



WILDBOY

The Journey of Brando Yelavich

by Stephanie Chamberlin

You're walking along a wild, lonely stretch of coastline. Suddenly you hear something crashing around in the bush. The mystery creature stumbles onto the beach, and you see it's a goat. What do you do? If you're Brando "Wildboy" Yelavich, you don't think twice: a wild goat means dinner. You shoot it, skin it, gut it, and chop it up. Then you bag the pieces and strap the whole lot to your backpack. By the time you set up camp later that night, you'll be grateful for the protein to add to your seaweed stir-fry.

Into the Wild

Sound like a day in the life of your average teenager? Amazingly, just a few months earlier, Brando Yelavich had been just that. Living with his sister and parents in suburban Auckland, he had a comfortable existence. There was food in the fridge, so he didn't have to scan the horizon for wild animals when he was hungry, but Brando remembers often feeling depressed and stressed out.

"I fought with my parents about everything," he says, "and school was a really bad fit for me. I have ADHD* and dyslexia, and it's taken me a long time to learn that I'm much better in practical situations than in a classroom. After I left school, I went through a few jobs that didn't work out. I ended up lying around doing nothing much. It was a really negative cycle."

* attention deficit hyperactivity disorder

Fascinated by a movie called *Into the Wild* – about the adventures of a young American named Christopher McCandless – Brando began to dream of a completely different life. With a strong urge to achieve something significant, he told his family and friends he was going to become the

first person to walk around New Zealand's entire coastline. Hoping to raise \$10,000 for Ronald McDonald House, Brando also decided he would be self-sufficient along the way: hunting, fishing, and foraging for food.

A Doer

Brando's goal was hugely ambitious. New Zealand's twisting coastline is around 15,000 kilometres long. As well as walking for days along endless stretches of beach, he would face sheer cliffs, sharp and slippery rocks, dangerous harbours, and deep rivers. Drowning, injury, and hypothermia were all real possibilities. Then there was solitude. Brando would be alone for up to a week at a time. And in isolated places, he'd have no cellphone coverage.

None of this stopped him. "I'd been told so many times that most people are 'gunnas'," Brando says. "They're gunna do this, gunna do that. I decided to be a doer." Not everyone took him seriously, but within months, Brando had worked

on his fitness and found a sponsor for his gear. "My parents made it clear that I was doing this on my own, and I had almost no money for food or campsites," Brando explains. "I had to be organised. I carried a lot of survival gear, including purification tablets for water, a flint and steel, a fishing line, a personal locator beacon, a survival blanket, a notepad, a compass, some rope, and wire traps. I couldn't have done without Andrew Crowe's amazing book *A Field Guide to the Native Edible Plants of New Zealand*, and I also carried an air rifle, a crossbow, and an inflatable raft for harbour and river crossings. My pack weighed over 40 kilograms when I set out." Before he left, Brando also set up a social media page so that people could follow his travels.

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Food

Living off the land was a challenge from the first day. "I started my walk at the Cape Rēinga lighthouse and headed down the coast along Ninety Mile Beach," Brando explains. "On that first night, I shot a black-backed gull with my air rifle. I assumed I'd be able to cook it in the flame of my gas cooker. It didn't really cook; it tasted disgusting."

Over the next six hundred days, Brando would become more skilled at cooking what he caught – though he had to remain open-minded about what was "food". From the land, there were berries (Brando once got sick after eating the wrong kind), fern tips, earthworms, onion weed, and animals such as goats and pigs. One time, he ate a squashed wētā from the bottom of his boot; another time, he ate a possum.

From the sea came blue cod, kina, and crayfish as well as less appealing options, such as whelks and stranded octopuses. "I also ate a lot of limpets," Brando says.

Sometimes food came easily. Kayaking round the Marlborough Sounds (in a borrowed kayak), Brando noticed a wild goat stranded on a rock. "I shot it with my crossbow," he remembers, "and strapped it to the front of my kayak before paddling on to a campsite where I could skin and

cook it." Other times, whole herds of wild goats could prove elusive, and Brando would go to bed hungry. "Having to fight for my food taught me a lot about myself," he says. "I realised I was no different from any other creature struggling to survive. We don't often get the opportunity to think about stuff like that. Our lives are too comfortable – and we're too distracted by our smartphones and laptops. This stops us from figuring out the big questions in life."

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Connection

Trying to stay alive was one thing – and then there was coping with the countless hours alone. This was a huge challenge for Brando, especially when times were tough – like the day he received repeated electric shocks while climbing a fence. “Sometimes I was so lonely I would cry,” Brando remembers. “It felt like everyone had forgotten me.” But being alone eventually taught Brando something. “I learnt that

loneliness is a sign you haven’t figured out who you are – or why you’re here. When you can answer those questions, loneliness turns to peace. I’m different now. I never feel lonely anymore. Knowing who I am is like taking a friend with me everywhere I go.”

Another big thing Brando learnt was the importance of connection. “I’m very conscious now of the way all living things have a relationship. Birds eat berries, but

then they spread the seeds around. Bacteria help dead trees to rot. The problem with humans as a species is that we’ve stopped working in with each other. We make a big deal of being individuals, but my trip taught me that human connection is everything. We need each other; it’s just not obvious like it is in nature.” On his trip, whenever he was offered food or shelter, Brando always

accepted it. Sometimes one person would ring ahead to let someone else know he was coming – a chain of hospitality and support. “It was amazing,” Brando says. “People’s generosity completely blew me away. They fed me and lent me kayaks. I was made to feel a part of families all over the country.”



Adventure

Brando walked all those kilometres, and he raised more than \$30,000 for his chosen charity. Then he wrote *Wildboy*, a book that went straight onto the bestseller list. Having tasted such a rich and exciting way of life, Brando says we should all be alert to the possibility of adventure – to *real* adventure that brings about change. “People often think an adventure is going somewhere interesting in a car and taking a photo to share on social media. But if you just take a picture and get back in the car and leave, it’s not really an adventure; it hasn’t changed you.” Brando has more to say on this topic. “Forget about how many people have liked

or shared your photo. Everyone’s awesome; the challenge is to make friends with who you are and what your story is.”

Now that his life is more “normal”, Brando is enjoying each day as it comes. As well as working, he’s grabbing every opportunity to get out and explore the outdoors. “Life is just so good,” he says. “The universe is an incredible place – there’s beauty all around us. We just need to make sure we slow down enough to see it. All the things we get busy with don’t really matter. I just want to tell everyone to get out there and do the things you really want to do.”



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