

5E HEXCRAWL

by Justin Alexander – February 28th, 2021



The hexcrawl is a [game structure](#) for running wilderness exploration scenarios. Although it was initially a core component of the D&D experience, the hexcrawl slowly faded away. By 1989 there were only a few vestigial hex maps cropping up in products and none of them were actually designed for hexcrawl play. That's when the 2nd Edition of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* removed hexcrawling procedures from the rulebooks entirely.

It wasn't until Necromancer Games brought the [Wilderlands back into print](#) and Ben Robbins' [West Marches campaign](#) went viral that people started to rediscover the lost art of the hexcrawl. The format has returned to prominence in recent years through releases like the [Kingmaker](#) campaign for *Pathfinder* and [Tomb of Annihilation](#) for D&D 5th Edition.

BASIC HEXCRAWL STRUCTURE

Hexcrawls are only one way of running wilderness travel (see [Thinking About Wilderness Travel](#) for some other options) and there are actually many different varieties of hexcrawls and schools of thought on how they should be designed or run. "True" hexcrawls, however, share four common features.

1. They use a **hexmap**. In general, the terrain of the hex is given as a visual reference and the hex is numbered (either directly or by a gridded cross-reference). Additional features like settlements, dungeons, rivers, roads, and polities are also often shown on the map.
2. Content is **keyed** to the hexmap. Using the numbered references, some or all of the hexes are keyed with locations and/or encounters.
3. **Travel mechanics** determine how far the PCs can move and where they move while traveling overland. After determining which hex the PCs are starting in, the GM will use these mechanics (and the decisions the players make) to track their movement.

4. When the PCs enter a hex, the GM will tell them the terrain type and determine whether or not the keyed content of the hexmap is triggered: If so, the PCs experience the event, encounter the monsters, or see the location. (There is often a 100% chance that the keyed content will be triggered.)

Around this basic structure you can build up a lot of additional features and alternative gameplay. For example, mechanics for random encounters and navigating (or, more importantly, getting lost in) trackless wastes are quite common. [Hex-clearing procedures](#) were once quite common, too, as an antecedent for stronghold-based play.

THE ALEXANDRIAN HEXCRAWL

In 2012, before 5th Edition was released, I wrote [Hexcrawls](#): This series discussed hexcrawl procedures and laid out a robust structure for prepping and running hexcrawls in both 3rd Edition and the original 1974 edition of the game.

The Alexandrian Hexcrawl had several key design goals.

First, I wanted a structure that would **hide the hexes** from the players. In my personal playtesting, I found that the abstraction of the hex was extremely convenient on the GM's side of the screen (for tracking navigation, keying encounters, and so forth), but had a negative impact on the other side of the screen: I wanted the players interacting with the game world, not with the abstraction. Therefore, the hexes in the Alexandrian Hexcrawl were a [player-unknown structure](#).

Second, the structure was explicitly built for **exploration**. The structure, therefore, included a lot of rules for navigation, getting lost, and finding your way again. It was built around having the players constantly making new discoveries (even in places they'd been to before).

Third, the hex key features locations, not encounters. It's not unusual to see hexcrawls in which encounters are keyed to a hex, like this one from the [Wilderlands of the Magic Realm](#):

*A charismatic musician sits on a rock entertaining a group of Halfling children.
He sings songs of high adventure and fighting Orcs.*

While the Alexandrian Hexcrawl system could be used with such keys, my intention was to focus the key on content that could be used more than once as PCs visit and re-visit the same areas. (This is particularly useful if you're running an [open game table](#).) In other words, **the key is geography**, not ephemera, with encounters being handled separately from the key.

Fourth, the system is built around the assumption that **every hex is keyed**. There may be rare exceptions – the occasional “empty” hex, for example – but if this is happening a lot it's generally an indication that your hexcrawl is at the wrong scale. This tends to create two problems in actual play: First, it results in very poor [pacing](#) (with long spans of time in which navigational decisions are not resulting in interesting feedback in the form of content). Second, the lack of content equates to a lack of structure. One obvious example of this is that hexcrawls with vast spans of empty space lack sufficient landmarks in order to guide navigation.

(You run into similar problems if you have lots of densely packed hexes featuring multiple locations keyed to each hex: The abstraction of the hex stops working and your hexcrawl procedures collapse as the PCs engage in lots of sub-hex navigation.)

THE (MANY) RULES OF 5TH EDITION WILDERNESS TRAVEL

Since the release of 5th Edition, I have been frequently asked to update the Alexandrian Hexcrawl to the new system. Unfortunately, there have been a couple impediments making this more difficult than it might first appear.

First, 5th Edition is not designed for hexcrawls. 3rd Edition didn't feature hexcrawl play, either, but its rules were fundamentally grounded in a mechanical tradition that had originally been designed to support hexcrawl play, and it was therefore fairly straightforward to graft those procedures back onto those mechanics.

5th Edition, ironically, reintroduced hex-mapping to the core rulebooks, but mechanically trivializes or strips out essential mechanical elements that make hexcrawls (or, more generally, the challenges of wilderness exploration) work in actual play.

Second, the rules for overland travel and wilderness exploration in 5th Edition are a little... fraught.

- The rules are scattered haphazardly throughout the rulebooks and difficult to pull together into any sort of cohesive procedure.
- The rules actually change from one book to the next: The exploration procedures and travel distances in *Tomb of Annihilation*, for example, are just slightly different from those in the core rulebooks for no apparent reason. And the ones in the *Wilderness Kit* are different once again.
- The rules are vague in bafflingly inconsistent ways. For example, there is a specific rule about how many pounds of food you need each day. And there's a specific rule about how many pounds of food you get while doing the Forage activity while traveling. It seems like those would link up, but the rule for how often you make a Forage check is "when [the DM] decides it's appropriate." Which could be every hour, every day, every week, or literally anything else.
- Most of the wilderness rules are not actually found in the SRD, making them inaccessible for projects outside of the Dungeon Master's Guild.

Although these factors have largely stymied my efforts in the past, I've decided to more or less embrace the vague chaos of it all: If there is no coherent set of rules in the first place, then no one will probably care if I change them.

So my final design goal is to maintain the large, macro structures of 5th Edition wilderness travel that tie into other elements of the game – like how various classes modify your travel pace, for example – but otherwise tweak and change whatever needs to be altered to make things work.

PART 2: WILDERNESS TRAVEL

[by Justin Alexander – March 26th, 2021](#)



The rules for wilderness exploration can be broken down into four modules:

- **Wilderness Travel**, with rules for timekeeping and determining the distance traveled.
- **Watch Actions**, which allow characters traveling through the wilderness to do activities other than simply moving.
- **Navigation**, providing a structure for determining *where* the characters actually go.
- **Encounter System**, for determining what characters experience during their travels.

To some extent, each of these modules can be used independently of the others, either by simply ignoring a particular module or, in some cases, by assuming a basic default for the module.

For example, instead of using the rules for wilderness travel, you could simply assume that an expedition always moves 24 miles or 2 hexes per day, while still using the rules for navigation to determine where the PCs end up with that distance traveled. Conversely, you could use all the rules for wilderness travel to greatly vary and customize the distance traveled each day, but simultaneously ignore all the rules for navigation and simply checking off the distance traveled towards whatever destination was selected.

But, of course, the four modules are also designed to be used together, with the results produced by one module enhancing and informing the others.

WATCHES

A **watch** is the basic unit for tracking time. A watch is equal to 4 hours.

Determining Time Within a Watch: To randomly generate a particular time within a watch, use 1d8 to determine the half hour and 1d30 to determine the exact minute (if necessary).

WATCH TYPES

There are six watches per day and three types of watch:

- Active
- Rest
- Travel

While traveling, it is generally assumed that an expedition is spending two watches per day traveling, two watches per day resting, and two watches per day engaged in other activities.

Forced March: If a character spends more than two watches traveling in one day, they must make a Constitution check (DC 10 + 1 per hour of additional travel). On a failure, they suffer one level of exhaustion.

TRAVEL PACE

During each travel watch, the expedition determines their **travel pace**.

Normal: An expedition traveling at normal pace cannot use Stealth checks to avoid detection.

Slow: While moving at a slow pace, the expedition is purposely being careful. An expedition traveling at slow pace:

- Gains advantage on navigation checks.
- Can make Stealth checks to avoid detection.
- The chance for a non-exploratory encounter is halved. (If a non-exploratory encounter is generated, there is a 50% chance it doesn't actually happen.)

Exploration: While exploring, an expedition is assumed to be trying out side trails, examining objects of interest, and so forth. While exploring, an expedition:

- Cannot use Stealth checks to avoid detection.
- Gains advantage on navigation checks.
- The chance for encounters is doubled.

Fast: While moving quickly through the wilderness, expeditions traveling at fast pace:

- Cannot use Stealth checks to avoid detection.
- Suffer disadvantage to Wisdom (Perception) checks.
- Suffer a -5 penalty to navigation checks.

BASIC TRAVEL DISTANCE

Pace	Per Hour	Per Watch	Per Day
Fast	4.5 miles	18 miles	36 miles
Normal	3 miles	12 miles	24 miles
Slow	2 miles	9 miles	18 miles
Exploration	1.5 miles	6 miles	12 miles

Note: Per Day on this table is based on traveling for two watches (8 hours); i.e., a full day of travel without a forced march.

ADVANCED RULE: MOUNTS & VEHICLES

Gallop: If riding a mount, you can gallop for 1 hour during a watch in which you are traveling at normal or fast pace. During that hour you travel at twice your fast pace speed. (This results in a total watch distance of 18 miles at normal pace or 22.5 miles at fast pace.)

If fresh mounts are available every 8 or 10 miles, characters can cover larger distances at this pace, but this is very rare except in densely populated areas.

Note: If you are using the advanced rules for party speed below, do not use the rule for galloping.

Land Vehicles: Choose pace normally.

Waterborne Vehicles: Distance is limited to the speed of the vessel. On some ships, characters may be able to take rest and active watches even while the ship is moving. This may also allow the ship to travel up to 24 hours a day if the crew can operate in multiple shifts.

Unsuitable Terrain: Most land vehicles are designed to be used on roads, although many will fair well in open terrain (like a prairie). At the GM's discretion, in unsuitable terrain a vehicle may be limited to a slow pace and ability checks may be required each watch to make any progress at all.

ADVANCED RULE: EXPEDITION SPEED

An expedition's speed is based on the speed of its slowest member.

- In 1 hour at normal pace, the expedition can travel a number of miles equal to its speed divided by 10.
- At a fast pace, the expedition can travel 150% of its normal speed.
- At a slow pace, the expedition can travel two-thirds of its normal speed.
- At an exploration pace, the expedition can travel one-half of its normal speed.
- Calculate distance per watch based on the expedition's hourly speed.

On the tables below, distances have been rounded to the nearest half mile.

EXPEDITION SPEED - PER HOUR

Expedition Speed	Fast Pace	Normal Pace	Slow Pace	Exploration Pace
20 ft.	3 miles	2 miles	1.5 miles	1 mile
25 ft.	4 miles	2.5 miles	2 miles	1.5 miles
30 ft.	4.5 miles	3 miles	2 miles	1.5 miles
40 ft.	6 miles	4 miles	3 miles	2 miles
60 ft.	9 miles	6 miles	4 miles	3 miles
100 ft.	15 miles	10 miles	7 miles	5 miles
300 ft.	45 miles	30 miles	20 miles	15 miles

EXPEDITION SPEED - PER WATCH

Expedition Speed	Fast Pace	Normal Pace	Slow Pace	Exploration Pace
20 ft.	12 miles	8 miles	5.5 miles	4 miles
25 ft.	15 miles	10 miles	7 miles	5 miles
30 ft.	18 miles	12 miles	8 miles	6 miles
40 ft.	24 miles	16 miles	11 miles	8 miles
60 ft.	36 miles	24 miles	16 miles	12 miles
100 ft.	60 miles	40 miles	27 miles	20 miles
300 ft.	180 miles	120 miles	80 miles	60 miles

Note: You might also choose to generally use the basic travel distance for expeditions, but use the advanced rules for expedition speed for unusual means of conveyance (via magic, mechanism, or fantastical mount, for example).

ADVANCED RULE: TERRAIN

The type of terrain modifies the speed at which an expedition can travel.

- **Highway:** A highway is a straight, major, paved road.
- **Road:** A road is a dirt track or similar causeway.
- **Trail:** An irregular byway. Probably unsuitable for most vehicles and may only allow for single-file travel. Most off-road travel follows local trails. A **known trail** does not usually require navigation checks, although a known trail in poor repair requires a DC 10 navigation check to follow.
- **Trackless:** Trackless terrain is a wild area with no paths. +2 to navigation DCs.

Terrain	Highway	Road/Trail	Trackless	Navigation DC	Forage DC
Desert	x1	x 1/2	x 1/2	12	20
Forest (sparse)	x1	x1	x 1/2	14	14
Forest (medium)	x1	x1	x 1/2	16	14
Forest (dense)	x1	x1	x 1/2	18	14
Hills	x1	x 3/4	x 1/2	14	12
Jungle	x1	x 3/4	x 1/4	16	14
Moor	x1	x1	x 3/4	14	16
Mountains	x 3/4	x 3/4	x 1/2	16	18
Plains	x1	x1	x 3/4	12	12
Swamp	x1	x 3/4	x 1/2	15	16
Tundra, frozen	x1	x 3/4	x 3/4	12	18

ADVANCED RULE: TRAVEL CONDITIONS

Certain climate conditions and activities modify the speed at which an expedition can travel.

Conditions	Speed Modifier
Cold or hot climate	x 3/4
Giant terrain	x 3/4
Hurricane	x 1/10
Leading pack animal	x 3/4
Poor visibility (fog, darkness)	x 1/2
River crossing	x 3/4
Snow cover	x 1/2
Snow cover, heavy	x 1/4
Storm	x 3/4
Storm, powerful	x 1/2

Leading Pack Animal: Under normal circumstances, a pack-puller can lead a file with a number of animals equal to their passive Wisdom (Animal Handling) skill.

Poor Visibility: This condition also gives disadvantage to navigation and forage checks.

River Crossing: This penalty applies to any watch during which a river must be crossed. This does not apply if the characters are following a road which has a bridge on it, but does apply if they're traveling cross-country and must seek out a bridge.

ADVANCED RULE: ACTUAL DISTANCE TRAVELED

The distance cited on the travel tables is the average distance traveled. The actual distance traveled in a watch is 50% to 150% (2d6+3 x 10%) of that distance.

Characters can ascertain the actual distance traveled with a successful Wisdom (Survival) check made at the Navigation DC of the terrain. On a failure, they assume the average value of the distance traveled.

Design Note: The purpose of this rule is to make accurate mapping more difficult. (You could hypothetically adapt a similar rule to dungeon exploration in order to make accurate mapping of the dungeon environment more difficult, too, although the resolution time involved would probably be prohibitive.)

ADVANCED RULE: TRAILBLAZING

Trailblazing is a special travel pace which can be taken in conjunction with other travel paces. It reduces the expedition's speed by one-half, but also marks an efficient trail through the wilderness with some form of signs – paint, simple carvings, cloth flags, etc.

Once blazed, this is considered a known trail to the expedition.

Hidden Signs: The signs of a trail can be followed by any creature. When blazing a trail, however, the character making the signs can make a Wisdom (Stealth) check to disguise them so that they can only be noticed or found with a Wisdom (Perception) or Intelligence (Investigation) check.

You don't need to make a Wisdom (Perception) check to follow your own hidden signs (or the hidden signs of a known trail you've followed before). Those who are aware of the trail's existence but who have not followed it before gain advantage on their Wisdom (Perception) or Intelligence (Investigation) check to find the trail sign.

