (this is in addition to your doubled proficiency bonus, if you have it).
- You can use the Keep a Lookout traveling action even when you are engaged in another activity while traveling.
- If you are traveling alone, you can move stealthily at a normal pace.
- You have a +5 bonus to Foraging checks (this is in addition to your doubled proficiency bonus, if you have it).
- While tracking other creatures, you also learn their exact number, their sizes, and how long ago they passed through the area.

You choose additional favored terrain types at 6th and 10th level.

UNEARTHED ARCANA: REVISED RANGER

The following feature replaces the Natural Explorer feature in the Unearthed Arcana Revised Ranger.

NATURAL EXPLORER

You are a master of navigating the natural world, and you react with swift and decisive action when attacked. This grants you the following benefits:

- You ignore difficult terrain.
- You have advantage on initiative rolls.
- On your first turn during combat, you have advantage on attack rolls against creatures that have not yet acted.

In addition, you are skilled at navigating the wilderness. You gain the following benefits when traveling for an hour or more:

- Difficult terrain doesn't slow your group's travel.
- You gain a +5 bonus to Navigation checks.
- You can use the Keep a Lookout traveling action even when you are engaged in another activity while traveling.
- If you are traveling alone, you can move stealthily at a normal pace.
- You have a +5 bonus to Foraging checks.
- While tracking other creatures, you also learn their exact number, their sizes, and how long ago they passed through the area.

KEEN MIND FEAT

In addition to its other features, the Keen Mind feat grants you a +2 bonus to Navigation checks.

OUTLANDER BACKGROUND

The following feature replaces the Wanderer feature for the Outlander.

WANDERER

You have an excellent memory for maps and geography, and you can always recall the general layout of terrain, settlements, and other features around you, granting you a +2 bonus to Navigation checks. In addition, you have advantage on Foraging checks, and when you successfully Forage for food you find an additional amount of food and water to support one more person.

Special thanks to Victorian-Lady of Deviant Art for her designs, which were used in this document.



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