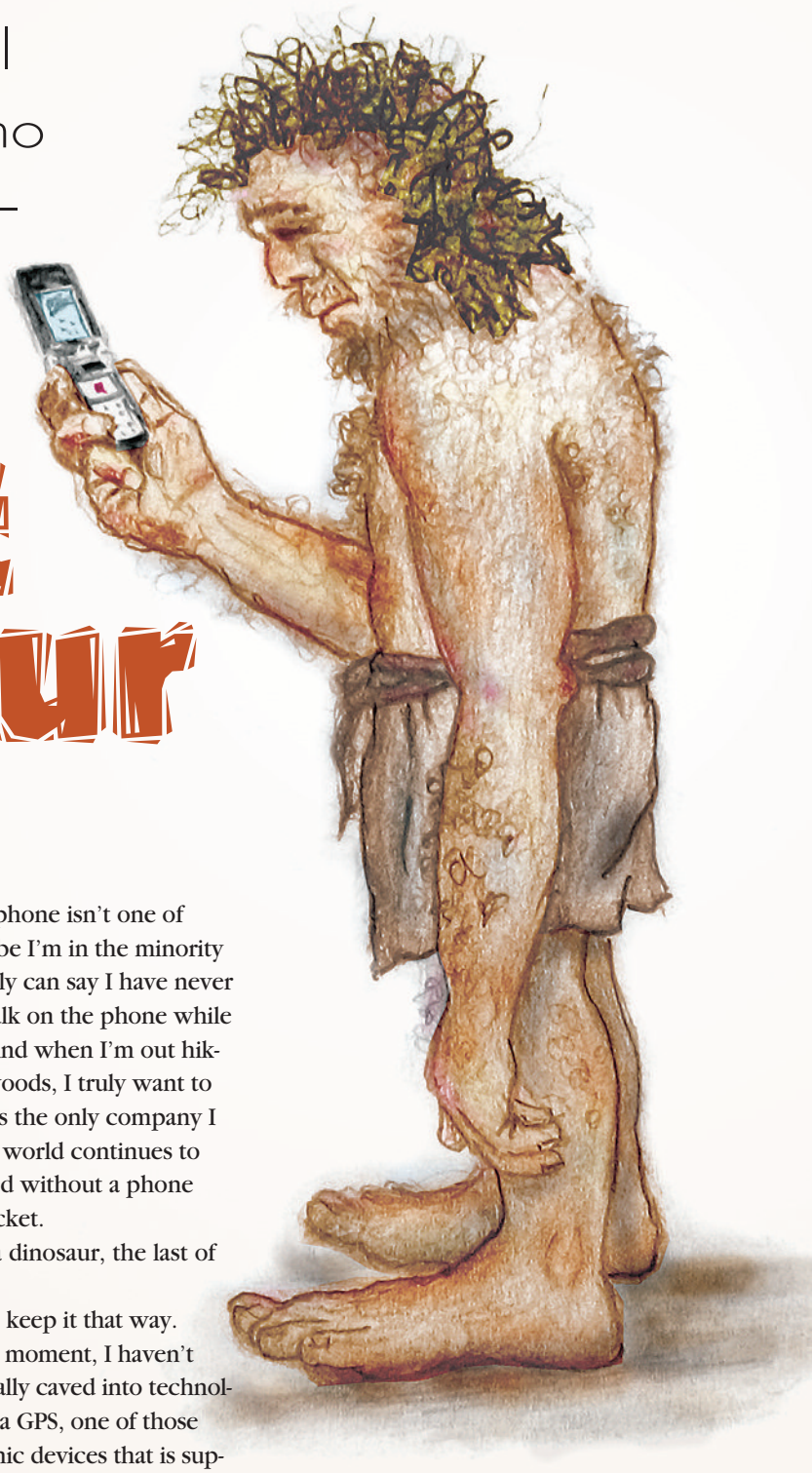
When it comes to survival in nature, all creatures who fail to adapt will be lost—especially with a GPS.



The Last Dinosaur

Story and Photo By Joe McFarland

In the Illinois state park where I work, parents often bring their children along to witness the rare dinosaur on display in my office.