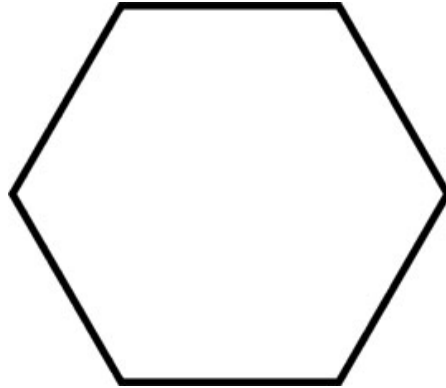
Note: Trail signs – including hidden trail signs – may be encountered as an exploration encounter in a hex the trail passes through.

Optional Rule - Old Trails: Most trail signs are impermanent and likely to decay over time. There is a 1 in 6 chance per season that a trail will decay from good repair to weather worn; from weather worn to poor repair; or from poor repair to no longer existing.

Someone traveling along a weather worn trail can restore it to good repair as long as they are not traveling at fast pace. Trails in poor repair require someone to travel along them at the trailblazing travel pace to restore to good repair.

Note: Erecting more permanent trail signs – like cairns, stone carvings, etc. – is a significant and time-consuming activity, but may be worthwhile on well-traveled trails.

HEXES



1 Hex = 12 miles (center to center / side to side) = 7 mile sides = 124 square miles

Movement on the wilderness hex grid is abstracted. In order to determine if an expedition has left a hex, you must keep track of their **progress** within the hex.

Starting in a Hex: If an expedition starts movement within a hex, it requires 6 miles of progress to exit any face of the hex.

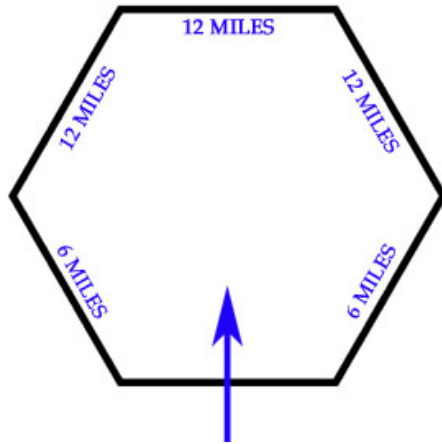
Optional Rule: You can choose to bias a starting position. For example, you might see that a river flows near the western edge of a hex. If the PCs start traveling from that river, you might decide it only takes 2 miles to exit through the hex's western face and 10 miles to exit through its eastern face.

Crossing Hex to a Far Side: It requires 12 miles of progress to exit a hex through one of the three faces on the opposite side.

Crossing Hex to a Near Side: It requires 6 miles of progress to exit a hex through one of the two nearest faces.

Changing Direction: Changing direction more than once within a hex will result in the loss of 2 miles of progress each time direction is changed.

Back the Way We Came: If characters deliberately double back along their own trail, simply reduce their progress until they exit the hex. If they leave back through the face through which they entered the hex for any other reason (by getting lost, for example) it requires an additional 1d6-1 miles of progress to exit the hex (unless circumstances suggest some other figure).



PART 3: WATCH ACTIONS

by [Justin Alexander](#) – March 27th, 2021



Characters can take watch actions to contribute to the expedition's success or achieve other tasks while traveling. Some watch actions are limited to specific types of watch or travel pace.

Playtest Tip: It's usually a good idea to get an expedition's "standing orders" instead of asking everyone to declare their watch action during every single watch. An easy example is that if the ranger has been doing the navigating for the last eight days, he's probably going to continue navigating for the next four hours and you don't need to confirm that.

FORAGER

Characters can forage during an active watch or while traveling at a slow pace. Foragers make a Wisdom (Survival) check against the Forage DC of the terrain. On a success, the forager either gains 1 ration of food or finds a source of fresh water (allowing the expedition to drink their daily ration of water and for waterskins to be refilled). An additional ration of food or source of fresh water can be found for every 2 points by which the check result exceeds the DC.

Advanced Rule - Sparse Biome: At the GM's discretion, a biome may be deemed sparse. In a sparse biome, each source of fresh water discovered only yields one gallon of water.

Advanced Rule - Grazing: Some animals (like horses) can simply graze for sustenance. In an appropriate biome (as determined by the GM), they will be fully fed as long as they are allowed to graze for one watch per day. In a sparse biome, they must graze for two watches per day and it may be necessary to also provide fresh water for them.

FOOD & WATER

Food: Small or Medium creatures require 1 ration of food per day. They can go without food for a number of days equal to 3 + their Constitution modifier (minimum 1) before suffering 1 exhaustion level per day thereafter. A normal day of eating resets the count of days without food to zero.

A creature on half rations counts as going a ½ day without food (and these half days accumulate until they can eat full rations).

Water: Small or Medium creatures require 1 gallon of water per day, or twice that in hot weather. A creature on a half ration of water must succeed on a DC 15 Constitution check at the end of each day or suffer a level of exhaustion. If they drink less water than that, they suffer a level of exhaustion automatically. If the character already has one or more levels of exhaustion, the character takes two levels instead of one level in either case.

Waterskins hold a half-ration of water.

Recovery: Any exhaustion suffered from lack of food or water cannot be removed until after a full day of normal consumption.

Large & Tiny Creatures: Tiny creatures require one-quarter ration of food and water per day. Large creatures (like horses) require four rations of food and water per day.

NAVIGATOR

The expedition's navigator is responsible for making navigation checks. A second navigator can assist, granting advantage to the navigation checks.

PACK-PULLER

A pack-puller is responsible for managing an expedition's pack animals. A pack-puller can lead a number of animals equal to their passive Wisdom (Animal Handling) score. (This number includes the pack-puller's mount, if any.)

RESTING

A character must take the Resting watch action for two rest watches in a row in order to gain the benefits of a Long Rest. (See the rules for Long Rests regarding which types of interruptions are possible without disrupting the Resting action.)

Advanced Rule - Lack of Sleep: If a character does not spend at least one full watch per day resting, they must succeed at a Constitution saving throw (DC 16 - the number of hours they slept, if any) or suffer a level of exhaustion.

SCOUT

A scout can journey out from an expedition in an effort to chart a course or learn the lay of the land. When scouting, they can choose one of two actions:

- **Reporting:** If the navigator receives a scout's report, they gain advantage on their navigation checks for the next travel watch.

- **Pathfinding:** The scout attempts a Wisdom (Survival) score using the area's Navigation DC. On a success, the expedition can treat trackless terrain as if it had a trail for one watch.

A character can scout during a watch in which an expedition is traveling only if their speed is faster than the expedition's. Alternatively, scouts can be sent out during watches in which the rest of the expedition are active or resting (but not traveling).

An additional encounter check is made for each scouting group. (They are effectively a separate expedition while engaged in scouting.)

SENTINEL

A member of an expedition acting as a sentinel can make Wisdom (Perception) checks to detect threats or notice anything else out of the ordinary.

Design Note: If you use passive Wisdom (Perception) scores, their use on journeys is also limited to sentinels. [I do not.](#)

Advanced Rule – Outrider: During a travel watch, a character can journey out in an effort to protect the expedition from detection or threats. Whenever an encounter is generated for the expedition, each outrider group can attempt a Wisdom (Perception) check (DC 15 or opposed by the encounter's Stealth check) to detect the encounter before it's encountered by the expedition.

However, an additional encounter check is also made for each outrider group at one-half the normal chance of an encounter. (It's possible for outriders to discover locations or encounter creatures which would have otherwise been missed by the main expedition.)

SIGHTING

During an active watch, a character can take a watch action to find an outlook – a good sighting place which will allow the character to significantly extend the distance to which they can see the surrounding wilderness. (See [Hexcrawl Tools: Spot Distances.](#))

At the GM's discretion, a skill check may be required to identify or reach the outlook. (For example, a Strength (Athletics) check to reach the top of an appropriately positioned tree.)

TRACKER

Finding Tracks: Searching a significant wilderness area for tracks is an active watch action. The tracker makes a Wisdom (Perception) check against the appropriate Track DC.

Following Tracks: Once tracks have been found, a tracker can follow the trail during a travel watch by making a Wisdom (Survival) check against the appropriate Track DC. A new check must be made each time the trail enter a new hex.

If a trail is lost, it may be possible to reacquire it using the Finding Tracks action.

Design Note: Generally speaking, it's appropriate to use [let it ride](#) techniques when tracking a quarry. In this case, however, navigation (and possibly getting lost) is a significant component of the hexcrawl structure and these additional checks are meaningful.

However, you could easily decide to go the other direction: A single successful Wisdom (Survival) check could follow the trail all the way to its end. Alternatively, you might only call for new checks when the terrain (the tracks enter the desert) or conditions (it starts raining) change, creating points of uncertainty.

TRACK DCs

Surface	DC
Very soft ground (snow, wet mud)	5
Soft ground (sand)	10
Firm ground (fields, woods, thick rugs, dusty floors)	15
Hard ground (bare rock, indoor floor, streambeds)	20
Condition	Modifier
Multiple people	-2
Large group	-4
Very large group	-8
Creature is bleeding	-4
Every day since the trail was made	+1 per day
Every hour of rain since the trail was made	+1 per hour
Fresh snow cover since the trail was made	+10

Advanced Rule - Cover Your Tracks: As a watch action, a character can attempt to cover the expedition's tracks. This is a stealth action, requiring the expedition to be moving at a slow pace. The character makes a Wisdom (Stealth) or Wisdom (Survival) check to set the Track DC for any pursuer attempting to find or follow their tracks. The check suffers disadvantage in very soft ground, but gains advantage on hard ground. Condition modifiers apply normally to the pursuer's tracking check.

TRAILBLAZER

When an expedition is trailblazing (see *Advanced Rule: Trailblazing*, above), one member of the expedition must use their watch action to blaze the trail. If hidden signs are being employed, an additional character can assist the trailblazer on their Wisdom (Stealth) check.

PART 4: NAVIGATION

[by Justin Alexander - April 7th, 2021](#)



In general, an expedition can navigate through the wilderness by **landmark** or they can navigate by **compass direction**.

NAVIGATING BY LANDMARK

Generally speaking, it's trivial to follow a road, river, or other natural feature of the terrain. It's similarly easy to head towards any visible landmark. The landmark or terrain feature will determine the route of travel and there's no chance of becoming lost, so you can simply track the number of miles traveled.

IDENTIFYING LANDMARKS

If the PCs are unsure of a landmark but have had previous experience with it, it may be possible to identify it with a Wisdom (Survival) check, at the DM's discretion. The accuracy and detail of the identification will depend on prior experience.

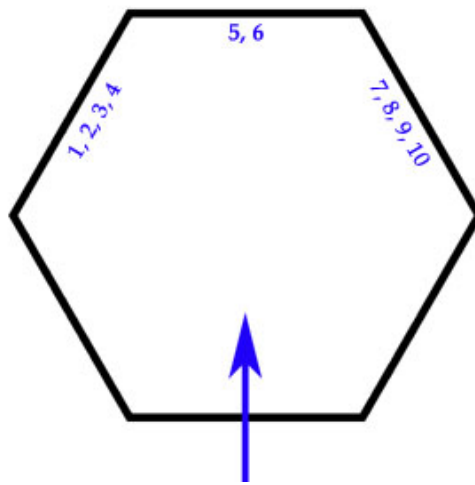
Example: A ranger is passing through the woods when they encounter a river. If it's a river they've walked up and down before, the Wisdom (Survival) check might let them confirm that it is, in fact, the Mirthwindle. If they're less familiar with the region, the check might tell them that this is probably the same river they crossed earlier in the day - it must be taking a southerly bend. If this is the first time they've ever seen this river in an area they're not familiar with, the Wisdom (Survival) check won't tell them much more than "this is a river."

NAVIGATING BY COMPASS DIRECTION

Characters trying to move in a specific direction through the wilderness must make a navigation check using their Wisdom (Survival) skill once per watch to avoid becoming lost. The DC of the check is primarily determined by the terrain type the expedition is moving through, although other factors may also apply.

BECOMING LOST

Characters who fail the navigation check become lost and may veer away from their intended direction of travel, as indicated by a 1d10 roll on the diagram below. When lost characters exit a hex, they will exit through the face of the hex indicated by the die roll.



Characters who are lost remain lost. In the new hex neither their intended direction of travel nor their veer will change.

If characters who are already lost fail another navigation check, their veer can increase but not decrease. (If they have not yet begun to veer - i.e., they rolled a 5 or 6 on their initial veer check - then their veer can increase in either direction.)

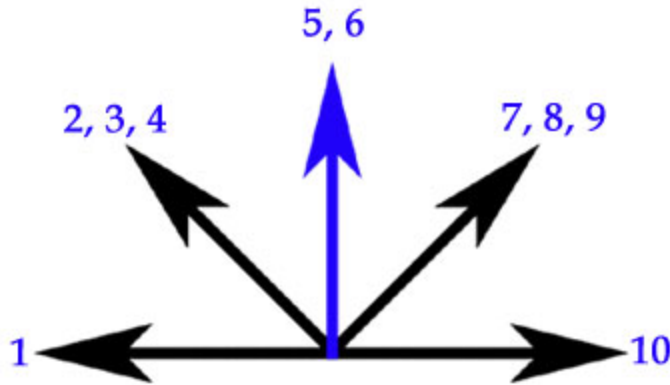
Example: A lost party is already veering to the left when they fail another navigation check. A roll of 1-4 on 1d10 would cause them to exit the next hex two hex faces to the left of their intended direction, but any other result would not change their veer at all.

ALTERNATE VEERS

These alternate methods of determining veer may be useful, particularly if you are adapting these rules to be used without a hex map.

Absolute Degree: Roll (1d10 - 1d10) x 10 to determine the number of degrees off-course.

Compass Direction: Roll 1d10 and consult the diagram below. (The blue arrow indicates the intended direction of travel.)



USING A COMPASS

Compasses grant advantage to navigation checks. In addition, they automatically eliminate veer at hex borders even if the user doesn't recognize that they were lost. (Even if you don't recognize that you ended up off course, the compass constantly reorients you towards your intended direction of travel.)

LOST CHARACTERS

Once a character becomes lost, there are several factors to consider.

RECOGNIZING YOU'RE LOST

Lost navigators continue making a navigation check once per watch. If the check succeeds, they will recognize that they are no longer certain of their direction of travel.

Navigators who encounter a clear landmark or unexpectedly enter a distinctly new type of terrain can make an additional navigation check to realize that they've become lost.

Note: Some circumstances may make it obvious to the characters that they have become lost without requiring any check.

REORIENTING

A navigator who realizes that they've become lost has several options for reorienting themselves.

Backtracking: A lost character can follow their own tracks (see the Tracking watch action). While tracking allows them to retrace their steps, they must still recognize the point at which they went off-track. If a character is successfully backtracking, they may make a navigation check (using the Navigation DC of the terrain) each watch. If the check is successful, they'll correctly recognize whether they were previously on-track or off-track. If the check is a failure, they reach the wrong conclusion.

Compass Direction: It requires a DC 10 Wisdom (Survival) check to determine true north without a compass or similar device. On a failed check, randomly determine the direction the navigator thinks is true north.

Setting a New Course: A lost navigator can attempt to precisely determine the direction they should be traveling in order to reach a known objective by making a navigation check at the Navigation DC of the terrain + 10. If the navigator fails the check, they immediately become lost. Determine their direction of travel like any other lost character.

CONFLICTING DIRECTIONS

If several characters in a single party all attempt to determine the correct direction of travel, make their Wisdom (Survival) checks separately. Tell the players whose characters succeeded the correct direction in which to travel, and tell the other characters a random direction they think is right.

Alternative Rule - Group Check: Alternatively, you can use the rules for group checks. If at least half the group succeeds on their Wisdom (Survival) checks, they have determined the correct direction of travel. If not, they immediately become lost.

FINDING LOCATIONS

The difficulty and complexity of finding a specific location within the wilderness varies depending on the character's familiarity and approach.

Visible Locations: As described in [Part 5: Encounters](#), some locations are visible from a great distance. Characters within the same hex as the visible location (or within a certain number of hexes, as indicated by the key) automatically spot a visible location.

On Road: If a location is on a road, river, or trail, then a character following the road, river, or trail will automatically find the location. (Assuming it isn't hidden, of course.)

