

Why Crozet: Who Does This? Albemarle Outdoorsman Finds Humor and Happiness in Extreme Adventure

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Tom Garstang's hunting skills enabled him to bag 47 animals in his 43 days on "Alone." Photo courtesy the HISTORY Channel/Brendan George Ko.

Why Crozet is a long-running feature examining the positive aspects of living in this beautiful area. This month, we tell the story of a local outdoorsman who learned many lessons in rural resourcefulness from his life

here, as well as from more exotic locations overseas. Tom Garstang appeared on season nine of 'Alone,' the popular HISTORY channel survival series, where contestants are dropped in the wilderness with only ten items of their choosing, and directed to film their own survival techniques, with the longest-lasting winning \$500,000. Please note that the following will preview the outcome of the show for those who haven't yet watched all of season nine.

When the producers of Alone chose Tom Garstang for their ninth season, they expected him to be one of the most successful hunters among the 10 contestants. They were right: In his 43 days in Labrador, Garstang bagged 47 animals, an assortment of grouse, rabbits, squirrels and fish.

What they didn't know was that he'd be unfailingly cheerful and upbeat during his time in the frigid north woods, through storms, injuries, loneliness and a damp cold so numbing that he had to carry hot rocks in his pockets to warm his fingers enough to pull a bow. "I remember the first night," Garstang said. "I found what I thought was a great spot, nice and flat, with no vegetation." Contestants generally seek out the most obvious space for their first night's shelter, usually just a tarpaulin draped over a branch, until they can find the ideal spot for a more permanent shelter.

"I failed to notice that I was sleeping on a peat bog," Garstang said. "It rained and I slowly sank into the mud." So, in the early morning hours of his first night, he hauled his tarp and a collection of his few soggy supplies (contestants can bring only 10 things with them) to a better spot in the pitch dark. "I was grinning from ear to ear, kind of like 'who does this?'" he said.

For some of his hunting skills, he credits his father, a conservation biologist who ran programs in South Africa, and later in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Richard



Tom Garstang. Photo courtesy the HISTORY Channel/Brendan George Ko.

Garstang enlisted his son to track, move, cull and capture animals for various reasons. Tom learned that patience and observation—as well as a deep knowledge of the habits and needs of each animal through the seasons—were important tools for the hunter. Tom's time in the bush was to influence his later life in ways he couldn't imagine.

But Tom credits his mother for qualities that are just as important to his success: his equanimity and joyful outlook. His family went through many changes, some of them painful. They left Africa—the only home the children had known—because of apartheid. The parents split up, there was no money to spare, and the young boy believed he didn't fit in here. The extended family had rural land near Earlysville, and that's where he chose to spend his time, in the woods and fields, observing and hunting. His mother supported him in his desire to be outdoors most of the time. He also played music with friends, and did odd jobs as needed around the family farm.



Tom Garstang was one of ten accomplished outdoorsmen to compete for \$500,000 on Season 9 of Alone. Photo courtesy the HISTORY Channel/Brendan George Ko.

“Through it all, she was never bitter or miserable,” he said about his mother. She refrained from criticizing Tom’s father—with all his worthwhile attributes, he was a hard man, Tom said—even giving him ideas about how the two of them could get along better. “She taught me that you didn’t need money to have a good life, that you could be uncomfortable and still be happy.”

No one was happy with Tom’s decision to drop out of high school and live a vagabond life for a while, but it added to the random survival skills he was steadily accumulating.

Survival School

At home, Tom immersed himself in tracking, fishing and hunting, while also

learning the value of the medicinal and edible native plants that surrounded him. He became a musician, joining a band playing Appalachian roots music. On the road, he hitchhiked, jumped trains, went to music festivals, did all kinds of manual labor and service jobs. There wasn't a hands-on skill that didn't interest him. He became a prescribed fire practitioner, learned about regenerative agriculture, and pitched in on the family farm. "On a farm, you're always relying on ingenuity," he said. "You'll spot a problem and figure out how to fix it with baling twine or something else you already have."

