FIELD GUIDE · NO. 23

Basic Map Symbols

A map is a picture of a place from above. The legend tells you what the symbols mean.



FROM THE BOOK

1. Start by answering "Where am I?" Compare the map to your surroundings. A road intersection, bridge, lake, ridgeline, power line, or stream crossing can serve as a reference point.
2. Every map uses symbols, colors, and lines. The legend (or key) explains them. If you are not sure what a symbol means, look there first.
3. In the book's examples, a dashed line may represent a hiking trail and a solid line a paved road. Different shades of green, blue, or brown can indicate forests, water, and changes in elevation. Other symbols vary by map — use that map's legend.
4. Scale tells you how distance on paper relates to distance on the ground. A trail that looks a few inches long may be several miles.
5. On topographic maps, contour lines show elevation change. Lines close together mean steeper terrain; lines farther apart suggest gentler slopes.
6. Orient the map so it matches the direction you are facing. Keep the map in a waterproof sleeve or bag, somewhere you can reach it without unpacking your whole pack, and check it as you go — not only at the start of the day.

PRACTICE IT

Unfold a local map, find the legend and scale, match two visible landmarks to the map, and turn the sheet until those features line up with the land in front of you.