Familiar Locations: Familiar locations are those which a navigator has visited multiple times. Navigators within the same hex as a familiar location can be assumed to automatically find the location. (Within the abstraction of the hexmapping system, they've demonstrated sufficiently accurate navigation.) Under certain circumstances, navigators may also be considered "familiar" with a location even if they've never been there. (Possibilities include possessing highly accurate topographic maps, receiving divine visions, or using certain types of divinatory magic.)

Note: If navigators are flailing about in their efforts to find a familiar location – by repeatedly "missing the hex," for example – the GM can decide to treat the location as being unfamiliar until they find some way to reorient themselves.

Unfamiliar Locations: Unfamiliar locations (even those a navigator has been to previously) are found using encounter checks.

In other words, when the navigator has gotten the expedition into the correct hex and a location encounter is generated, that indicates that the navigator has found the location they were looking for. Expeditions can also spend time to specifically search an area in order to increase the odds of finding a location. See [Part 7: Hex Exploration](#).

PART 5: ENCOUNTERS

by [Justin Alexander](#) - April 12th, 2021



To check for encounters, roll 1d12 once per watch.

A roll of 1 indicates that an encounter should be rolled on the hexcrawl's wandering encounter table.

A roll of 12 indicates that the characters have encountered a keyed location within the hex as an exploration encounter. Most hexes only have a single keyed location. For hexes with multiple keyed locations, determine the location encountered randomly.

Playtest Tip: It's often effective to do an encounter check for all of the watches in a day simultaneously by rolling 6d12. (See [Fistfuls of Dice](#) for tips on interpreting simultaneous dice rolls.)

Exploration Encounter: Exploration encounters only occur during watches in which the characters are traveling or otherwise exploring an area. They do not occur during watches in which the characters are resting or otherwise stationary.

Wandering Encounter: A wandering encounter can occur during any watch. (They are usually creatures, whose movement can bring them into contact with the expedition regardless of whether the expedition is on the move or not.)

Note: See [Hexcrawl Tool: Spot Distances](#) for guidelines on the distance at which initial Wisdom (Perception) and Dexterity (Stealth) checks should be resolved.

ADVANCED RULE: ENCOUNTER CHANCE

You can vary the probability of having an encounter. The table below shows the probability per watch of different encounter checks and also the chance per day that there will be at least one encounter.

You also need to determine whether or not a keyed location has been encountered. This can be done in one of three ways:

- Determine it on the same encounter die. (The probability does not have to match the probability of a location encounter. For example, you might roll 1d8, triggering a wandering encounter on a roll of 1 or 2 and triggering a location encounter on a roll of 8.)
- Roll a separate encounter die. (This can have the advantage of simultaneously triggering both an encounter and the keyed location, suggesting that the encounter might happen at the location.)
- Roll a single encounter check and then check to see if that encounter is the keyed location. (You might build this onto the random encounter table – i.e., results 1-10 on a d20 table might be for the keyed location while 11-20 have the wandering encounters. However, this can make it difficult to modify the encounter table or use different encounter tables while keeping the probability of finding locations consistent.)

Check	Per Watch	Per Day
1 in 1d6	16%	66%
2 in 1d6	33%	91%
1 in 1d8	13%	57%
2 in 1d8	25%	82%
1 in 1d10	10%	46%
2 in 1d10	20%	73%
1 in 1d20	5%	26%

Note that if you're using some of the advanced rules below that interpret certain wandering encounters as exploration encounters, these will effectively reduce the odds of an encounter happening.

ADVANCED RULE: LOCATION PROPERTIES

Keyed locations may have optional properties that determine how and when they're encountered.

On Road/River/Trail: The location is on a road, river, or trail. Expeditions traveling along the road, river, or trail will automatically encounter the location (unless it's hidden, see below). Expeditions avoiding the road, river, or trail will usually not encounter the location.

Visible: The location is large enough or tall enough to be seen anywhere within the hex. Expeditions entering the hex automatically spot the location. If a rating is given (e.g., Visible 2), then the location can be seen from that many hexes away.

Hidden: The location is difficult to spot. When this encounter is generated, make a second encounter check. If an encounter is not indicated on the second check, the location has not actually been found. (If the expedition is in exploration mode, they may instead make a Wisdom (Perception) or Intelligence (Investigation) check to locate a hidden location after the first encounter check.)

ADVANCED RULE: % LAIR

The percentage listed is the chance that a creature encountered as a wandering encounter is instead encountered in their lair. If the creature is encountered in their lair, the encounter is considered an exploration encounter.

Note: This check functionally generates a new location for the current hex (the lair of the indicated creature type). Over time and thru play, therefore, this

encounter system will continue to add new content to your hex key (helping to fill the vast, howling emptiness of a typical hex). The more time the PCs spend in a particular area, the more content will be added to that area.

ADVANCED RULE: % TRACKS

The percentage listed is the chance that a creature's tracks are encountered (and not the creature itself). Tracks are only found as an exploration encounter.

The tracks may be followed using the Tracker [watch action](#). Tracks are usually 1d10 days old. DMs can determine where the tracks lead (although they'll usually circle back to the creature's lair in both directions). See [Hexcrawl Tool: Tracks](#) for additional guidance.

Note: When generating a wandering encounter, check to see if the encounter is tracks. If it is not, then check to see if it's a lair. If it is not, then it's a wandering encounter. Once again, notice that these additional checks will substantially reduce the odds of a night time encounter (when the party is not on the move).

ADVANCED RULE: BORDER ENCOUNTERS

This percentage, which is listed for either a region or a specific hex (or set of hexes), is the chance in a hex bordering on a different region that the wandering encounter should be rolled on that region's encounter tables.

This rule is obviously only relevant if you have different wandering encounter tables customized for each region.

ADVANCED RULE: ENCOUNTER REACTION CHECK

To randomly determine a creature's initial reaction to an encounter, roll 2d6 on the following table.

2d6	Reaction
2-3	Immediate Attack
4-5	Hostile
6-8	Cautious/Threatening
9-10	Neutral
11-12	Amiable

Obviously, the roll is not necessary if you already know the creature's attitude. After the initial interaction, assuming hostilities don't immediately break out, you can use Charisma checks to determine if the creature's attitude improves, worsens, or stays roughly the same.

Note: The outcome of the reaction table is deliberately vague. This is necessary because it can be applied to a wide variety of intelligent, semi-intelligent, and unintelligent creatures, but it's also expected that the DM will use their creativity and knowledge of the setting to make the general result something specific. A Hostile encounter, for example, might be a group of starving wolves; slavers looking to capture the PCs; or a group of paladins who mistakenly think the PCs are the slavers.

ADVANCED RULE: SIMULTANEOUS ENCOUNTERS

It can be desirable for your encounter procedures to potentially generate multiple encounters in the same watch:

- It creates uncertainty for the players. (They can't simply assume that they won't experience another encounter in the current watch because they've already had one.)

- It can create a dynamic fluctuation in difficulty.
- The combination of multiple encounters into a single encounter can create [lots of different encounters](#) from a relatively simple encounter table. (Are the two encounters allies? In conflict with each other? Is one encounter drawn to the sounds of the PCs dealing with the other encounter? If you generate one encounter at the lair of a different encounter, what are they doing there? And so forth.)

There are a few methods you can use for achieving this:

- Make multiple checks per watch.
- On a successful encounter check, immediately make a second encounter check. (You can repeat this again if the second encounter check is successful, potentially putting no limit to the number of encounters possible in a single watch.)
- Incorporate a “Roll Again Twice” or similar entry on your wandering encounter table.

Each method has its own advantages and disadvantages.

Note: I, personally, check for a second encounter when the first encounter is successful. This second encounter check might also indicate the keyed location of the hex, placing the first encounter there.

ADVANCED RULE: CIRCUMSTANCE DIE

The circumstances of an encounter will be informed by the terrain type, time of day, spot distance, watch actions, and so forth. (Generating an encounter with eight kenku at night while the expedition is resting on the open plains suggests a very different encounter than one with eight kenku in the middle of the day in a dark forest.)

When a particular condition is either pervasive in a region or important to the campaign (but should not be present in every single encounter), a circumstance die can be used to randomly incorporate it.

Examples could include:

- An Icewind Dale campaign in which there’s a 2 in 6 chance for an encounter to occur during blizzard conditions.
- A 1 in 4 chance that the demon trapped in a cage formed from one of the PCs’ souls attempts to assert control.
- A 1 in 6 chance that the encounter is being watched by a strange, shadowy figure with glowing red eyes.
- A 1 in 6 chance that the creatures encountered belong to or are working for the Countess Remorzstan (with appropriate brands or work papers).
- A 1 in 8 chance that the encounter occurs near an outcropping of glowing purple crystals.

Some such conditions might, under other circumstances, be generated through other procedures. (For example, blizzards might be generated through a random weather table.)

EXAMPLE: SAMPLE ENCOUNTER TABLE

Location Check: 1 in 1d6

Encounter Check: 1 in 1d10

Border Encounter: 1 in 1d20

1d20	Encounter	# Appearing	% Lair	% Tracks
1-3	Lizardmen (hex A10, A13)	2d6+4	30%	50%
4-5	Tree trolls (hex C13)	1d2	40%	50%

6	Adventurers	2d4-1	10%	75%
7-9	Ghouls (hex A12, E9)	2d12	20%	50%
10-12	Zombies (hex E9)	3d8	25%	50%
13	Bat swarm	1	20%	5%
14	Jungle bear (hairless, use black bear stats)	1d2	10%	50%
15	Carrion crawlers	1d6	50%	50%
16	Giant leech	4d4	Nil	Nil
17-18	Orcs (hex B7)	4d6	25%	50%
19	Wild boars	1d12	Nil	25%
20	Tyrannosaurus rex	1d2	Nil	50%

Note: I indicate hexes which are already keyed as potential lairs for this creature type. This can inform the nature of wandering encounters and/or suggest a potential origin/terminus for tracks.

This table uses several advanced rules. When rolling an encounter, I would simultaneously roll a 1d6, 1d10, and 1d20 for each watch.

If the 1d6 result is a 1 (indicating a location encounter), it would indicate that the PCs have found the keyed location in the hex. If I'm not using simultaneous encounters, I would then ignore the other dice rolls (the location check "overrides" them; you could also just roll the 1d6, then the 1d10, then the 1d20, but that's not necessary and is more time-consuming).

If the 1d10 check indicates an encounter, then you'd check the 1d20 roll to see which encounter table you should be rolling on. (You could also theoretically roll 2d20 of different colors, allowing you to immediately identify what type of encounter.)

With an encounter identified, you would then check % Lair, % Tracks, and # Appearing (although you don't need to check for tracks if a lair encounter is indicated). Lairs and tracks are also exploration encounters, so if those are indicated when the party is resting, you can treat the encounter check as having no result and the watch passes quietly.

This is, of course, a fairly complicated example featuring a lot of the advanced rules all being used simultaneously. For a much simpler resolution you could just roll 1d12 (1 = wandering encounter, 12 = location encounter), roll 1d20 on the wandering encounter table (if a wandering encounter is indicated), and then the number of creatures appearing.

DESIGN NOTE: PROCEDURAL VS. DESIGNED ENCOUNTERS

A **procedural encounter** will usually generate one or more general elements. (For example, 1d6 friendly orcs.) As described in [Breathing Life Into the Wandering Monster](#), the expectation is that the DM will contextualize this encounter. In other words, the procedural encounter is an improv prompt for the DM to create the encounter (often combined with a simulationist element of modeling, for example, what kinds of monsters lurk in the Darkovian Woods).

A **designed encounter**, on the other hand, is far more specific: You're essentially prepping the material that you would improvise with a procedural encounter.

The [Principles of Smart Prep](#) maintain that you generally shouldn't prep material that can be just as easily improvised at the table, so generally speaking I would describe most designed encounters as being

training wheels for DMs who aren't confident improvising encounters from procedural prompts yet. (There can be a number of exceptions to this, but they're pretty rare in actual practice, in my experience.)

In other words, designed encounter tables typically result in a lot of wasted prep. They also get used up (a procedural encounter can be used over and over and over again to varying results; a designed encounter is specific and generally can't be repeated). This creates gaps in your encounter table and a need to frequently restock them.

(Procedural-based encounter tables will also need to be tweaked or restocked from time to time – if the PCs wipe out the goblin village, it may result in no further encounters with goblins – but this is very rare in comparison.)

DESIGN NOTE: SETTING LAIR/TRACK PERCENTAGES

In designing your encounter tables, the % Lair and % Tracks values can be set arbitrarily. For a quick rule of thumb, use Lair 20% (or Nil for animals that don't really have lairs) and Tracks 40%.

Older editions actually included values for one or both of these stats in their monster entries, so for some creatures you may be able to reference those older resources.

A gamist tip here is to increase the % Tracks value based on difficulty: If there's a monster that's a lot more powerful than everything else in the region, crank up the % Tracks so that the PCs are more likely to become aware that it's there than they are to run into it blindly.

A simulationist tip is to vary both numbers by a sense of the creature's behavior. Here's an easy example: How likely is a flying creature to leave tracks compared to a woolly mammoth? (See [Hexcrawl Tool: Tracks](#) for thoughts on what types of tracks a flying creature *would* leave.)

A dramatist tip is to think about how interesting each type of encounter is for each creature type. Is a ghoulish lair more interesting than running into a pack of ghouls in the wild? If so, crank up the ghouls' % Lair.

The last thing to consider is that, as noted above, a Lair encounter will generally add a new location to the current hex. The higher you set the % Lair values on your encounter tables, the more often this will happen and the quicker areas of your campaign world will fill up with procedurally generated points of interest.

Conversely, how comfortable are you improvising this type of content? It's good to stretch your creative muscles, but it may make more sense to keep the % Lair value low until you've gotten more comfortable with pulling lairs out of your hat.

PART 6: WATCH CHECKLISTS

by [Justin Alexander](#) – April 19th, 2021



As we discussed in [Part 2](#), this system is designed to be modular, including a large number of advanced rules and supplemental tools that can be optionally used or discarded depending on your personal taste and the specific needs of a particular hexcrawl.

When you've decided which options you want to use, you'll want to create a clean [resolution sequence](#) to make running the hexcrawl at the table silky smooth.

Below you'll find three examples of such resolution sequences: one for an ultra-stripped down version of the rules, a basic version with all four modules implemented in a basic form, and a third loaded up with a lot (but not all) of the bells and whistles. (Not all of the optional rules are compatible with each other, so it's not possible to have a version with *everything* we've laid out.)

BASIC HEXCRAWL PROCEDURE

During each watch, do the following:

- 1. DETERMINE THE DIRECTION OF TRAVEL.** Ask the players what direction they want to travel.
- 2. ENCOUNTER CHECK.** Roll 1d12. On a roll of 1, roll on the wandering encounter table. On a roll of 12, the location keyed to the hex has been encountered.
- 3. HEX PROGRESS.** The characters move 12 miles per watch, or 6 miles in difficult terrain.
 - It takes 12 miles of progress to exit one of the hex's 3 far faces.
 - It takes 6 miles of progress to exit one of the hex's 2 near faces.
 - Changing direction within a hex will result in the loss of 2 miles of progress.

- If characters double back, reduce progress until they exit the hex. If they leave the hex by any other route, it requires an additional 1d6-1 miles of progress to exit the hex.

LEAVING A HEX. Determine the new hex (based on direction of travel) and reset progress.

FULL HEXCRAWL PROCEDURE

1. DIRECTION & TRAVEL PACE.

- Determine the expedition's navigator.
- Navigator determines intended direction and travel pace.

2. ENCOUNTER CHECK. Roll 1d12. On a roll of 12, the location keyed to the hex has been encountered. On a roll of 1:

- If in a border hex, check to see which encounter table should be used.
- Roll on the wandering encounter table.
- Check % Tracks.
- Check % Lair.
- If it's a wandering encounter or lair, make an encounter reaction check.