For years, he had his eye on another skill, one that would require him to stay in one place and invest a chunk of time. "I wanted to learn leather work," he said, "but there never seemed to be an opening at Pinnell's (Pinnell Custom Leather in Crozet). Finally, one of the small, tight-knit crew left and Tom began an apprenticeship, learning the skills needed for high-end leather crafting. He stayed there for six years, until the pandemic shut the shop down for a while.



Besides survival skills, agricultural skills and leather work, Tom Garstang learned to play the guitar, here displaying


In his job, Tom was just as patient and easygoing as he was on film, Chuck Pinnell said. "He learned quickly and worked hard." Pinnell said his own first experience with turkey hunting was with Tom as a guide. "He made sure I got a turkey. He's a very generous, loyal man."

When the world shut down in 2020, Tom was better suited than most of us for seclusion. "I don't even own a television and seldom go online," he said. But his girlfriend had been watching *Alone* and he began to join her. "I was fascinated, and watched every episode, right from the beginning." Finally, he applied for season 9 with a short video. "I'd learned a little about filming from helping my father."

Behind the Scenes

There are more people steeped in wilderness survival skills than you might think. More than 4,500 applied for Season 9, which initially was narrowed down to 500. Tom was chosen for this pool, but he didn't know it because he didn't check emails. He did answer his phone, though: One day, he picked up a call from a Hollywood area code and found he'd neglected to answer four different emails sent by the producers. He made it through every subsequent cut and finally found himself at the crew's orientation site in Labrador, along with nine other skilled survivalists.

"We spent some time in training, mostly to learn the filming equipment," he said, "and we got to know each other really well." To be sure everyone has a fair chance, there's a triple-blind process where no one knows where they'll end up, or the order in which the helicopter will take them to their spot. The order of the drops is very important, because someone dropped off in the morning will have a great deal more time to find a suitable night's shelter than someone, like Tom, who's dropped off at the end of the day. The areas are remote enough, and distances great enough, that there's no chance of the contestants overlapping.



The timing of each contestant's arrival at their space in Labrador is important. Tom was picked up and dropped by the helicopter late in the day. Photo courtesy the HISTORY Channel/Brendan George Ko.

Tom looked around and saw Juan Pablo Quiñonez, who had gained 60 pounds for the competition, drinking a gallon a day from a camelback dispenser of milk before his final drop. When Tom found out he never cleaned it, Juan Pablo said he believed that growing up in an area with little sanitation, he was pretty resistant to bacteria. He was right, Tom said. Juan Pablo drank directly from the river with no ill effects.

He pegged Kari Lee Knoke, a 57-year-old woman who had also put on a lot of pounds, as an early departure, because she was always laughing and singing. "I was wrong, and I'm sure I'll be wrong again," he said. "She had awesome skills. Like me, she was interested in having fun with the whole thing. It goes to show that you can't make superficial judgements." Kari Lee did extremely well, leaving after 75 days, the last one to leave before Juan

Pablo was declared the winner.

Tom said the contestants from his season, and sometimes from other seasons as well, stay in touch constantly, one reason he still answers his phone. "All of us immediately recognized we were in the company of people like us—misfits and weirdos—a kind of community we hadn't found before." He said they respect and learn from each other rather than dwelling on differences or mistakes.

Tom, who is naturally thin, had tried to gain weight but his job outside in the heat (after leaving Pinnell's, he became a cattle herder for a farm in Keswick) worked against him. But he made other ingenious preparations. Frederick Drieir of Outside Online magazine called him one of the most creative contestants of all time. One example: Tom, realizing he couldn't fit fishing lures into his limit of 10 objects, died his hair pastel in spots, then cut and tied the hair into tiny bundles for lures. "I actually had quite a few colors," Tom said, "but some of them faded."

It Gets Real

After Tom left the peat bog, he built an amazing shelter, including what a comment on the channel's website said was the best fireplace ever on the show. He built into a hillside, digging with his hands and feet. "I learned this from my dog," he told the camera. He adapted his woven walls from fences he'd seen in East Africa.

