



# How to Shit in the Woods, 3rd Edition: An Environmentally Sound Approach to a Lost Art

By Kathleen Meyer

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It's the feisty third edition of *How to Shit in the Woods*, jam-packed with new information for outdoor enthusiasts of every stripe. Hailed in its first edition as “the most important environmental book of the decade” by *Books of the Southwest*, and in its second as “the real shit” by the late, great, outdoor photographer Galen Rowell, this bestselling guide is often called the “backpacker’s bible” and has sold more than 2.5 million copies in eight languages. Author Kathleen Meyer continues to pioneer the way with her inimitable voice—at once humorous, irreverent, and direct—examining the latest techniques for graceful backcountry elimination, and answering a desperate cry from nature concerning environmental precautions in our ever-shrinking wilds.

World changes come fast and furious, and in the backcountry it is no different. The practice of “packing-it-out,” adopted to protect high use areas and fragile eco-systems, is here to stay. We are now often urged to haul our poop home. Or with increasing frequency, the whole business is mandatory. To assist with all this responsible human waste disposal, Meyer’s new edition features the latest in product innovations, from classy high-tech to inexpensive do-it-yourself. She covers the most current solutions to the health risks of drinking straight from wilderness waterways; presents a raft of natural substitutes for the purist swearing off toilet tissue; and offers a wealth of new recommendations for ladies who must make do without a loo.

This down-to-earth guide has been employed as a training aid for scout troops, outdoor schools, and wilderness programs for inner-city youth; for rangers with the U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, and Bureau of Land Management; as well as for whitewater rafting guides, backcountry outfitters, and members of the military.

In rowing hundreds of urbanites down whitewater rivers, Meyer honed her squatting skills and found she “wasn’t alone in the klutz department.” Her delightfully shameless discussion of a once-shameful activity, her erudite

examination of its associated vocabulary, and her unapologetic promotion of its colorful vernacular make *How to Shit in the Woods* essential and vastly entertaining reading for anyone who's ever paused at the edge of the forest and pondered: "Where do I go to go?"

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

“Kathleen Meyer has contributed to environmental awareness while lending a grand old English word the respectability it hasn’t had since Chaucer’s day.”

--FRANK GRAHAM, *Audubon* magazine

#### About the Author

A longtime outdoorswoman, **KATHLEEN MEYER** is the founding editor of *Headwaters*, published by Friends of the River. Her travel essays have been included in the *Travelers’ Tales* anthologies *A Woman’s Passion for Travel: More True Stories from a Woman’s World* and *Sand in My Bra and Other Misadventures: Funny Women Write from the Road*. Her adventure memoir *Barefoot Hearted: A Wild Life Among Wildlife* was released by Villard in 2001. Whitewater rafter and canoeist, sea-kayaker and sailor, she is also a draft horse teamster, having traversed three Rocky Mountain states by horse-drawn wagon. Ever the nontraditional spirit, Meyer resides in an old, rather unrestored, dairy barn in Montana’s Bitterroot Valley and is available for interviews. Visit her Website [www.KathleenintheWoods.net](http://www.KathleenintheWoods.net) and hop onto her blog *Shooting the Shit*

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#### 1 Anatomy of a Crap

Bowels are not exactly a polite subject for conversation, but they are certainly a common problem. . . . Please think of me again as the urologist’s daughter. . . . It may disgust you that I have brought it up at all, but who knows? Life has some problems which are basic for all of us--and about which we have a natural reticence. --Katherine Hepburn, *The Making of The African Queen*

In the mid-1800s, in the Royal Borough of Chelsea, London, an industrious young English plumber named Thomas Crapper grabbed Progress in his pipe wrench and with a number of sophisticated sanitation inventions leapfrogged ahead one hundred years. T. J. Crapper found himself challenged by problems we wrestle with yet today: water quality and water conservation. Faced with London’s diminishing reservoirs, drained almost dry by the valve leakage and “continuous flush systems” of early water closets, Crapper developed the water waste preventer--the very siphonic cistern with uphill flow and automatic shut-off found in modern toilet tanks. T. Crapper & Co Ld, Sanitary Engineers, Marlboro Works, Chelsea (as his name still appears on three manhole covers in Westminster Abbey) was also responsible for the laying of hundreds of miles of London’s connecting sewers--and none too soon. The River Thames carried such quantities of rotting turds that the effluvium had driven Parliament to convene in the early morning hours to avoid a vile off-river breeze.