3. WATCH ACTIONS. Resolve all watch actions.

4. ARE THEY LOST?

- If they are not following a landmark or trail, make a Navigation check.
- If they are lost, determine veer. If they are already lost, veer can be increased but not decreased.

5. HEX PROGRESS

- It takes 12 miles of progress to exit one of the hex's 3 far faces.
- It takes 6 miles of progress to exit one of the hex's 2 near faces.
- Changing direction within a hex will result in the loss of 2 miles of progress.
- If characters double back, reduce progress until they exit the hex. If they leave the hex by any other route, it requires an additional 1d6-1 miles of progress to exit the hex.

LEAVING A HEX:

- Determine new hex (by applying current veer to the expedition's direction of travel).
- If they were lost, make a Navigation check to see if they recognize it. If they do, they can attempt to reorient. If they do not, veer accumulates. (Note: Using a compass automatically resets veer at the hex border even if they don't recognize they were off course.)

ADVANCED HEXCRAWL PROCEDURE

1. DIRECTION & TRAVEL PACE.

- Determine the expedition's navigator.
- Navigator determines intended direction and travel pace.
- Modify expedition's speed by terrain and travel conditions.

2. ENCOUNTER CHECK. Roll 1d8. On a roll of 1, roll on the wandering encounter table. On a roll of 8, the location keyed to the hex has been encountered.

3. WATCH ACTIONS. Resolve all watch actions.

4. ARE THEY LOST?

- If they are not following a landmark or trail, make a Navigation check.
- If they are lost, determine veer. If they are already lost, veer can be increased but not decreased.

5. DETERMINE ACTUAL DISTANCE TRAVELED

- Roll $2d6+3 \times 10\% \times \text{Average Distance}$.
- Make a Wisdom (Survival) check to see if they accurately estimated their distance traveled.
- **TIP:** If their progress would cause them to leave a hex during a watch *and* that would cause their terrain type to change, calculate progress by hour. When they reach the hex edge, note how many hours are left. Then you can reference the new hex, calculate the new average distance, and continue marking progress.

6. HEX PROGRESS

- It takes 12 miles of progress to exit one of the hex's 3 far faces.
- It takes 6 miles of progress to exit one of the hex's 2 near faces.
- Changing direction within a hex will result in the loss of 2 miles of progress.
- If characters double back, reduce progress until they exit the hex. If they leave the hex by any other route, it requires an additional $1d6-1$ miles of progress to exit the hex.

LEAVING A HEX:

- Determine new hex (by applying current veer to the expedition's direction of travel).
- If they were lost, make a Navigation check to see if they recognize it. If they do, they can attempt to reorient. If they do not, veer accumulates. (Note: Using a compass automatically resets veer at the hex border even if they don't recognize they were off course.)

PART 7: HEX EXPLORATION

[by Justin Alexander - May 31st, 2022](#)



Finding locations during a hexcrawl – including locations that you are specifically looking for – is handled primarily through the navigation and encounter rules.

SIMPLE EXPLORATION

In the simplest form of hexcrawling, expeditions will automatically encounter the keyed location in a hex when they enter that hex. Therefore, finding a location you're looking for – e.g., the Tomb of Sagrathea – is simply a matter of finding the correct hex.

This may be slightly more difficult for the PCs to pull off reliably if you're running with player-unknown hexes, but the procedure remains the same: The expedition will want to navigate to the area they suspect the location to be, then move through the area in some form of search pattern until they find what they're looking for (by entering the correct hex).

Following roads or trails, of course, may make it much easier for the PCs to hit the right hex.

BASIC ALEXANDRIAN EXPLORATION

The Alexandrian Hexcrawl includes a number of optional and advanced rules that can add complexity, challenge, and choice to exploration.

As described in [Finding Locations](#), above, Visible and Familiar locations can be automatically found by any character passing through the appropriate hexes (just as with simple exploration). Other locations, however, are found through encounter checks, so the expedition must be in the correct hex *and* generate a location encounter there.

Choosing the [exploration travel pace](#) – during which the expedition is assumed to be trying out side trails, examining objects of interest, and so forth – will significantly increase the likelihood of finding the location you’re looking for by (a) reducing your speed of travel (so that you’ll spend longer in any individual hex) and (b) doubling the chance of having an encounter. Compared to moving at a fast pace, for example, the exploration travel pace makes it six times more likely that you’ll find a location.

Optional Rule - Focused Search: If the expedition is traveling at exploration pace and looking for a location that they have specific information about, the DM may allow a third encounter check per watch for that location and only that location. (Any other encounters that would normally be indicated by this check are ignored.) Obviously if the location they’re looking for isn’t in the current hex, the DM can skip this check – they are, after all, looking in the wrong place.

Design Note: It may seem unreasonable that you can pass through a hex and not find a location within it. But hexes are, in fact, very large. For example, the entire island of Manhattan could fit into a 12-mile hex more than five times over. If it still feels unreasonable that the PCs could move through a hex and NOT find the location they’re looking for, you might want to consider the possibility that this location should be classified as Visible.

BASECAMP EXPLORATION

If an expedition wants to perform a dedicated exploration of a specific area, they can establish a basecamp. There are two basic watch actions associated with a basecamp: Make Camp and Area Search.

MAKE CAMP

As an active watch action, a character can establish a camp suitable for 4 creatures if they have tents or similar equipment to shelter them. (Horses and similar creatures do not require tents, but must still be accounted for in camp preparations.)

If the expedition does not have equipment for shelter, the character can only establish a camp suitable for one creature (either themselves or someone else) per watch action.

Optional Rule - Camp Required: Characters without a proper camp require an additional Resting action to gain the benefits of resting. (It takes three Resting actions in a row to gain the benefits of a Long Rest. If using the advanced rule for lack of sleep, it takes two Resting actions in a row to avoid the consequences for not resting.)

Optional Rule - Favorable Site: A character can perform an active watch action to make an Intelligence (Nature) or Wisdom (Survival) check against the Forage DC of the terrain. On a success, they have identified a favorable campsite. Characters performing the Forager action in a favorable campsite gain advantage on their forage checks.

The check to identify a favorable site can also be attempted as part of a Scout action.

AREA SEARCH

As an active watch action, a character can search the wilderness in the hex cluster around their base camp. Multiple characters performing this action simultaneously can form a search group (or multiple search groups if they split up).

Encounter Checks: Make a normal encounter check for the base camp, even if no characters remain in the camp. (An encounter would indicate that the base camp has been discovered.) Make an additional encounter check for each search group. (The search counts as a travel watch for the purpose of making this encounter check.)

Search Area: The hex searched by a search group can be determined:

- **Randomly.** Roll 1d8 on the hex cluster chart below.
- **Directionally,** if the search group indicates the direction they are searching. Roll 1d8, with any roll other than 7-8 (the base camp hex) indicating the hex in the selected direction.
- **By Hex,** in which case the search group indicates which specific hex in the cluster (including the hex of their base camp) they wish to spend their time in.



Location Discovery: One character in each search group can attempt a Wisdom (Perception) or Intelligence (Investigation) check using the Navigation DC of the hex to find the location (+5 DC if the location is hidden). Additional characters in the group can assist, granting the searcher advantage on their check.

If there are multiple locations, randomly determine which one is found.

Note: At the DM's discretion, they may assign an alternative DC to specific locations. If there are multiple locations, the DM may rule that an additional location is found for every 5 additional points of success.

Other Group Members: Characters performing Sentinel or Tracker actions can join a search group. (Note that the Wisdom (Perception) checks performed by sentinels detect approaching threats, as opposed to the checks made to find locations.)

HEXCRAWL TOOL: RUMOR TABLES

by [Justin Alexander](#) – October 22nd, 2022



As we've [previously discussed](#), exploration can take several forms. The most basic form is simple **curiosity**, in which you just randomly look around hoping to find something interesting. This is, more or less, the level of exploration provided by the basic hexcrawl structure: You pick a direction and you march forth to see what's there.

And there's nothing wrong with that. Curiosity is the bedrock of exploration. But for a hexcrawl to truly come to life, the players need to be able to learn information about the region so that they can:

- (a) set specific goals,
- (b) ask specific questions, and
- (c) plan their expeditions.

This is the function of the **rumor table**, which in its most basic form is simply a random table: Roll a die and tell the players a rumor. Each rumor provides a tangible nugget of information about the region:

d10 Rumor

- 1 North of Graykeep, there is a ruined arena which is home to minotaur.
- 2 A merchant has been kidnapped by goblins in the Old Forest.
- 3 An ogre living along Silkmauk Road has been known to offer aid and enigmatic trinkets to travelers.
- 4 There are ancient altars of red jadeite scattered throughout the area.
- 5 The old imperial fort stands on a plateau southwest of town.
- 6 The lizardmen of Tockmarsh are said to treat all tabaxi as if they were gods.
- 7 A white wyrm's lair lies at the headwaters of the Red Rapids river.
- 8 A nymph of the White Wood will trade magic items for a vial of your tears.
- 9 In the Old Forest there's a circle of stone sarsens. Stand amidst them and blow on horn of mistletoe and you can open a fairy gate.
- 10 Flying carpets have been seen in the skies around Mt. Skarlap, which lies east of town.

You can see how the rumors on this table would instruct the PCs about local regions (Old Forest, the Tockmarsh, White Woods) and interesting adventuring sites (old imperial fort, Graykeep, ruined arena,

Mt. Skarlap) that they can now consciously choose to seek out (or use as navigational markers) rather than just stumbling across them randomly.

If this information is so useful, why not just give it all to them in one big infodump? Partly this comes down to effective pacing. In an exploration-based campaign, you really want the players to be slowly learning new things about the area over time. This also avoids information overload: By spreading the information out over time, it becomes easier for the players to process it and use it. (It's the same reason you don't read a textbook cover-to-cover, instead processing a section of the textbook and then applying it through practice problems, classroom discussions, etc. before proceeding to the next section.)

Conversely, if you only want to give the PCs a few rumors at a time, why go to the trouble of stocking an entire rumor table? Why not just design the handful of bespoke rumors that you're going to give them? Well, as we'll see, a good rumor table is an incredibly useful runtime tool for the GM, useful for responding to any number of actions which might be taken by the PCs.

STOCKING THE RUMOR TABLE

Stocking a rumor table is pretty straightforward: Figure out what size die you want to roll, list that number of rumors, and number them. (Or, vice versa, make a list of rumors until you run out of ideas or feel like you have enough, then count them, and assign whatever die size seems most appropriate.)

But how many active rumors should you aim to have in your hexcrawl?

There's no one-true-answer here. Personally, I like to have twenty. A d20 is convenient, and it gives you enough rumors to cover the breadth of the hexcrawl without going overboard. (If you own a d30, that can also be a fun way to use that unusual die. But a table of d100 rumors, in my experience, can be a lot of work to prep without really providing a lot of extra value.)

In making each rumor, you're going to be looking at its source, focus, type, and truth value.

SOURCE

The source of a rumor might be a:

- hex
- random encounter tables
- roads/paths/trails
- factions
- NPCs

Basically, anything you've keyed or created for the hexcrawl can (and arguably should!) be fodder for your rumor table.

In fact, if I've started struggling to come up with new rumors to stock my rumor table with, a technique I've found useful is to just pick a random hex, look at what I've keyed there, and then figure out a rumor that could lead the PCs to it. (If you've done a 10 x 10 hexmap, for example, you can just roll two d10's, cross-reference their position, and look at the resulting hex.)

Playtest Tip: You can also use this "pick a random hex, that's your rumor" technique during actual play to generate rumors even in the absence of a stocked rumor table. Obviously this means you need to be a little more comfortable improvising rumors, but it's a very flexible technique which, crucially, requires zero prep.

FOCUS

Potential focuses for a rumor can include:

- Location
- Creature
- Object
- Actions/Situations (including threats and upcoming situations)
- Background/Lore

For example, let's consider one of our example hexes from [Hexcrawl Addendum: Designing the Hexcrawl](#):

C2 - WYVERN SHAFT

60 foot deep shaft that serves as the lair of a wyvern. The wyvern has dug an escape tunnel that emerges from a hill a quarter mile away.

Wyvern: Has a large scar on its left side from a spear wound.

Treasure: 7,000 sp, 5 zircons (50 gp each)

What rumors could we generate from this?

Location: Adventurers exploring the Red Plateau southwest of town report seeing a mysterious 60-foot-deep shaft.

Creature: A wyvern has been seen flying over the Red Plateau.

Object: A wyvern attacked a tax assessor's wagon along the Southway and carried off a lockbox containing 7,000 sp. It was last seen flying west.

Situation: A wyvern has been attacking travelers along the Southway.

Lore: A generation ago wyvern eggs were taken from the Red Plateau and sent east so that the hatchlings could imprint on imperial wyvern riders. The practice ended because the plateau became depopulated as a result of the egg-harvesting.

Note that, regardless of the rumor's focus, each rumor is **actionable**, in the sense that it gives a clear location for the PCs to go. This is not strictly necessary, but should be much more the rule than the exception: The primary function of the rumor table is to guide and inform the PCs' explorations, and it can't do that if the PCs lack the information necessary to do anything *with* the rumor. (For example, a rumor that just said "there's a wyvern in the area" is, at best, very limited in its utility, because there's no way for the PCs to go looking for the wyvern other than just wandering around randomly.)

The actionable specificity of the rumor can vary quite a bit, though. "West of the Southway" is less precise than "check out the Red Plateau," which is less precise than "the adventurers offer to sell you a map indicating the precise location of the shaft for 10 gold pieces." But even the vaguest of these nevertheless provides some specific direction.

TYPE

Thinking about a rumor's type, in my experience, is mostly useful if I'm struggling to come up with a good rumor. But most rumors will fall into one of five types.

Local Color tells you something about an area or the people/monsters who live there (e.g., "The White Woods lies north of Mt. Skarlap" or "the ealdorman is a man named Harlan, who lost his wife in a goblin

raid twenty years ago"). Local color may be actionable — if you know the White Wood exists, then you can choose to go there — but lacks a specific motivation for doing so.

Other local color may not truly be actionable at all. As such, you might even want to maintain a separate table of *Local Color Rumors* that you can consciously choose to mix in with more meaningful intelligence.

Opportunities offer a reward, payoff, or some other form of gain. Treasure is always great — caches of magic items or bounties paid for the capture of an outlaw, that sort of thing — but there are many forms of reward: land, favors, a chance to flirt with a handsome centaur. Think about what motivates your PCs and seed that into your rumor tables.

Challenges are like opportunities, but with the addition of some clear **threat** or **obstacle** which must be overcome in order to gain the reward. Capturing a bandit to get their bounty is an example of this, as is a mine infested with goblins or a haunted forest where rare alchemical reagents can be found.

One form of reward that may not be immediately apparent is the simple desire to be a Big Damn Hero. If you tell the players that farms in the Fieflands are being attacked by mutant marauders, the desire to save the day may be more than enough to prompt them.

This is aided and abetted by the common D&D conceit that “where there be monsters, there by treasure.” If you tell the PCs about a wyvern attacking travelers along the Southway, you don’t probably don’t need to tell the players that “the wyvern is guarding a cache of treasure” for them to infer it.

Dangers are like challenges, but without reward. The other way to think about this is that a challenge or opportunity is something that the PCs might set as a goal for themselves (find the nymph of the White Wood, slay the wyvern, etc.), but a danger is something for them *avoid*, most likely while pursuing other goals. It’s the Valley of the Monocs they should go around; or the red gems in Cawthorne Keep that should be eschewed.

The distinction here can be kind of hazy, and will likely even shift as the PCs grow in power and ability. (“There’s a dragon over there!” is a terrifying danger to a group of 1st level characters, but a rich opportunity that will leave higher level characters salivating at the thought of looting its hoard.)

Mysteries are similar to opportunities, but the “reward” is simply unraveling the unknown and/or learning secret lore: What’s causing those strange lights in the Tockmarsh? Why are there 60-foot-wide shafts drilled into the earth all over this area? Who built the red jadeite altars?