His hunting skills did indeed help him, and he rarely felt hungry, but lost weight daily. "That's because almost everything I ate was lean meat," he said. "You just can't live on protein alone. You need carbohydrates and fat." He knew how to find some of the minerals and vitamins he needed from berries, mushrooms, fir, and spruce. For fat, his plan was to find a bear when the time was right. "But it's a tricky window," he said. "It's hard to preserve bear meat in the wild. If it's too warm, it will all spoil. Then, shortly after it's

cold enough, the bears hibernate." Tom took a lot of risks the others avoided. He was so confident of his archery skills that he stored meat in and around his shelter, hoping to attract a bear at the right moment. "Black bears in Labrador aren't like the ones that look for scraps around my cabin in Virginia," Tom said. "They're more like Grizzlies, much more aggressive, especially when they're hungry."

Still, Tom's former life among large predators overseas as well as here in the mountains gave him some insight into their behavior. "You have to convince them that it would be just too inconvenient for them to attack you," he said. "On the other hand, an animal that knows it's the prey will fight for its life." Tom has disdain for hunters who hunt only for the sport of killing. "They give hunting a bad name and cause a lot of damage," he said.

While waiting to spot a bear, Tom had his eye on a plump beaver, and even got a good shot at one. "Beavers are good food," he said. "People have eaten beavers for centuries." He noted that some woodsmen (and many critics in the Alone audience) believe that beavers are more likely than other animals to contain the parasite giardia. In fact, some call giardia "beaver fever." Benji Hill, a clear frontrunner, who'd eaten grouse cooked in beaver fat, left the show with an agonizing stomach infection. Tom's experience living with people in rural Africa and Afghanistan taught him about avoiding food poisoning in primitive conditions. "These people are always super conscious of what they've touched," he said. "The most common source of infection is your own hands. You train yourself not to touch your face, or your food, unless you're certain your hands are clean."

Tom had skills less easy to quantify than his hunting. He didn't have demons and regrets that haunted him during the long, dark nights. He was very comfortable being alone with his thoughts. "If you're somewhere with no distractions you might think one thought for more than two days." He sang familiar songs in the darkness, made some earrings for his girlfriend, basically enjoyed the whole process.

He said many of the contestants build fires only to cook or boil water, because the calorie cost of finding firewood for heat is so great. Juan Pablo, the winner, deliberately kept his shelter very cold and exerted little energy towards the end when food sources dried up, so his body would go into a state akin to hibernation. Tom would build small fires in the morning but didn't try to keep them going all day, or keep the shelter warm at night.



Photo courtesy the HISTORY Channel/Brendan George Ko.

Starvation was catching up with Tom, though. "I began to feel uncomfortable lying down, and realized there was just no fat to cushion me." He felt like he was wearing lead boots. "The quadriceps seem to go first," he said, "so even just lifting your leg over a log feels like a huge ordeal." He became clumsy and slow in his movements and the audience could see two very painful falls recorded by the cameras set up around his shelter.

It was perhaps his first, unrecorded, fall on the ice that affected him the most, though, he said. "I realized that I could easily die out there without

anyone knowing." He believes if his falls had happened a little later, he might have weathered the injuries with rest, but knowing the caliber of the other contestants, he knew he was nowhere near the time frame it would take him to win. "It seemed pointless to lie in my shelter for a week, lose more and more weight, and still not win."

Most of all, he didn't feel the need to hurt himself seriously for the cash prize, he said. "I have a great life. I don't need a lot of money to be happy. I knew I could be back in the Virginia woods by bow season. I had everything to look forward to already."

That includes any opportunity to return to Alone: "I had so much fun," he said. "I'd go back in a heartbeat."

*Find Tom's adventure, and all seasons of Alone on the HISTORY channel. See a short clip of Tom building his shelter and fireplace:
play.history.com/shows/alone/videos/shelter-from-the-storm-hillside-shelter?playlist_slug=alone-shelter-from-the-storm*



Tom Garstang learned leather work from Pinnell Custom leather in Crozet. Courtesy Charles Pinnell.