For the Victorian ladies who complained of the WC’s hissing and gurgling as giving away their elaborately disguised trips to the loo, Crapper installed the first silencers. Such pretenses as “pricking the plum pudding” or “picking the daisies” were foiled when a lady’s absence was accompanied by crashing waterfalls and echoing burbles. Among Mr. Crapper’s other claims to fame were his pear-shaped toilet seat (the forerunner of the gap-front seat) designed for men, and the posthumous addition to the English language of a vibrant

new word: crapper!

Clearly, T. J. Crapper was ahead of his day. Progress and time, nonetheless, are peculiar concepts. Some things in the universe--pollution, the use of euphemisms, sneaking off to the bathroom to tinkle silently down the side of the bowl, to name a few--seem to defy change, even from century to century. But there's been one glaring reversal in regard to crap. Our advanced twenty-first-century populace, well removed from the novelties and quirks of the first indoor WCs, finds itself having to break entirely new ground, as it were, when relieving itself outdoors. Ironically, shitting in the woods successfully--that is, without adverse environmental, psychological, or physical consequences--might be deemed genuine progress today. Take Henry, for instance (a namesake, perhaps, or even a descendant of old King Henry VIII).

*All the stories you are about to read are true (for the most part), having been extracted from dear friends and voluble strangers on various occasions, sometimes following the ingestion of copious quantities of Jose Cuervo or Yukon Jack. Only the names have been changed to protect the incommodious.*

High on a dusty escarpment jutting skyward from camp, a man named Henry, having scrambled up there and squeezed in behind what appeared to be the ideal bush for camouflage, began lowering himself precariously into a deep knee bend. Far below, just out of their bedrolls, three fellow river runners violated the profound quiet of the canyon's first light by poking about the commissary, cracking eggs, snapping twigs, and sloshing out the coffee pot. Through the branches, our pretzel man on the hill observed the breakfast preparations while proceeding with his own morning mission. To the earth it finally fell, round and firm, this sturdy turd. With a bit more encouragement from gravity, it rolled slowly out from between Henry's big boots, threaded its way through the spindly trunks of the "ideal" bush, and then truly taking on a mind of its own, leaped into the air like a downhill skier out at the gate.

You can see the dust trail of a fast-moving pickup mushrooming off a dirt road long after you've lost sight of the truck. Henry watched, wide-eyed and helpless, as a similar if smaller cloud billowed up defiantly below him, and the actual item became obscured from view. Zigging and zagging, it caromed off rough spots in the terrain. Madly it bumped and tumbled and dropped, as though making its run through a giant pinball machine. Gaining momentum, gathering its own little avalanche, round and down it spun like a buried back tire spraying up sand. All too fast it raced down the steep slope--until it became locked into that deadly slow motion common to the fleeting seconds just preceding all imminent, unalterable disasters. With one last bounce, one final effort at heavenward orbit, this unruly goof ball (followed by an arcing tail of debris) landed in a terminal thud and a rain of pebbly clatter not six inches from the bare foot of the woman measuring out coffee.

With his dignity thus unraveled along sixty yards of descent, Henry in all likelihood might have come home from his first river trip firmly resolved to never again set foot past the end of the asphalt. Of course, left to his own devices and with any determination at all unless he was a total fumble-bum, Henry would have learned how to shit in the woods. Eventually. The refining of his skills by trial and error and the acquiring of grace, poise, and self-confidence--not to mention muscle development and balance--would probably have taken him about as long as it did me: years.