This category of rumor really relies on humanity’s innate curiosity: It may take nothing more than offering the players an enigma to fill them with a burning desire to resolve it.

A final thing to note is that we’re categorizing the content of the *rumor*, not necessarily reality: For example, a rumor might offer an opportunity of an abandoned silver mine... and it’s only when they arrive that the PCs discover it’s infested with goblins. Something offered simply as a mystery to unravel might nevertheless result in discovering a huge treasure hoard.

TRUTH VALUE

Keeping this distinction between rumor content and reality is also useful as we look at the **truth value** of the rumor. Rumors can be:

- True
- False
- Partial (there is a hermit in Shamrock Cave, but the rumor didn’t mention he’s a psychotic axe murderer)
- Mixed (the “friendly old hermit in Shamrock Cave” exists, but he’s not friendly)

In structural terms, the key thing to keep in mind is that even a completely false rumor can nevertheless motivate the PCs to go somewhere or do something that will result in adventure.

What you want to avoid, however, is continually offering them rewards and then leaving them with nothing. As long as the players are getting reliably enjoyable experiences following rumors (even when the rumors are false), they'll continue following them. If that stops being true, however, the players will just ignore rumors as being worse than a waste of time, and all of the wonderful utility of rumors will be lost to you.

HEARING RUMORS



With a fully stocked rumor table ready to go, it's time to deliver your rumors to the PCs. Broadly speaking, there are three approaches to doing this (and you'll probably want to use all three): **proactive**, **reactive**, and **opportunistic**.

Playtest Tip: No matter how they actually get a rumor, you can have the players roll for their rumor! It's a fun way for them to feel involved in the process and can increase their sense of "ownership" over the rumor they get.

PROACTIVE

Proactive methods sort of "push" rumors on the PCs without the players taking any specific action to acquire them.

INTERVAL TRIGGER: At some regular interval, the PCs pick up new rumors. This might be once per week, at the end of each adventure, once per downtime, or any such trigger.

ACTION/LOCATION TRIGGERS: You might also trigger rumor delivery based on actions the PCs take which are not, explicitly, looking for rumors. For example, they might get new rumors each time they return to town or visit a new town. Or perhaps taking any non-solitary downtime action triggers rumor acquisition.

In *City-State of the Invincible Overlord*, individual city buildings would be keyed with specific rumors (which would be delivered when the PCs visited those locations). That feels like low-value prep to me, but it could perhaps be used to good effect as a spice.

CHARACTER CREATION: It's a very good idea to give any brand new character one or more rumors to kick things off. Before play even begins, these rumors will give them the knowledge to start setting goals and making navigational decisions.

RUMOR CHECK: At any point where you have a proactive rumor trigger, you can make a rumor check instead of automatically granting rumors. You'll also want to decide if it's possible to gain multiple rumors at the same time, and whether rumors are gained individually or by the whole group.

For example, in my last [open table](#) hexcrawl campaign, every new character would get 1d4 rumors (the stuff they'd heard before the player started playing them) and I would make a 1 in 6 rumor check for each PC at the beginning of each session (representing stuff they'd heard around town since the last time we'd seen them in play).

REACTIVE

As the players learn how useful rumors can be, they're likely to start actively seeking them out. They may also go looking for other types of information without specifically thinking in terms of "rumors," but which nevertheless can feed rumors to them.

INVESTIGATIVE ACTION: The [investigation action](#) is part of the urbancrawl scenario structure, but this covers any effort by the PCs to deliberately canvass a community for information. This effort might require a Charisma (Investigation) or similar check, with the number of rumors gleaned being determined by the relative success of the check.

TAVERN TALK: Buying a round of drinks and plying others over a cup of grog in the common room of a tavern is another common shorthand for gathering rumors.

BROADSHEETS & BULLETIN BOARDS: Broadsheets (the antecedents of newspapers) and bulletin board notices are formal packaging of "rumors," allowing the PCs to periodically check in and receive a fresh packet of information. (You can imagine any number of similar packages, ranging from town criers to magic mirrors murmuring cryptic prophecies.) The content of each package (broadsheet headlines, job offers on the bulletin board, etc.) can be bespoke creations, but it's just as easy to roll them up randomly from your rumor table.

RESEARCH: Delving into the tomes of the local library or digging through the musty scrolls of the official chronicles may not turn up any rumors dealing with purely current events, but there are any number of rumors that can nevertheless be delivered through PC research (e.g., the trade in wyvern eggs a generation back).

ADDING COST: Regardless of the precise method pursued by the PCs, you might consider attaching a cost to it (for buying a round of drinks, well-placed bribes, access fees at the university library, etc.). I'd recommend against making this a particularly large fee, since obviously you don't want to discourage players from pursuing rumors. Something like 1d6 gp is quite reasonable.

Another option is to make the fee optional, but have it grant a bonus to the PCs' skill check (making success more likely or improving the quality or number of rumors gained). In this case, since it's not essential, you can elect to make the cost more substantial.

Once a cost, optional or otherwise, has been attached to rumor-gathering, one cool thing you can do is add this cost to the equipment list for your campaign: Now every new player rolling up a character and every returning player looking to resupply for their next expedition will have an in-their-face reminder that hunting for rumors is something they can do.

OPPORTUNISTIC

Because the whole point of the rumor table is to impart information to the players, you should seize opportunities during play that you can use to leverage your rumor table. For example:

- During any broad social interaction (e.g., the players say “we spend the evening drinking at the tavern”) you might mention one or two interesting things they pick up in the general conversation.
- During specific interactions with NPCs, the rumor table can be used to generate topics of conversation.
- NPCs might be specifically questioned or interrogated about the area.

In practice, the rumor table can be an incredibly versatile tool, and whenever a dollop of information would be useful or provide a bit of spice, you can simply roll or select an appropriate rumor for the situation.

CONTEXTUALIZING RUMORS

When giving a rumor to a player, you can simply drop it in their lap: “You’ve heard that a wyvern has been attacking travelers along the Southway.” It works. There’s nothing wrong with it. In fact, it may often be the best way to present a particular rumor. (For example, when I’m handing out rumors to newly created characters at my open table, I don’t feel a need to get fancy about it: Here’s the stuff you know. If you’d like, maybe you could tell *me* how you know it.)

Frequently, however, you’ll find it more effective to contextualize the rumor – to explain exactly how they came by the information and perhaps even give them the opportunity to play through it. This is when you frame up a scene at the local tavern where the PCs have noticed a young man with a freshly bandaged wound on his shoulder. Now they can strike up a conversation with him, learn his name, and hear from his own lips the tale of how the wyvern attacked his caravan and carried away his sister. They can see the haunted look in his eyes as he describes how her screams still echo in his ears.

Now those wyvern attacks have been given a face.

If you want a more detailed breakdown of how to contextualize this sort of thing, check out [Rulings in Practice: Gathering Information](#). But the short version is:

1. Summarize how they’re looking for information.
2. Frame the key moment where they’re actually receiving the information. (This may include playing out a short scene, but it may not.)
3. Contextualize the information, taking cues from the situation, characters, etc. to provide a specific slant or POV on the rumor.

If you’re uncertain how the PCs might have found the information, ask the players what they’re looking for then. See what they throw at you and then play it forward. Or here’s a short list of options:

- Talking in a tavern. (Is it a quiet conversation? Or do they hear someone boisterously boasting at the next table?)
- Saw the information posted somewhere (a wanted poster, a bulletin board, etc.).
- Chatting with a friend. (Which friend? Ask the player if you don’t know.)
- Performing research. (Where?)
- A letter. (From who?)
- A tarot reading, fortune telling, or divine vision.

OPEN TABLE RUMOR POOL

Here's a fun technique that seems to work best with an open table, but can also be adapted for a dedicated campaign: When a PC gains access to a rumor, it gets added to the **open table rumor pool**. This list of rumors can be posted in the group's Discord, put on a wiki, periodically updated by e-mail, or whatever other method of coordination your group is using.

When a rumor is resolved (e.g., the wyvern is slain), reward Inspiration. You can limit this to just the group who resolved the rumor, but it may be even more effective to award it to every single PC in the campaign. This heightens the sense of community in the open table, and can also motivate people to get back to the gaming table ASAP. (Since otherwise their Inspiration will be "wasted" if someone resolves another rumor before they can use it.)

You can also leave the decision of whether to share a rumor with the open table rumor pool up to the individual players: Doing so gives them the opportunity to benefit if someone else can capitalize on the information, but keeping a rumor secret might be desirable if they specifically want to exploit it for their own gain.

MODERATE YOUR RUMORMONGERING

Rumors are good.

Too many rumors, however, will overload your players. They just turn into meaningless noise, and the players will just tune them all out. So, paradoxically, too many rumors can end up being functionally identical to no rumors at all.

In short, to achieve maximum effect with your rumors, you want to limit how many of them you're handing out.

How many? Well, this depends on the players. I've had some players who keep meticulous notes and will have a couple dozen rumors scrupulously listed (and even carefully cross-referenced to their maps!). I've had other players who get a third rumor and basically say, "Fuck this noise." So this is really something you have to play by ear and be willing to adjust on-the-fly.

The key thing to moderate, though, are your proactive rumors: Opportunistic stuff tends to be linked to specific interactions which makes it more significant. And reactive stuff, obviously, is happening at the players' own request, and so is naturally not overburdening them.

In many ways, though, this is ideal in any case: You really just want a smattering of proactive stuff to (a) help players who would otherwise be lost and (b) remind players that rumors exist, prompting them to do their own legwork to dig up more information on their own recognizance (and to whatever amount they want).

With that being said, you may also want to limit the group's ability to systematically drain all the available rumors out of the campaign. You might want to, for example, limit them to 1d4 rumors per downtime or per session. Alternatively, perhaps villages are limited to 1 rumor, towns to 1d4 rumors, and metropolises to 2d6 rumors (1d4 of which require special effort). This structure can actually be used to motivate the PCs to explore more: You want more information? You'll have to go to the big city.

RESTOCKING THE RUMOR TABLE



Your rumor table should be a living document. The latest gossip, after all, is alluring because it's topical, and the enigma of the table will degrade as PCs learn its content. Here are a few techniques for keeping it fresh.

SAME RUMOR, NEW CONTEXT: When you give a rumor to the PCs, cross it off the list. If you roll the same rumor again, you may want to roll again (until you get a rumor the PCs haven't heard yet). Being aware that you've given this specific rumor previously, however, you might simply make a point of finding a different spin or variation on the information the PCs already have. (For example, if they've previously heard that a wyvern has been attacking travelers along the Southway, they might hear about a different group of travelers being attacked. Or from a group of explorers who saw the wyvern flying over the Red Plateau.)

Tip: In an open table campaign, the fact that one PC has heard a rumor doesn't necessarily mean that the rumor will have truly "entered" the campaign. That PC might never be played again, and there may be lots of other PCs who never even meet that PC (for all of whom the rumor would still be completely new). It may be slightly less obvious that the same thing can be true in a dedicated campaign, as players may forget or simply lose track of a rumor they've previously heard. This is what makes the "same rumor, new context" technique so useful, as it can be used to reintroduce the same information in an organic, rather than repetitive, way.

REMOVE AND REPLACE: Alternatively, once a rumor has been heard, you can cross it off your rumor list and replace it with a new one.

You'll also likely want to replace rumors that are no longer applicable (e.g., someone has killed the wyvern, so it won't be attacking people along the Southway any more).

You may also want to periodically replace a random selection of rumors (whether they've been heard or not) just to keep the rumor tables fresh.

Tip: You can combine these techniques. For example, you might cross out rumors when they're heard, but only replace them once per month (finding new contexts if they get repeated before then). Or just keep them until they get randomly cycled out.

EVOLVE SITUATIONS: When you're updating your rumor tables, it's an opportunity to both evolve ongoing situations in the campaign world and give the PCs a vector for learning about it.

- A wyvern has been seen flying over the Red Plateau.
- The wyvern is now attacking travelers along the Southway.
- The wyvern has attacked a tax assessor's wagon and carried off a lockbox containing 7,000 sp.

These situations, of course, don't need to be limited to stuff that was previously seeded on the rumor table. There's likely lots of stuff happening in your campaign.

CURRENT EVENTS: On a similar note, a rumor table can be stocked with current events and gossip. When you're restocking, you may want to drop older events and add new ones to enhance the sense of time passing in the campaign world.

Tip: You can think of the rumor table as having certain "slots." For example, entries 1-4 on the table might be current events; 5-10 point to random hexes; 11-14 refer to random encounters; and 15-20 being where everything else gets placed. This can help make sure that the table remains varied and "balanced" in its content, while also making it easy to, for example, swap out your current events.

RESPOND TO PC ACTIONS: PCs tend to do lots of big, splashy stuff (like killing wyverns) that are exactly the sort of thing people tend to gossip about. So when they do something notable, add it (or the situation that evolves out of it) to the rumor table.

Players love this. ("Hey! That was us!") It makes them feel important and it's a great of showing that their choices are meaningful and their actions have consequences. And the possibilities are almost limitless:

- With the wyvern slain, trade along the Southway has boomed. The caravan activity has outstripped the capacity of the Patrol Guild and they're looking for freelance guards willing to ride with smaller caravans to Maernoc.
- Lord Erequad has issued a bounty for the adventurers who are believed to have stolen the tax assessor's lockbox (which was originally taken by the wyvern).
- Four hungry baby wyverns have been seen hunting on the Red Plateau.

In a great hexcrawl campaign, the adventure never ends and the rumor table is constantly driving the world forward.

HEXCRAWL TOOL: SPOT DISTANCES

[by Justin Alexander – March 29th, 2021](#)



This is a useful cheat sheet I created for understanding what characters can see in the wilderness. In practice, sight lines will vary quite a bit (due to hills, forest canopies, atmospheric haze, and other obstructions), but I've found it's useful to have some reference points and a few rules of thumb.

HORIZON: The horizon is 3 miles away at sea level.

NEIGHBORING HEXES: Passing through the center of a [12-mile hex](#), neighboring hexes cannot be seen. If the path is biased, the nearest hexes can usually be discerned (depending on the terrain).

Design Note: This is one of the reasons I prefer a 12-mile hex. Unless the PCs take special action to see farther, you'll generally be able to focus exclusively on the hex they're currently traveling through.

MOUNTAINS: Mountains can be seen from 6 hexes (72 miles) away.

Design Note: My research indicates that most mountain ranges have an average height of 3,000 feet. If you do the math, you can see an object 3,000 feet high from about 68 miles away, which I then rounded up to 6 hexes. Or, if you reverse the math, I'm saying that at 72 miles you can see the occasional peak that's up to 3,500 feet high in that range or thereabouts. A very tall peak of 10,000 feet could theoretically be seen from 10 hexes away on a clear day.

ELEVATION: Distance to the horizon in miles is the square root of (feet above sea level x 1.5 feet). Add the height of tall objects to the viewer's. Atmospheric haze will eliminate the ability to see even the largest objects more than 3-5 hexes away.

Height	Horizon
Halfling	2 miles
Human	3 miles
10 ft.	4 miles
25 ft.	6 miles
50 ft.	9 miles
100 ft.	12 miles (1 hex)
400 ft.	24 miles (2 hexes)
1000 ft.	39 miles (3 hexes)
1500 ft.	48 miles (4 hexes)
2500 ft.	60 miles (5 hexes)

SIGHTING

Characters may seek out a good location for seeing long distances by taking the Sighting [watch action](#). Height is obviously a factor here, but finding the right sight lines can be equally important. (Climbing a tree is all well and good, but if it's at the bottom of a valley the effect will be mitigated.) This is also why simply being "on a mountain" doesn't automatically translate to great sighting: you're usually surrounded by other mountains.

As a general rule of thumb, assume that characters can find a location granting them 50 feet of height (or the equivalent thereof). This will allow them to see into neighboring hexes, and possibly even see notable locations within those hexes or their current hex (which may or may not require a Wisdom (Perception) check).