"Behold!" a father will say to his wide-eyed children as he escorts them inside, sweeping an arm in my direction. "The last man on Earth without a cell phone."

I always smile and shrug. The children, fascinated by their first-ever glimpse of the ancient world, immediately thrust their cell phones forward and begin taking pictures.

"Is he real?" they say incredulously. Children are astonished by the baffling image of a man sitting at a desk where a regular telephone is on display. "How does he communicate?"

Here's the deal: I don't buy that everybody-has-to-own-a-cell-phone thing. The notion that all humans must remain in constant communication with everyone else in the world goes against one of my oldest life principles, which is the policy of avoiding anything new.

I like doing things people have been doing for a very long time. And pushing buttons on a cell phone isn't one of those things. Maybe I'm in the minority here, but I honestly can say I have never once wanted to talk on the phone while reeling in a fish. And when I'm out hiking alone in the woods, I truly want to be alone. Nature is the only company I need. The natural world continues to keep me fascinated without a phone buzzing in my pocket.

I know. I am a dinosaur, the last of my kind.

And I intend to keep it that way. It's why, until this moment, I haven't told anybody I finally caved into technology: I just bought a GPS, one of those hand-held electronic devices that is supposed to explain where you're at in the world. As far as I can tell, a cell phone and a GPS aren't all that different when it comes to how they work: Both have buttons that send signals someplace, and that's about all I know. Of course, I'm a little embarrassed to own the thing, partly because it looks like a cell phone, and partly because I haven't yet figured out how it works.

The fact is, I am tired of getting lost in the woods. No outdoorsman worth his salt will ever admit he can't find his way out of the woods. But my problem is that I have this habit of wandering into places where no man in Illinois has ever wandered before.

"You should carry a compass," well-meaning people often suggest. "And a good map." The thing is, maps and compasses, while nice in theory, are no good when navigating through uncharted territory.

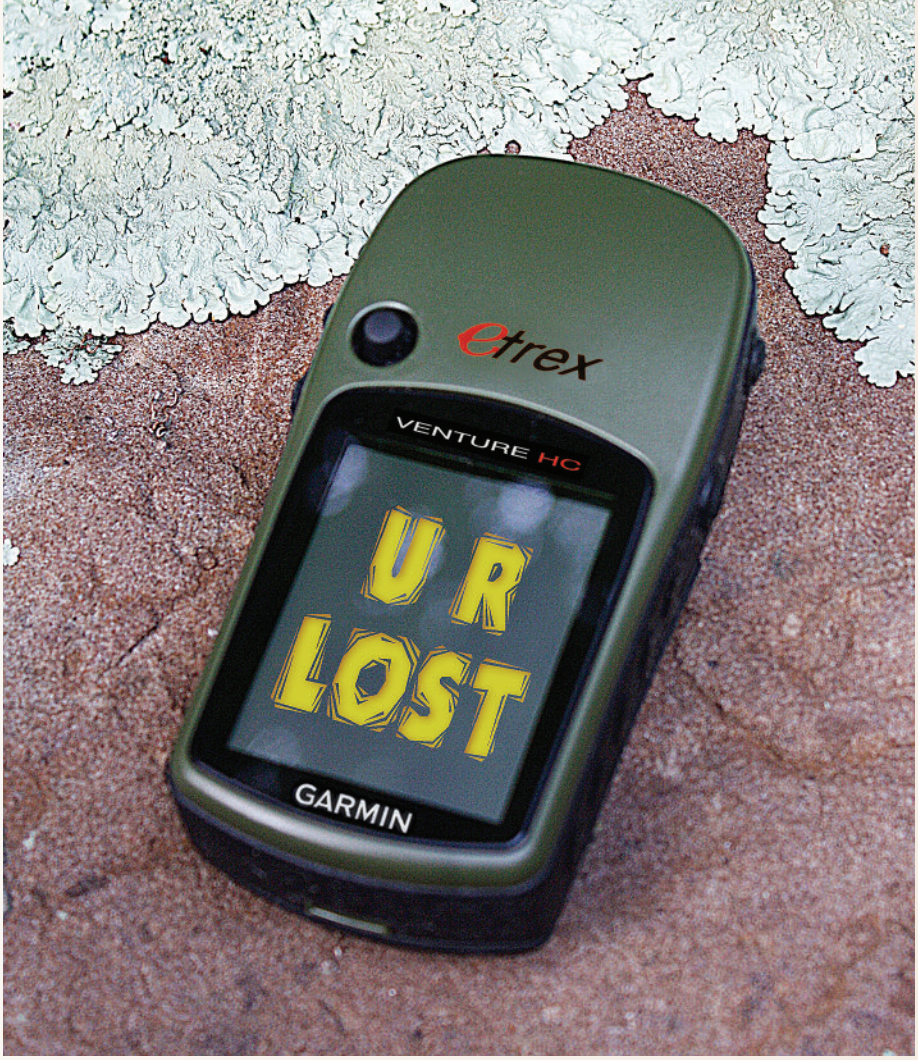
For example, a few weeks ago I decided to go hiking in a remote area in the Shawnee National Forest not far