I don't think Henry would mind our taking a closer look at his calamity. Henry can teach us a lot, and not all by poor example. Indeed, he started out on the right track by getting far enough away from camp to ensure his privacy. Straight up just wasn't the best choice of direction. Next, he chose a location with a view, although whether he took time to appreciate it is unknown. Usually I recommend a wide-reaching view, a landscape rolling away to distant mountain peaks and broad expanses of wild sky. But a close-in setting near a lichen-covered rock, a single wildflower, or even dried-up weeds and monotonous talus, when quietly

studied, can offer inspiration of a different brand.

The more time you spend in the wild, the easier it will be to reconnoiter an inspiring view. A friend of mine calls her morning exercise the Advanced Wilderness Appreciation Walk. As she strides along an irrigation canal practically devoid of vegetation, but overgrown with crumpled beer cans, has-been appliances, and rusted auto parts, she finds the morning's joy in the colors of the sunrise and the backlighting of a lone thistle.

Essential for the outdoor neophyte is a breathtaking view. These opportunities for glorious moments alone in the presence of grandeur should be soaked up. They are soul replenishing and mind expanding. The ideal occasion for communing with nature is while you're peacefully sitting still--yes, shitting in the woods. The rest of the day, unless you're trekking solo, can quickly become cluttered with social or organizational distractions.

But back to Henry, whose only major mistake was failing to dig a hole. It's something to think about: a small hole preventing the complete destruction of an ego. A proper hole is of great importance, not only in averting disasters such as Henry's, but in preventing the spread of disease and facilitating rapid decomposition. Chapter 2 in its entirety is devoted to the hole.

More do's and don'ts for preserving mental and physical health while shitting in the woods will become apparent as we look in on Charles. He has his own notion about clothes and pooping in the wilderness: he takes them off. Needless to say, this man hikes well away from camp and any connecting trails to a place where he feels secure about completely removing his britches and relaxing for a spell. Finding an ant-free log, he digs his hole on the opposite side from the view, sits down, scoots to the back of the log, and floats into the rhapsody that tall treetops find in the clouds. Remember this one. It's by far the dreamiest, most relaxing setup for shitting in the woods. A smooth, bread-loaf-shaped rock (or even your backpack in a pinch in a vacant wasteland) can be used in the same manner--for hanging your buns over the back.

This seems like an appropriate spot to share a helpful technique imparted to me one day by another friend: "Shit first, dig later." In puzzlement, I turned to her and as our eyes met she watched mine grow into harvest moons. But of course, "shit first, dig later"--that way you could never miss the hole. It was the perfect solution! Perfect, that is, for anyone with bad aim. Me? Not me.

Unlike Charles, there's my longtime friend Elizabeth who prizes the usefulness of her clothes. While on a rattletrap bus trip through northern Mexico, the lumbering vehicle on which she rode came to a five-minute halt to compensate for the lack of a toilet on board. Like a colorful parachute descending from desert skies, Lizzie's voluminous skirt billowed to the earth, and she squatted down inside her own private outhouse.

Occasionally it is impossible to obtain an optimal degree of privacy. Some years back, my colleague Henrietta Alice was hitchhiking along the Autobahn in Germany, where the terrain was board flat and barren. At last, unable to contain herself, she asked the driver to stop and she struck out across a field toward a knoll topped by a lone bush. There, hidden by branches and feeling safe from the eyes of traffic, she squatted and swung up the back of her skirt, securing it as a cape over her head. But Henrietta's rejoicing ended abruptly. Out of nowhere came a column of Boy Guides (the rear guard?) marching past her bare derrière.

Another version of Henrietta's story needs to be kept in mind when hiking switchbacks. I was all settled once, well off the path, completely shrouded with low-hanging branches, pants down, a soft mullein leaf in hand, when smack at me came three hikers, all men, stepping smartly along on the previous bend in the trail.

Only the footway's ruts and roots, which held their attention, and my holding my breath like a startled squirrel saved me.

There are many theories on clothes and shitting, all individual and personal. In time you will develop your own. Edwin, our next case study, has a new theory about clothes after one memorable hunting trip; whether it be to take them off or keep them on, I haven't figured out.

## **Users Review**

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