If you call for a skill check to find a sighting location, consider using a [fail forward](#) technique: On a success, the PCs get the normal benefits of sighting. On a failure, they might only be able to make out the terrain type of two or three of the nearby hexes (and no details thereof).

If circumstances suggest that the PCs would have great sight lines without needing to take special effort, that's great. It might still be appropriate to allow them to take the Sighting action to improve their line of sight even more, extending their vision by another hex.

ENCOUNTER DISTANCE

When an encounter is generated, the distance at which the encounter may be detected will depend on the terrain in which it is occurring. (If the encounter is with a group of creatures and both sides are surprised - i.e., they do not detect each other - it's technically possible they will pass each other without ever realizing it.)

The figures here represent typical circumstances on the ground. If the PCs are keeping watch from the top of a stone tower, for example, it's quite possible for them to spot potential threats at much greater distances.

Terrain	Encounter Distance
Desert	6d6 x 20 feet
Desert, dunes	6d6 x 10 feet
Forest (sparse)	3d6 x 10 feet
Forest (medium)	2d8 x 10 feet
Forest (dense)	2d6 x 10 feet
Hills (gentle)	2d6 x 10 feet

Hills (rugged)	2d6 x 10 feet
Jungle	2d6 x 10 feet
Moor	2d8 x 10 feet
Mountains	4d10 x 10 feet
Plains	6d6 x 40 feet
Swamp	6d6 x 10 feet
Tundra, frozen	6d6 x 20 feet

HEXCRAWL TOOL: TRACKS

by [Justin Alexander](#) – May 20th, 2021



There are two places where tracks (along with the associated concept of tracking) can be found in the [Alexandrian Hexcrawl](#): First, there is the Tracker [watch action](#), in which characters can actively search for and follow tracks.

Second, the [encounter system](#) is designed to generate random encounters, lairs, and tracks.

Random encounters provide immediate obstacles and interludes while traveling, lairs spontaneously generate new locations in the hexcrawl (organically building up material along well-traveled routes as the campaign develops), and tracks are a trail that can be followed to a point of interest.

Thinking in terms of “tracks” seem to commonly conjure up the image of hoof prints in the sod, but we shouldn’t limit ourselves to that. In the wilderness exploration of the hexcrawl that sort of physical spoor is most likely very common, but the concept of “tracks” can really be generalized to “clue.”

For example, if we generated a result of “tracks” for bandits, that might mean footprints in the forest. But it could just as easily include a merchant caravan in panicked disarray due to their latest highway robbery; the dead body of a bandit that was critically wounded and abandoned; a bolt-hole containing documents implicating the mayor of a local village in collusion with the bandits; and so forth.

TYPES OF TRACKS

Spoor: What can be thought of as the “classic” tracks we commonly think of. This includes both physical prints and scents (particularly if you have a hound for a familiar or live life as a werewolf). Following a spoor path usually also means looking for and encountering other signs (like broken foliage) that are described below.

Spoor paths can include trails, which are paths used repeatedly by a creature or creatures. The common image here is the worn rut of a deer or fox path. Runs are similar to trails, but are less frequently used.

Subsurface trails are tunnels. In the real world, trackers frequently look for where small tunnels re-emerge (and will use the diameter of tunnels to identify creatures). In a fantasy world, it's quite possible the tunnel will be more than large enough for adventurers to follow the spoor path right inside. (Tunnels created by one creature may also be used by other creatures.)

Sounds: The howl of a wolf, the roar of a dragon, the screech of a griffon, or the distant sound of a *fireball* exploding. Sounds emanating from nearby can be used as an encounter trigger, but distant sounds can (often ominously) indicate the presence (and direction) of creatures.

Smells: The zombie stench of putrefacting flesh, the lingering ozone odor of a beholder's rays, the sulfurous stench of a hell hound, or the distinctive musk of more mundane creatures can linger in the air long after they have passed.

Moulting: Anything shed by a creature, such as feathers and fur. This can also include skin (like a snake) or an exoskeleton (like a crab, spider, or insect). Some lizards will actually lose their entire tails (a process known as "caudal autotomy") in order to evade predators, and you could imagine similarly fantastical abilities. Perhaps there are creatures which, when threatened, will spontaneously generate a cloned copy of their "corpse" and leave it behind to slowly decompose into ectoplasmic residue.

Other creatures use parts of their bodies as weapons, which could be left behind in their victims or embedded in the environment, like the spines of a barbed devil being left in a tree.

On a similar theme, there might be **body parts** lost by animals due to hazard rather than nature (like a dismembered limb or pool of blood).

Food: This might include food that's been stored (whether squirrels hiding nuts or a cache of the local rangers), but is probably more commonly partially consumed meals. This can include carcasses (including human corpses depending on which predators are active in the area), but also plants or area of foliage which have been grazed by herbivores.

Also consider pellets, which are masses regurgitated by hawks and the like. These include trace remnants of food, but are primarily made up of indigestible remnants from their meals (bones, exoskeletons, fur, feathers, bills, teeth, etc.).

Fewmets: The other end of the digestive track, specifically scat and excrement. Urine is also an option. Don't be afraid to embrace the fantastical here, ranging from the well-known scale of triceratops poop to, say, the scorching phosphorescence of hell hound pee.

Kill Sites: This includes carcasses, but may just be signs (like blood spatter) left from a kill which a predator later dragged from the site (or consumed whole). This category is also worth calling out specifically because far more dramatic kill sites are frequently left by intelligent creatures (victims of goblin raiders or the rotting corpses left by poachers).

Glyphs: Intentional markings left by intelligent creatures. These might include navigational signs carved into trees, strange runic carvings, odd fetish sculptures, demonic graffiti, or simply a discarded note.

Sleeping Areas: Many sleeping areas will actually be generated as lairs, but there are also transit beds and lays, which are used as less frequent or irregular resting areas. For animals, this often takes the form of crushed vegetation. Intelligent creatures may leave a wide variety of signs (remnants of a campfire, a latrine, discarded food remnants, miscellaneous refuse, etc.).

Marring: The activities of beasts and monsters will often damage or leave their mark on the natural environment. **Rubs** are produced by an animal rubbing against trees or rocks. **Gnaws and chews** can

give clear indication of the size of a creature's teeth. (You might similarly find a place where intelligent creatures were practicing with their weapons or using a machete to chop through thick overgrowth.) **Scratchings** can be both intentional (sharpening your claws or digging for grubs) and unintentional (signs left from climbing or scampering over terrain).

In the realm of fantasy we might add to this things like **burns** (fire or acid), **phase marks** (distinct traces left by incorporeal creatures passing through physical objects), **ectoplasm**, and the like.

Tip: When imagining tracks and other signs, don't get fixated on the ground. Remember verticality! In the real world, woodpeckers drill in trees above your head. In fantasy, bloated stirges can leave smears of blood up there, too.

SCALE OF TRACKS

Something else to consider is that tracks can vary from the obvious to the almost impossibly obscure. You can use this to provide varied flavor to tracking sequences, or to reward particularly good Wisdom (Perception) or Wisdom (Survival) checks.

Large scale tracks are significant and obvious. You might not automatically notice them, but even untrained people will likely recognize clear pawprints in mud, well-worn trails, significant damage to foliage, big animal carcasses, and the like.

Medium scale tracks are perhaps the most common (being left almost constantly by anyone or anything not intentionally covering their tracks), but are more difficult to notice or may only be significant to those with training. This can be stuff like gnaws and chews, pellets, and subtle vegetation breaks. It can also include more obvious tracks which have been obscured by the passage of time.

Small scale tracks usually require a sharp eye, special training, or both. They include many of the same signs as previous categories, but are subtler, sometimes as the result of extreme age. These are faint pawprints on hard ground, a handful of partially buried bones left from a months-old kill, or an orcish arrowhead buried deep in a tree trunk.

Ghost scale tracks almost certainly require training and experience to spot and interpret. They also frequently disappear quickly. This can include **dullings** (in which a creature passing through the morning dew leaves a "dull" area by brushing the water off foliage), **shinings** (later in the day, creatures walking through the grass press it down, revealing its shiny side), and other incredibly subtle tracks (like leaf depressions).

HEXCRAWL ADDENDUM: DESIGNING THE HEXCRAWL

[by Justin Alexander - June 14th, 2022](#)



One of the principles of the [Alexandrian Hexcrawl](#) is that you **key geography**. In other words, your hex key features locations, not encounters. (Encounters are handled separately.) The distinction between a “location” and an “encounter” can get a little hazy if you stare at it for too long, but in practice it’s usually pretty obvious: If your key reads “an ogre walking down the road,” then the next time the PCs pass along that road the ogre will presumably be gone (particularly if they’ve killed it). If your key instead reads “an ogre living in a shack,” then even if the PCs kill the ogre, the shack will still be there.

Of course, one might argue that the PCs could do some quick demolition work on the shack and make it disappear, too. (That would be an excellent example of staring at the distinction for too long.) But the general point remains: You’re looking to key permanent geography, not ephemeral events.

Another key principle is that **every hex is keyed**. This can be a daunting prospect. When I created my Thracian Hexcrawl, for example, I started with a 16 x 16 hex map. That meant I needed to key 256 individual hexes.

My experience with that hexcrawl taught me that you can (and almost certainly should!) start with a smaller map. I generally recommend a 10 x 10 hex map, for a total of 100 hexes, with the PCs’ home base in the center of the map. The key thing, though, if you’ll pardon the pun, is that you want enough hexes so that the PCs can head in any direction and NOT fall off the edge of your map in the first session. Based on my practical experience, that distance appears to be roughly 5 hexes.

In the [Avernian Hexcrawl](#), for example, I used a 10 x 6 map. I could get away with this because:

- (a) There were mountains on the northern and southern edges of the ‘crawl, acting as natural obstacles that would tend to focus PCs on the large valley between them; and
- (b) This hexcrawl features a map of the region which is given to the PCs. Although the PCs are not prohibited from moving beyond the edge of the map, such maps tend to *also* focus the PCs’ explorations.

The advantage, of course, is that I only needed to prep 60 hexes.

Similarly, Ben Robbins' [West Marches](#) campaign featured an explicit limit: The home base was located on the western edge of civilization, and the PCs could go anywhere they wanted... as long as it was west into the unknown. If you used a similar set up for your campaign, you could effectively halve the number of hexes you need to key.

But whether we're talking about 50 or 60 or 100 or 256 hexes, that's still a lot of hexes. How can you get all of them prepped? It seems like a lot of work!

First, to be brutally honest, it *is* a lot of work. The prep for a hexcrawl is frontloaded: It's a structure that requires you to put a lot of work in up front, with the pay-off that it requires very little prep to keep the campaign in motion once you start playing. (For example, with my Thracian hexcrawl I spent 2-3 intense weeks prepping the hex key, but then ran dozens of sessions with no additional prep beyond 5-10 minutes at the beginning of each session. Your mileage may vary.)

Second, because of that frontloaded prep, you should make sure that a hexcrawl is really the right structure for what you're trying to do. There is a perception that "wilderness travel = hexcrawl" and that's [not really true](#). The hexcrawl structure is designed for *exploration*, and is really only appropriate if you expect the PCs to be constantly re-engaging with the same region. (This can make them ideal for an [open table](#), where you'll have multiple groups engaging the same region.) If the PCs are only traveling through a region or exploring it once or twice, then you're going to end up prepping lots and lots of hexes that never get used, and that's not [smart prep](#).

Third, with all that being said, it may not be as much work as you might think. There's a couple secrets to that.

The first secret is that, when you're prepping material for yourself, **polish is overrated**. (Details are also overrated, with the proviso that *essential* details and *awesome* details should always be jotted down.) For example, if I were writing up a dungeon behind a waterfall for someone else to use, I'd probably take the time to mention how wet and slick the stairs leading down into the dungeon are; the damp moistness in the air of the first chamber (providing a slight haze that can be burnt away dramatically by a *fireball* trap); and the way the dampness gives way to a chilled condensation that hangs in glistening drops from the rough hewn walls as you descend into the dungeon.

But since I'm prepping this for myself, I don't need to write that down.

Trust your own voice as a GM. During play, based on your intrinsic understanding of the scenario and the environment, it will provide the logical and evocative details you need to flesh things out. And by placing trust in yourself, you can save yourself a ton of prep time.

The second secret is that the amount of detail required to key a hex can vary quite a bit. You can **use minimal keys**. Just because something is geography, it doesn't mean that it has to be elaborate. Something can be brief without being ephemeral. There can be a perception that every hex "should" have a 20-room dungeon in it. But remember that ogre's shack? Your key doesn't have to be any more complicated than that. Some times, it can be even less complicated!

SAMPLE HEX KEYS

We're going to take a look at some actual hex keys I've prepped for my own hexcrawls. The goal here is to demonstrate the range of different key types that I use, so let's start with the shortest:

B4. RED RUTH'S LAIR (*Descent Into Avernus*, p. 107)

Red Ruth has a **heartstone**.

This one is pretty simple: I've grabbed a location from a pre-existing adventure (in this case, *Descent Into Avernus*) and plugged it straight into the hexcrawl. If the PCs encounter this hex, I can just pull out the appropriate book and start running it.

In this case, I've also included a short note modifying the original adventure. (The NPC named Red Ruth has a heartstone.) You may not need such notes at all. In other cases, you might have several such notes. Whatever works.

Here's another simple one:

K13 - RUINED TEMPLE OF ILLHAN

See hex detail.

This location was too detailed to include in my primary hex key. (Generally, I'll bump anything longer than a single page out of the primary hex key. In my experience, it keeps the hex key cleaner and much easier to use.)

Much like the published adventure, I'm telling myself to go look somewhere else for the detailed adventure. In this case, it's an adventure I wrote myself.

I keep these detailed adventure notes in a separate file folder, labeled and organized by hex number. For shorter published adventures, I'll keep print outs of the adventures in the same file folder.

The details of the Ruined Temple of Illhan were previously posted here on the site. They can be found [here](#). (The presentation there is slightly more polished than what would have been found in my original notes, but is substantially similar.)

B5 - BONE CRATER

A large meteor impact formed by a huge skull (more than ten feet across) that's partially embedded in the center of the crater.

This is an example of what I think of as a **landmark**. Sometimes these landmarks are more involved or have hidden features to them, but generally they're just single points of interest distinct from the surrounding wilderness. Regardless of their other characteristics, they're almost always useful for PCs trying to orient their maps.

N15 - RECENT FOREST FIRE

Landscape is scorched. No foraging is possible in this hex.

Another short one. This is basically similar to a landmark, but it covers a vast swath of territory. (In this case, an entire hex.)

C2 - WYVERN SHAFT

60 foot deep shaft that serves as the lair of a wyvern. The wyvern has dug an escape tunnel that emerges from a hill a quarter mile away.