from Dixon Springs State Park. The trail leading from the small parking lot appeared straightforward enough. A sign at the edge of the parking lot showed a large loop reassuring hikers there would be no risk of getting lost if one merely stayed on the trail. There was even evidence the trail had been used recently, and the footprints of various hikers leading in and out of the trail gave no indication the land I was about to enter had never been visited by another human.

Thus I began my journey, hiking past scenic overlooks and dense forests in this rugged and spectacular region of Illinois. The enjoyable hike progressed for several hours, during which time I encountered no other human or any hint the trail actually would loop back to the parking lot as the sign had indicated. As the sun began to set, I finally found myself following a very faint game trail that forked in several directions every few feet. Unfamiliar wildlife not known to exist in Illinois, along with calls of birds I did not recognize, sounded in the distance. But I kept my faith. I continued hiking amid what I believed to be the Shawnee National Forest, past valleys and streams and more overlooks, confidently expecting I would finally see my truck parked just over the next hill.

But I met with no such fortune. After a considerable amount of additional hiking, resting occasionally in a lean-to shelter I would build each night, the trail finally thinned to an end in an unfamiliar landscape that spread out for miles to the horizon, with not a building or human in sight. More than 280,000 acres of Shawnee National Forest, much of it rugged and seldom visited, exist in the southern part of Illinois where I live. After my long hike, I believed I'd walked every square inch of it, and a great many miles beyond, all in the course of trying to find my truck.

Fortunately, as any outdoorsman worth his salt will do before heading outdoors, I was well-prepared by carrying a sharp pocketknife, a book of matches and plenty of food and water. Indeed, those valuable supplies did, eventually, help me reach my truck again. After hiking for many more miles, I was able to barter my supplies with a group of friendly people I met on the trail in exchange for a ride in their dugout canoe back to Illinois. The natives I bartered with spoke almost no English, but they all gestured to me in a way that indicated I was no longer in North America and hadn't been for a very long while.



Today's lightning-fast satellite technology instantly confirms what used to take hours of aimless wandering.

Before climbing into the canoe for the long return trip, I noticed all of them carried cell phones, which they thrust at me, snapping pictures.

"Dinosaur!" they gasped in amazement. "Last one!"

Thus, the man who does not own a cell phone is now a man who owns a GPS, if only secretly. My new goal is to eventually figure out how a GPS actually keeps people from getting lost. Since I have yet to figure out how the buttons work, I stare at the GPS while hiking instead of paying attention to the trail. I rarely enjoy the sights and sounds of nature anymore, although I do get to appreciate the great outdoors during that long ride home in the dugout canoe.

Behind the Story

*Outdoor*Illinois staff writer Joe McFarland can trace his earliest memories of nature to the wildly mesmerizing stories his father would spin about the unexplored wilderness of Illinois. Joe McFarland became a writer at an early age, influenced by his father's wild exaggerations. As an accomplished illustrator and artist, Richard J. McFarland spent his long career in graphic arts without having the opportunity to illustrate one of his son's stories. Until now. At age 74, Richard J. McFarland proudly took up a pen and ink and provided *Outdoor*Illinois with the illustration featured here.