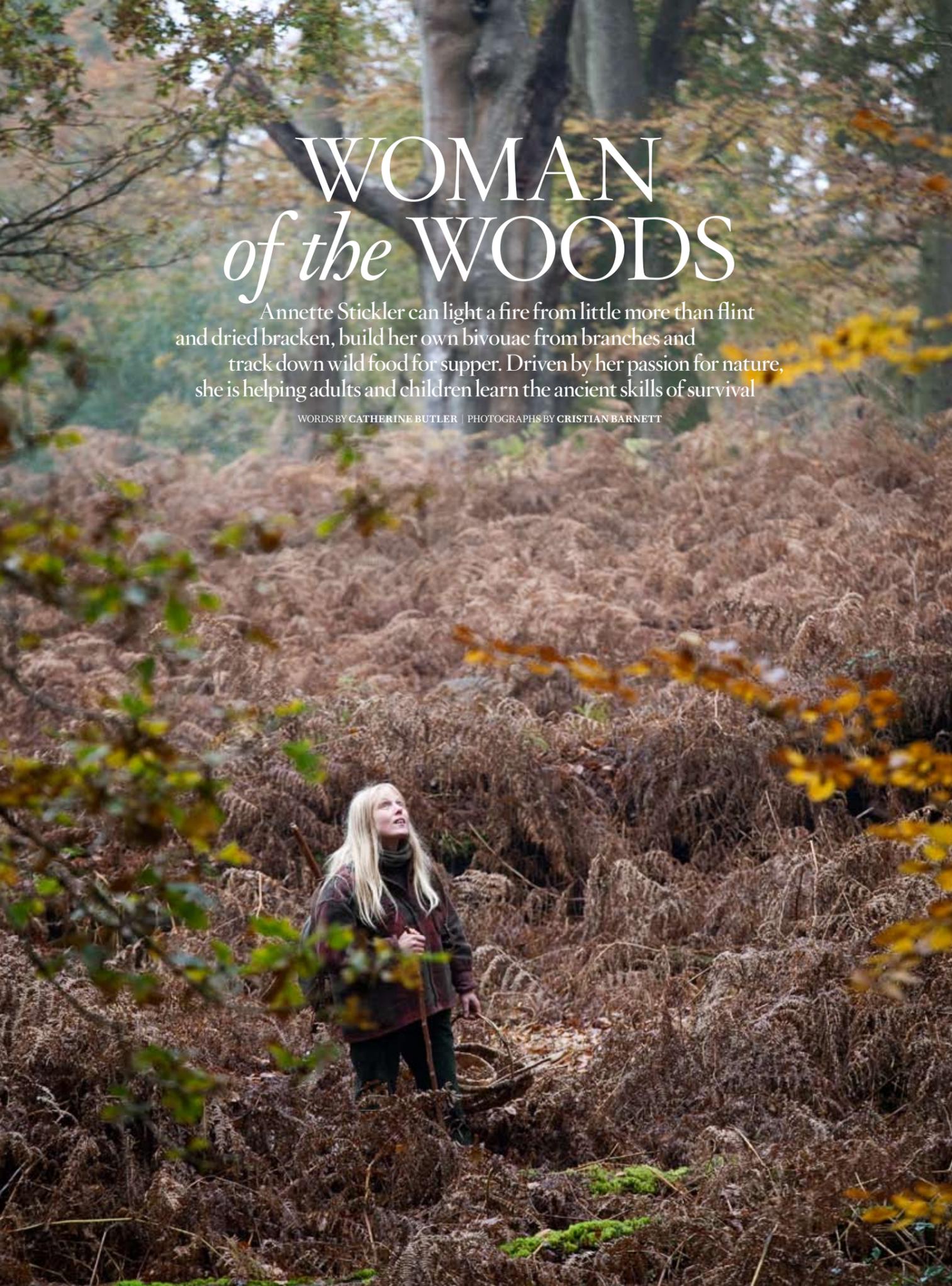


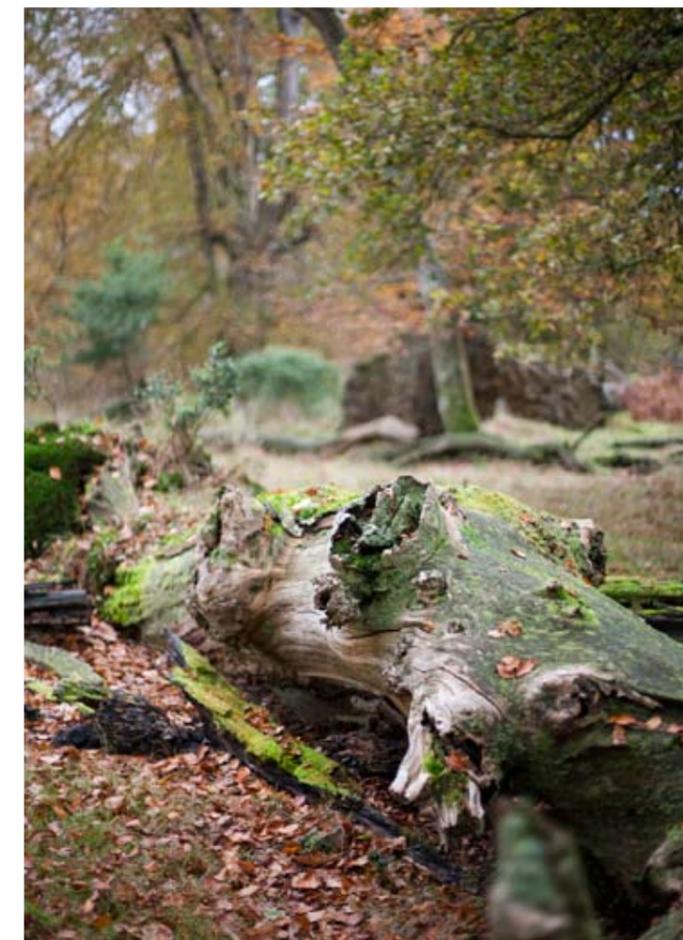
WOMAN *of the* WOODS

Annette Stickler can light a fire from little more than flint and dried bracken, build her own bivouac from branches and track down wild food for supper. Driven by her passion for nature, she is helping adults and children learn the ancient skills of survival

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ABOVE LEFT Wooden spoons carved by Annette; ABOVE RIGHT Gathering rosehips to make into syrup. THIS PICTURE Dead twigs for kindling





CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE
 Birch bark has many uses – it can even be used to make dressings for cuts and wounds; snapping off dead twigs from branches to start the fire; pine needle tea; striking flint against steel to make a spark

If you were lost in the wilderness, Annette Stickler might appear your most unlikely saviour. Less than five feet tall, with long blonde hair falling loosely about her shoulders, she cuts an almost childlike figure through the forest. Yet this is one woman who could teach you how to light a fire in the pouring rain, build a shelter from fallen branches, or rustle up a meal from the woodland floor. It is late October in a forest in Hampshire, and the bracken-covered ground is burnt with amber, brown and gold, broken only by the bright green moss that creeps over the damp bones of fallen trees.

Thumb-stick in hand, rucksack slung over her shoulder, walking with Annette is a bit like being on a safari-in-miniature, as she draws attention to the tiny wonders hidden in the tree canopy or under foot that would usually be missed. There are droppings the colour of oil on water hidden beneath the leaf litter – evidence a badger has been feasting on some silver dor beetles; the candlesnuff fungus growing on the side of a felled log that looks just like a blown-out candle wick; or the half-moon shaped fungus, birch polypore, which is so tough you can strop your knife on it, or use it to make a sterile plaster.

“Bushcraft is about understanding nature,” Annette says. For the past ten years she has run Campfire Skills, leading courses around the south-east of England and passing on her knowledge and passion for the natural world. “It has two sides – the survival skills where hypothetically you could light a fire in less than a minute, and the part that is done in your own time like basketry or cordage [rope and string making].”