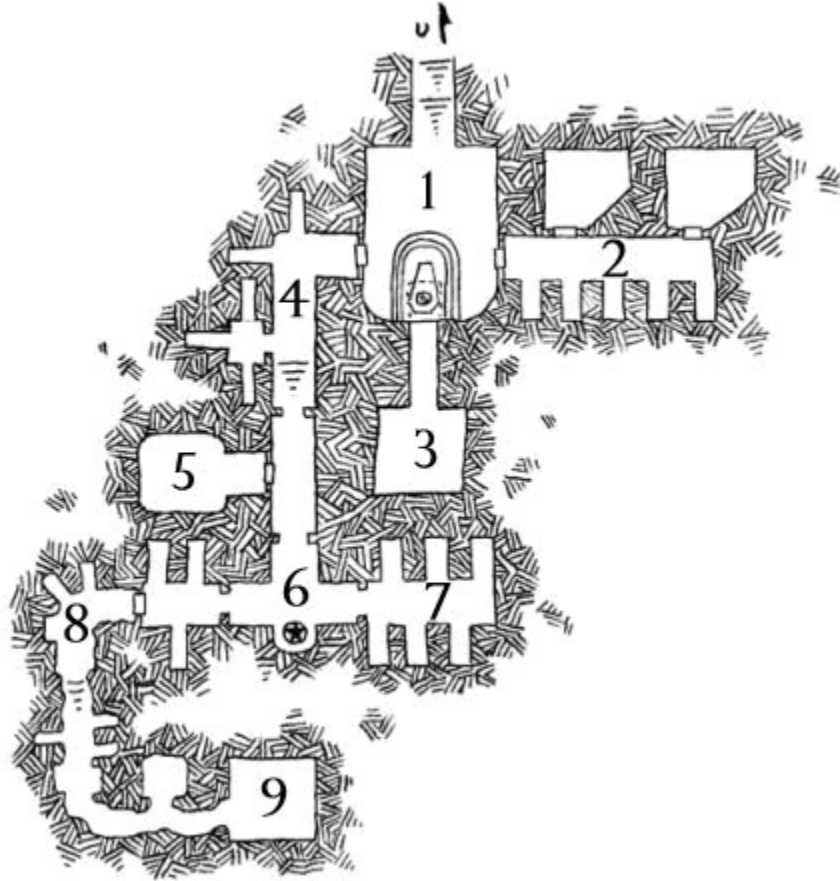
Wyvern: Has a large scar on its left side from a spear wound; has preferred to stay away from intelligent prey ever since. (MM, p. 303)

Treasure: 7,000 sp, 5 zircons (50 gp each)

A simple monster lair. I usually don't bother with maps for this sort of thing: It's easy enough to improvise a cave or shack or, in this case, a shaft. In fact, many smaller complexes with a half dozen rooms or less can also be managed without difficulty. (Assuming there's nothing radically unusual about them, of course.) Alternatively, you might use a [random floorplan generator](#) or similar tool.

(Note the page reference. I know Wizards of the Coast is terrified of page numbers on the off-chance that they get changed in a future printing, but why not make life a little easier for your future self?)

F15 - SKULL ROCK (on river)



A rock shaped like a skull thrusts out of the river. Crawling through the mouth leads to a crypt.

AREA 1: Mummified red dragon's head (huge). Breathes flame that fills most of the room (*fireball*, DC 14). Secret entrance to treasure chamber lies under the head.

AREA 2: 5 wights, 50% in lair (MM, p. 300). The two rooms off this area have been pillaged.

AREA 3 - BURIAL OFFERINGS: 3000 gp, 3 golden spinels (200 gp each)

AREA 4: Trapped hallway. Arrows shoot from wall and alchemist's fire from nozzles in the ceiling. (Chamber to the left has an incense burner in the shape of a squat, fat man worth 70 gp.)

AREA 5: Wight (MM, p. 300), no life drain but can detect magic, life, and invisibility. (Sniffs out magic and lusts for it.)

AREA 6: Bas relief skull. Insane. Asks incredibly bad riddles. (“What flies in the air?” “A bird.”), but then blasts those who answer with 1d6 *magic missiles* regardless.

AREA 7: Slain wights.

AREA 8: Staked vampires.

AREA 9: A lich (MM, p. 202) has been chained to the wall. Arcs of purple electricity spark off him in eternal torment. (Stripped of spellcasting and legendary actions.)

Notice the “on river” designator next to the key title here. That indicates that this location is on the river flowing through this hex on the map: If the PCs are following the river, they’ll automatically encounter this location.

This sort of fully-keyed “mini-dungeon” represents pretty much the upper limit of what I’ll handle in a hex key entry before bumping it into a separate document.

The map here is taken from [Dyson Logos’ website](#). His site has repeatedly proven invaluable to me when stocking hexcrawls.

STOCKING YOUR HEXES



On that note, let’s take a closer look at the practical techniques I use when stocking my hexes.

#0. HAVE A MAP

Our primary focus here is stocking hexes. But before you can do that, you need the map you’ll be keying.

First, figure out how big you want your map to be. For the reasons we discussed above, I recommend a 10 x 10 or 12 x 12 map. 100 or 144 hexes should be more than enough to get started.

Second, place the home base for the PCs in the center of this map. (This way, as noted, they can go in any direction without immediately riding off the edge of your prep.) The home base might be:

- A small town or city
- An expedition's base camp
- A keep
- An outpost
- A dimensional portal
- A crashed spaceship

There's no limit here except your imagination. The key thing is that the PCs need to have a reason to keep coming back to this location. (This usually means some form of resupplying between one expedition and the next.)

Third, grab some hexmapping software. Current options include:

- [Worldographer](#)
- [Tiled Map Editor](#)
- [Hextml](#)

You can also use other world-mappers and then just drop a hex grid on top of your map, but I recommend creating a true hex map with one clearly defined terrain type per hex. (It will make travel modifiers a lot clearer.)

I also suggest large blocks of similar terrain, which can then immediately double as your regions. (Remember that any individual hex is *huge*. Just because you threw down "forest" as the predominant terrain type, it doesn't mean there isn't a lot of local variation within it.)

Finally, I recommend having two or three different types of terrain immediately adjacent to the home base: If the PCs go north, they enter the mountains. If they go west, they enter the forest. If they head south or east they're crossing the plains. This gives a clear and immediate distinction which provides a bare minimum criteria that the PCs can use to "[pick a direction and go.](#)"

Fourth, throw down some roads and rivers.

You're done.

#1. BE CREATIVE, BE AWESOME, BE SINCERE

Before we get into any tips, tricks, shortcuts, or cheats, first things first: Do some honest brainstorming and pour some raw creativity onto the page.

The neat ideas you've been tossing around inside your head for the past few days? Everything your players think would be cool? Everything you think would be cool? Everything you wish the last GM you played with had included in the game?

Put 'em in hexes.

Then think about the setting logically: What *needs* to be there in order for the setting to work? For the stuff you've already keyed to work?

Get 'em in hexes.

Bring your creativity to the table. And make sure everything you include is *awesome*, because life is too short to waste time on the mediocre or the "good enough" or the "I guess I need to do that." If there's something that feels mundane or generic, give it a twist or add something extra. (The [Goblin Ampersand](#) can be a good technique here.)

Finally, throughout this entire process, be sincere. I think it's really important to stay true to yourself when you're doing design work: You have a unique point of view and a unique aesthetic. Even when

you're bringing in material or inspiration from other sources, apply it through your own perspective and values.

#2. JUMP AROUND

It can be useful to start at Hex A1, go to Hex A2, and then systematically proceed on through the A's before starting the B's.

But if you're working on A3 and you get a cool idea that belongs on the other side of the map, don't hesitate: Jump over there and key up Hex F7.

That is not only useful from a practical standpoint: It also feels great when you get to column F and discover three-quarters of the hexes have already been filled.

#3. STEAL

Okay, you've filled a couple dozen hexes, but now you're starting to run out of ideas. What next?

Steal.

If you're reading this blog, I'm guessing you've got a stack of adventures that you've collected over the years. Go pull your favorite location-based adventures off the shelf and start plopping them down into your hexes.

For example, consider the 5E adventure anthologies. [Tales From the Yawning Portal](#) has:

- The Sunless Citadel
- The Forge of Fury
- The Hidden Shrine of Tamoachan
- White Plume Mountain
- Dead in Thay (The Doomvault)
- Against the Giants (Hill Giant Stronghold)
- Tomb of Horrors

All of these locations could be dropped directly into your hexcrawl, although you might want to push the last three into hexes beyond your initial map as long-term goals for the PCs to work towards.

Next, flip open your copy of [Candlekeep Mysteries](#):

- Book of Ravens (Chalet Brantifax)
- A Deep and Creeping Darkness (Vermeillon)
- Price of Beauty (Temple of the Restful Lily)
- Zikran's Zephyrean Tome (Zikran's Laboratory)
- Zikran's Zephyrean Tome (Haunted Cloud Giant Keep)

And just like that, we've keyed twelve more hexes.

Old school editions featured a lot of these "here's a cool location" adventures, so if you're willing to adapt material you can unlock 50 years worth of cool options. In my Thracian Hexcrawl, for example, I used:

- [Caverns of Thracia](#)
- [S3 Expedition to the Barrier Peaks](#)
- [B3 Palace of the Silver Princess](#)
- [Temple of Elemental Evil](#)
- [L3 Deep Dwarven Delve](#)
- [Return to White Plume Mountain](#)

- [Touched by the Gods](#)

And more.

Having 30+ years of collecting to fall back on is nice, of course. But even if you don't have that kind of gaming library, you can find a ton of great stuff online for free. For example, the [One Page Dungeon Contest](#) is basically an all-you-can-eat smorgasboard for this sort of thing; I've already mentioned [Dyson Logos' maps](#) (only one of many free map resources); and so forth.

#4. STEAL MORE

No. Seriously. Go steal stuff. Pillage and loot with wild abandon.

Not every adventure can be dropped straight into a hex, but even adventures that aren't explicitly location-based will often feature cool locations that you can ripped out and easily adapted.

And the more you're willing to adapt, the more you'll be able to use. For example, "The Joy of Extradimensional Spaces" in *Candlekeep Mysteries* features Fistandia's Mansion, an extradimensional sanctum accessible from a magical book in Candlekeep.

- Drop the extradimensional component and you can drop the whole building into a hex.
- Change the extradimensional access point to a statue or shrine or giant magic rune carved into the wall of a box canyon and you can drop *that* into a hex.
- Give the mansion *multiple* magical access points and you can drop them into *multiple* hexes. (And you might as well toss the original magic book into a dungeon's treasure horde somewhere, too.)

Grab any non-urban 5E campaign book you're not interested in running and you'll be able to continue harvesting. From [Hoard of the Dragon Queen](#), for example, you could grab:

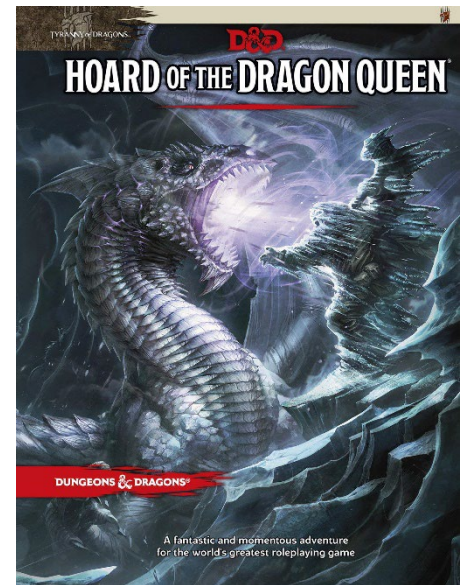
- The village of Greenest as the campaign's home base
- Raider Camp (p. 16)
- Dragon Hatchery (p. 23)
- Carnath Roadhouse (p. 41)
- Castle Naerytar (p. 43)
- Hunting Lodge (p. 62)
- Skyreach Castle (p. 76)

As you're harvesting material like this, you may start to notice patterns. For example, we've got a bunch of giant-related content now:

- Hill Giant Stronghold (from *Tales of the Yawning Portal*)
- Haunted Cloud Giant Keep (from *Candlekeep Mysteries*)
- Skyreach Castle (cloud giants from *Hoard of the Dragon Queen*)

How could we hook the lore of these locations together?

Also, when you're harvesting material from a campaign book, you're jettisoning the original connective material between the locations (which was probably some sort of linear plot), but the lore connections are still there. You can go one step further and strip those out, too. (Usually by adapting or genericizing them into something else.) But you usually don't have to: By plopping them into a hexcrawl, you've effectively remixed the original adventure. In fact, you can use [node-based scenario](#) design to diversify these connections. Check out [How to Remix an Adventure](#) to trivially add even more depth to your hexcrawl. (You can, of course, use these same techniques to link up other hex keys, too.)



Another resource I love for this are back issues of *Dungeon* magazine. Sadly these are harder to come by these days, but each issue usually had a half dozen different adventures. Some could be dropped directly into hexes; others could be easily harvested for locations.

For example, let's flip open *Dungeon* #65:

1. "Knight of the Scarlet Sword." This adventure details the Village of Bechlaughter and the magical silver dome in the center of the village which serves as home to a lich. Use the whole village or just use the dome.
2. "Knight of the Scarlet Sword" also contains the Caves of Cuwain – the tomb of a banshee. Another location that can be used as a key entry.
3. "Flotsam" is a side trek featuring a couple of pirates who pretend to be legitimate merchants; they lure people onto their ship by offering legitimate passage and then rob them on the high seas. It doesn't seem immediately appropriate for a forest hex key, but what if the PCs found this ship – and its weird, seemingly crazy crew – just sitting in the middle of the forest? Maybe it's a witch's curse or a strange haunting. Or just crazy people.
4. "The Ice Tyrant" is a heavily plotted adventure, but we could start by ripping out the fully-mapped Lodge and placing it along any convenient road that needs an inn.
5. "The Ice Tyrant" also contains a map for a Sentinel Tower occupied by evil dwarves. This can also be dropped straight into a hex. (Could it be connected with the dark dwarves from "The Forge of Fury" that we used earlier?)
6. "The Ice Tyrant" finally features the Keep of Anghanor – guarded by a white dragon and containing a bunch of bad guys. (Could this dragon be related to the dragon cults from the *Hoard of the Dragon Queen* locations?)
7. "Reflections" is another side trek, this one involving a cavern where a will o' wisp has imprisoned a gibbering moulder. That's another hex done!
8. "Unkindness of Raven" is a location-based adventure triggered by stumbling across Crawford Manor while wandering through the wilderness. This is easy!
9. "The Beast Within" is a location-based adventure triggered by stumbling across a werewolf's cottage in the wilderness. Plop it in!



And there you go. One random issue of *Dungeon* and you've got another nine hexes keyed. Pick up a dozen issues and you could probably key a full 10 x 10 hex map entirely from the magazine.

#5. IMPROVISED RANDOM GENERATORS

Okay, we started by filling the map with every ounce of creative thought we had. Then we started recklessly stealing everything we could lay our hands on. But we're still staring at empty hexes. Now what?

Now we need to get our creative juices flowing again by rapidly injecting fresh ideas that will break us out of the dried-out box our thinking is currently trapped in. There are a lot of ways to provide this stimuli.

For example, I've [used Magic the Gathering cards](#) to provide inspiration. In fact, you can use the [MTGRANDOM](#) website to generate a random *Magic* card. Let's do that a few times and see what we get:



So what I'm seeing here are some incredibly creepy constructs. Let's say there's a bunch of them. They're harvesting spores from a crop of strange flowers that blossomed in the wake of an meteorite falling to earth. How do these constructs work? Well, looks like brains are being sucked out of people and placed into the constructs. Obviously Kjora there is in charge of the whole operation.

Combine that basic set up with an appropriate map from Dyson Logos and you should be good to go.

Alternatively, grab a random map from Dyson Logos first and then use the [Goblin Ampersand](#) to help you figure out what's happening there by flipping to two random pages in the *Monster Manual*.

Another option is to repurpose random encounter generators. Sadly, this is a tool lacking in 5th Edition, but older editions include comprehensive generators that can be used (and a variety third-party options can be found).

For example, using the generators found in the 1st Edition of AD&D:

1. Roll 1d8 to determine a column on the "Sub-Arctic Conditions" encounter table. I roll a 6, so the result is "Mountains."
2. Roll 1d100 with a result of 65. That's a giant owl. According to the 1st Edition *Monster Manual*, giant owls appear in groups of 1d4+1. I roll and generate a group of five owls.
3. Giant owls have a treasure type of "Q x 5, X." I roll on those treasure tables and I get 1 miscellaneous magic, 1 potion, and 1 gem. Rolling on the sub-tables, I get a black pearl (500 gp), a *potion of human control*, and an *amulet of life protection*.

Okay, the hex I'm looking at is in the Old Forest, so let's try something like this:

N7 - TREE OF THE ELDER OWL

A giant tree, over 80 feet wide at its base and towering several hundred feet in the air. Around the base of the tree are a number of strange carvings, intermixed with primitive pictures of owls.

CALL OF THE OWL: Anyone performing an owl call near the base of the tree will cause a hidden door to open, allowing passage into the hollow center of the trunk.

COUNCIL OF OWLS: Within the tree, four giant owls sit on perches. For an appropriate tribute, these owls can each cast *augury* once per day.