Nature has long been important in her life. “My grandmother taught me how to recognise every common plant and tree by

“People rely on their eyes too much. You should be able to walk through a wood in the dark and recognise each tree by touch and smell alone”

the time I was six years old,” says Annette, who was brought up playing in the woods with her brothers, creating dens in the garden, building fires and making bows and arrows.

But it wasn't until she went on a course with the then-unknown Ray Mears that bushcraft became a way of life. A zoo-keeper at Marwell Zoological Park for eight years, Annette had been working on a project breeding endangered species and releasing them into the wild when she began to feel unhappy with captivity and the behaviour it caused. She decided

to go travelling to see wildlife in its natural environment, but as a lone woman first enrolled on a course to learn some survival skills. “It changed my whole outlook on life and gave me confidence and self-belief,” says Annette, who has since led courses for Mears as a seasonal instructor.

“I always start by getting my students to use all their senses. People rely on their eyes too much. You should be able to walk through a wood in the dark and recognise each tree by touch and smell.” Understanding trees and their properties is fundamental to bushcraft – knowing that yew is good for heat but poisonous to cook with, for example, that oak will give you hot embers and that chestnut will spit. One tree, however, truly is the bushcrafter's friend. “This is the supermarket of the forest,” says Annette, patting the silvery bark of a birch whose last ▷

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT
 Carving a wooden spoon with just a knife; baskets woven from rush and birch; Annette fans the ember to create a flame; heating water on a billycan hung from a thumb-stick



few leaves have turned to golden discs. "You can make soap from its leaves, wine from its sap or dressings from its bark."

It is a common misconception that hobbies such as bushcraft are a male preserve, and Annette works hard to dispel this image and encourage more women into the outdoors. She has even designed her own range of smaller-sized knives and bivvy bags especially for women, having found those on the market are too large for her smaller frame. While men do find some elements of bushcraft easier than women – shelter building for example – women will pick up other skills such as cordage more naturally. "It's anthropological," says Annette. "Give a piece of

She'd been dabbling in bushcraft since childhood but it wasn't until she went on a course with the then unknown Ray Mears that it became a way of life

flint to a boy and he'll smash it, whereas a girl will start knapping it because of that history of females making tools and men hunting"

Working with children outdoors was one of Annette's motivating factors in setting up Campfire Skills. She believes that the way to encourage children to grow up wanting to conserve their environment is by teaching them to love it – and the only way to do that is by letting them get their hands dirty. "Bushcraft is a vehicle for so many things," she says. "I've worked with verbally aggressive kids, but when they are together

doing bushcraft they are so focused that they start chatting together and achieving things. I used to go to school with a penknife in my pocket, but it wasn't a weapon, it was a tool."

Making fire is the holy grail of bushcraft yet, as with knife work, people panic too much, says Annette who is gathering firewood, snapping off the dead twigs from the tips of low-hanging branches until she has an armful of spindly kindling. She piles it next to the hearth she has cleared on the forest floor, having already checked for any roots that could catch light and burn underground for weeks. "I always carry at least three methods of fire-lighting with me: my knife – so I can carve a 'fire by friction set' whenever I need to, flint and steel, a firestick striker and matches," Annette says.

Holding a scrap of charcloth and small piece of flint in one hand, she begins to strike it with a steel peg. Sparks fly, and a tiny orange fleck catches the char cloth and begins to smoulder. Dropping the ember into a handful of dried bracken, Annette starts to nurture the flame, fanning it with her breath until gradually a thin trail of smoke begins to pour from the nest. With a little perseverance this soon turns into a great plume from which eventually leaps an orange flame. She drops the flame onto the hearth and begins feeding it slowly with pencil-thin sticks, until bright tongues of fire are crackling away on the woodland floor. "I never wanted to get to 70 and find that I've spent my whole life walking on Tarmac and carpets. People tell me that I should get out more – but I do. It's just that my idea of a good night out is sitting around a campfire, or hiding in the undergrowth watching for badgers." 🦊
Campfire Skills, Warsash, Hampshire; 0781720 2755; www.campfireskills.co.uk). Annette runs courses throughout the year including Traditional Family Bushcraft, Tracking, Primitive Skills and Basketry, and Wilderness Cookery.