UPPER EYRIE: For a much larger tribute, the Council will have the supplicant remove their arms and armor. Then one of the owls will clutch

them by the shoulders and fly them to the upper eyrie where they will be placed before the Elder Owl.

THE ELDER OWL: The left eye of the Elder Owl has been replaced with a black pearl (500 gp) and he wears an *amulet of life protection*. The Elder Owl will answer questions as per a *commune* spell, but he is also completely enamored with physical beauty: If someone of particular beauty (Charisma 16+) presents themselves, he will use his *potion of human control* in an attempt to enslave them.



#6. SPIN-OFFS

Regardless of how you're stocking a hex, you should keep your mind open to other locations that the current hex suggests.

For example, you've got a necromancer in a crystalline spire who's served by a bunch of goblins he's charmed by writing arcane runes on the insides of their eyelids and then sewing their eyelids shut. Where'd he get the goblins from? Maybe there's a village of them living nearby. They protect a tree that bears a single, bright red fruit each year. The fruit has magical properties and each year the necromancer comes to claim the fruit and take away goblin slaves.

Or you're keying a grotto that a bunch of bandits are using as a hideout. Turns out these bandits have longbows of remarkably high quality. This is because they're trading with a one-eyed troll who lives in a cave that can only be accessed through a green crystal which thrusts up through the forest floor: Lay your hand upon the crystal, say the magic password, and the crystal becomes intangible. The troll is a master bowyer.

#7. WALK AWAY

Finally, be willing to walk away from the project and take a break: Watch a TV show. Read a book. Flip through some unrelated game manuals. Power up the PS5.

Give your brain a chance to breathe and your creative batteries a chance to recharge.

This is not, by any stretch of the imagination, a comprehensive catalog or definitive technique for keying a hexcrawl. It's just stuff that's worked for me while keying hexcrawls.

HEXCRAWL ADDENDUM: RUNNING THE HEXCRAWL

[by Justin Alexander – June 20th, 2022](#)



This will be a detailed look at the actual process of running a hexcrawl at the gaming table: How I organize my tools, what I'm thinking about during the game, the decisions I make (and why I make them), how I play with and exploit the tools, and so forth.

I'm not entirely sure how useful this will be, but I'm hoping it will provide some useful insight and practical advice.

THE FOUR DOCUMENTS

What I've found over the years is that no two campaigns ever use exactly the same methods of documentation, but when I'm running a hexcrawl I generally find that I'm maintaining four "documents":

- (1) **THE HEX MAP.** Printed off on a single 8.5" x 11" piece of paper that I can lay flat on the table in front of me.
- (2) **THE BINDER.** This contains the campaign key. It includes background information (historical epochs, current civilizations, [custom terrain types](#), environmental conditions, etc.), random encounter tables, and the [hex key](#).
- (3) **THE FOLDER.** Each document in this folder details a single location. As described in [Designing the Hexcrawl](#), any location that requires more than a single page to describe gets bumped out of the hex key and placed in its own document. (This keeps the hex key clean and easy to use; it also makes it easier to organize and use these larger adventures.) Each adventure location is labeled with and sorted by its hex number for easy access when needed.
- (4) **CAMPAIGN STATUS SHEET.** This document is updated and reprinted for each session. It's responsible for keeping the campaign in motion. In my Thracian Hexcrawl, for example, the

campaign status sheet included: A list of current events in Caerdheim and Maernath (the two cities serving as home base for the PCs); a list of empty complexes (which I reference when I make a once-per-session check to see [if they've been reinhabited](#)); the current rumor table; details about the various businesses being run by the PCs; and the master loyalty/morale table for PC hirelings. I talk about campaign status sheets in more detail over [here](#).

STATUS QUO PREP

The heart of the hexcrawl, of course, is the hex key itself (along with the folder of detailed locations). And because the promise of the hexcrawl is that the PCs can go anywhere they want, it takes [a lot of front-loaded prep](#) to get this material ready for the first session of play.

The up-side, though, is that once all that prep is finished, a hexcrawl campaign based around wilderness exploration becomes incredibly prep-light: I typically spend no more than 10-15 minutes getting ready for each session, because all I'm really doing is jotting down a few notes to keep my documentation up to date with what happened in the last session.

What makes this work is that the content of each hex is designed in a state of "status quo" until the PCs touch it. Once the PCs start touching stuff, of course, the ripples can start spreading very fast and very far. However, in the absence of continued PC interaction, things in the campaign world will generally trend back towards a new status quo.

This status quo method generally only works if you have robust, default structures for delivering scenario hooks. In the case of the hexcrawl, of course, I do: Both the rumor tables and the hexcrawl structure itself will drive PCs towards new scenarios. (If all else fails in a hexcrawl, of course, the PCs can always choose a direction and start walking to find something interesting to do.)

The advantage of the status quo method is that it minimizes the amount of work you have to do as a GM. (Keeping 100+ hexes up in the air and active at all times would require a ridiculous amount of effort.) It also minimizes the amount of prep work which is wasted. (If you're constantly generating background events that the PCs are unaware of and not interacting with, that's all wasted effort.)

In practical terms, it means that you prep for each session consists of "touching base" on a half dozen or perhaps a dozen "active" hexes. That might mean:

- Updating the [adversary roster](#)
- Updating the key to reflect PC actions (although if you keep good notes during play, this is often perfunctory)
- [Repopulating an empty location](#) (using your random encounter tables or following your inspiration)

In addition to whatever tasks are necessary around the PCs' home base.

A key thing to keep in mind throughout this process is that "status quo" doesn't mean "boring." It also doesn't mean that literally nothing is happening at a given location. For example, the status quo for a camp of goblin slavers isn't "the goblins all sit around." The status quo is that there's a steady flow of slaves passing through the camp and being sold.

For a deeper discussion of this, check out [Status Quo Design](#).

SETUP

An hour or so before the game is scheduled to start, I'll set up the table.

I sit at one end of a long dining room table. I place a TV tray to the left of my chair and another TV tray to the right of my chair. Then I pull out the box that I keep all my hexcrawl material in.

On the TV tray to my right, I place the **Binder** that contains the campaign key and the **Folder** that contains the documents detailing individual locations.

There's a second folder that contains my **GM Screen**. I use a modular screen, that allows me to insert **reference sheets**. (The reference sheets consist of the [watch checklist](#) and all supporting material, like terrain modifiers.) This folder also contains several copies of my **GM Hexcrawl Worksheet**, and I pull one of those out and place it on the table in front of me.

I remove the **Hex Map** from the binder and also place that on the table in front of me.

Next, the **Rulebooks**. I place those on the TV tray to my left. If I have additional copies for the players, I'll place those in the middle of the table.

I also have a folder of **Player Supplies**, which are also placed in the middle of the table:

- Blank paper (including graph paper and hex paper)
- Blank character sheets (for an [open table](#); I'll also remove these once we start playing to reduce clutter)
- Communal maps (which have been drawn by the players and shared with the group)

Also in the campaign box are the **Characters**. I have a folder for living characters in the campaign and another folder for dead characters. These stay in the box: I generally don't need to reference them during play, so it's best to keep them out of the way.

I print out a copy of the **Campaign Status Sheet** for the current session and also place it on the table in front of me.

Finally, I'll grab my dice bag and lay out the **Dice** I need: 2d4, 8d6, 6d8, 2d10, 2d12, 6d20.

- 8d6 for *fireballs* and *lightning bolts*.
- 6d8 so that I can roll an entire day's worth of encounter checks in a single go.
- 6d20 because I can simultaneously roll an entire mob's attack rolls. (These are generally in three pairs of matching colors, so that I can easily group them for mixed types.)

(See [Random GM Tip: Fistfuls of Dice](#) for more advice on rolling and reading lots of dice at the same time.)

EXAMPLE OF PLAY: THRACIAN HEXCRAWL



The Thracian Hexcrawl was an [open table](#) I ran using the original 1974 edition of D&D. The example below is an abbreviated, annotated record of actual play from that campaign, which I've adapted slightly to be consistent with the mechanics and procedures detailed in [5E Hexcrawls](#).

BEGINNING THE SESSION

As the players arrive, I pull their character sheets out of the appropriate folder. Since this is an open table, the players may be choosing which of their active PCs they're going to be playing. (After which, I'll return the other characters to the folder.)

In my Thracian Hexcrawl, two things happen at this point:

1. I make a **rumor check** for each primary PC (not for hirelings; although it's possible for a hireling to be the vector by which a PC hears the rumor). There's a 1 in 3 chance for each PC that they'll receive a rumor. If they do, I roll on the rumor table.
2. I make a **morale check** for each hireling employed by the active PCs. On a success, the hireling continues adventuring with their employer. On a failure, I use a system based on the OD&D reaction table to determine the hireling's action: They might automatically leave the PC's service or demand an additional bonus of some variable amount. (Usually nothing happens, because the players have learned to keep the morale of their hirelings high.)
3. I make a check to potentially generate **new hirelings** who are available for hire in the home base.

Based on these checks, and their outcomes, I update the campaign status sheet appropriately.

While I'm doing this, the players are generally getting prepared for the adventure. This may be [creating new characters if they're needed](#). For established characters, it includes:

1. Discussing what their expedition is going to be.
2. Buying equipment.
3. Hiring hirelings.
4. Any other business they might need to attend to while in town.

The players may, of course, have questions for me while they're doing this. It's generally pretty easy to juggle their requests while simultaneously taking care of my bookkeeping.

STARTING OUT

While the players are wrapping things up, I'll grab my 6d8 and roll them. This represents a full day's worth of **encounter checks** (since there are six watches in a day). By reading the dice left-to-right as they fall, I can rapidly determine which watches in the day have an encounter. Since I don't know yet where the PCs will be on those days, I can't generate the specific encounters (which are region-dependent), but I can use my worksheet to jot down the Day/Watch when encounters will be happening. By generating three or four days worth of encounter checks up front, I can simplify my workflow once the PCs hit the road.

Note: If I do, in fact, know that the PCs are going to be heading in a particular direction and will likely be traveling through a given region for a lengthy period of time, I can also go ahead and generate full encounters at this point.

In this case, the PCs are in the city of Maernath, located in Hex O6. Maernath is an old city-state in the setting. It was here long before the Duchy of Thracia began pushing east in recent years (establishing the Keep on the Borderlands and the logging village of Caerdheim to the south) and the City Fathers occasionally chaff against the "authority" of the newcomers. Although the early adventures of the PCs were based primarily out of Caerdheim (which was near the [Caverns of Thracia](#)), an increase in interest in the Palace of Red Death to the north led to an increased number of expeditions being mounted from Maernath. Those expeditions resulted in various PCs gaining a lot of lore about the area surrounding Maernath and that, in turn, spurred even more expeditions there.

The PCs **leave town** along the road heading south. They choose to travel at normal pace. Because they're following a Road/Trail through Plains hex, their movement modifier is x1, which means they move at their normal [expedition speed](#) of 12 miles per watch. (We're not using the advanced rules for determining expedition speed based on the speed of the expedition's slowest member.)

Maernath's position in Hex O6 is [biased](#), so it only takes 4 progress to exit the hex in this direction. They're aiming for the river, which is [on the road](#) right at the border of the hex (so they obviously have no difficulty finding it).

Their goal is to follow the river into the Old Forest (Hex P7), so now I'm going to look ahead: Their course along the river takes them through the [near side](#) of the hex (6 miles away) into Hex P6 and, from there, they will then pass through another near side into Hex P7 (another 6 miles). Although they've left the road, they're still traveling through Plains and the river provides enough of a track that they're still traveling at 12 miles per watch. Total it up:

$$4 \text{ miles (Maernath to River/Hex O7)} + 6 \text{ miles (O7 to P6)} + 6 \text{ miles (P6 to P7)} = 16 \text{ miles}$$

Which means they'll arrive at the edge of the Old Forest a little over an hour into their second watch. This is notable because, looking at my worksheet, I can see that the second watch of the day has a **wandering encounter** (I rolled 1 on the 1d8 when making the encounter check). I can [determine the time in a watch](#) by rolling 1d8. The result is a 3, which basically means the encounter is scheduled to take place just as they're reaching the edge of the Old Forest.

This is a [border hex](#), and I've listed a 50% chance of border encounters for the Old Forest. So even though we're still in the Plains, there's a 50% chance that I'll roll an Old Forest encounter instead.

1. I roll a 13, so that's exactly what's going to happen.
2. I flip to the Old Forest encounter table and roll. The result I get is "Slimes," which has a sub-table which generates Gray Ooze.
3. Gray Ooze has a 25% chance of being a Tracks encounter, but I roll 46 (so it's not).

They have no chance of being a Lair encounter, so I can skip that step.

Given the confluence of factors involved, I'm going to have the Gray Oozes appear just as the river passes beneath the boughs of the Old Forest. They'll be draped across the tree branches above the river like some kind of horrific Spanish moss.

INTO THE OLD FOREST



After the PCs have dealt with (or avoided) the Gray Oozes, they'll be able to continue along the river. It's a Medium Forest and the trail has disappeared, so their speed is going to drop by $\frac{1}{2}$. They had 8 miles of movement left in their second watch, so they'll be able to gain 4 progress through Hex P7.

Three miles along the river, however, they come to a tree on the south bank of the river with the Dwarven letter "mu" carved into its trunk. They're familiar with it. In fact, one of the PCs left it here as a marker: Gordur, a powerful orc stronghold, lies several miles due south from this spot.

This, however, is not their goal. They continue along the river for another mile and then make camp for the night. The next day, they continue another two miles until they find a similar tree with the Dwarven letter "thod" carved into it. This marker was placed due north of the [Crypt of Luan Phien](#). The crypt is their ultimate goal, so now they turn south, away from the clear [navigational landmark](#) of the river, and into the depths of the Old Forest.

At this point, they need to start making navigation checks. Epicaste, a hireling rescued by the dwarf Aeng from a thousand-year slumber in the Caverns of Thracia, is the group's navigator, so she steps forward and takes point.

1. It's a Medium Forest, so the Navigation DC is 16.
2. Epicaste blows the check. (Possibly because Delmhurst, another hireling, keeps second-guessing her.) I roll 1d10 to determine the group's [veer](#). With a roll of 8, I determine that they're veering to the right. Instead of heading due south into Hex P8 (which is where they want to go), they're going to end up southwest in Hex O8.

LOST IN THE OLD FOREST

When does that actually happen? Well, they entered Hex P7 from due north. Whether they're leaving into Hex P8 or Hex O8, they're still existing through the [far side](#) of the hex. So they need to rack up 12 progress to exit the hex.

- They'd gained 4 progress in the hex during their second watch. They don't want to do a forced march, so they stop traveling after the second watch.
- During the first watch of the next day (their third watch of travel overall), they'll gain another 6 progress. That's a total of 10 progress, which is not quite enough.
- Therefore, they'll enter Hex O8 about midway through the second watch of their second day of travel.

Checking my worksheet, I can see that I generated a **location encounter** for the second watch of the second day, so once again I generate a random time and determine that they'll encounter the hex's keyed location AFTER they've entered Hex O8. (If the encounter had happened earlier, it would have been with the keyed location in Hex P7.)

I flip to the key for Hex O8:

Me: Towards the waning hours of the day, you enter a small clearing. Criss-crossing branches grow into what appear to be houses with walls of woven moss.

Aeng: I don't remember this.

Delmhurst: I think the thousand-year dummy has gotten us lost again.

It turns out the strange houses are empty and abandoned. It's getting late in the day, so the PCs decide to make camp here for the night. They'll try to backtrack the trail the next day and figure out where they made the wrong turn.

And that's basically all there is to it. With a [strong key](#) and a [clean procedure](#), the hexcrawl will flow naturally in response to the explorations of the PCs, drawing them deeper and deeper into the mysteries of the wilderness.

EXAMPLE OF PLAY: AVERNIAN HEXCRAWL



This post contains **SPOILERS** for [Descent Into Avernus](#) and the [Avernus Remix](#).

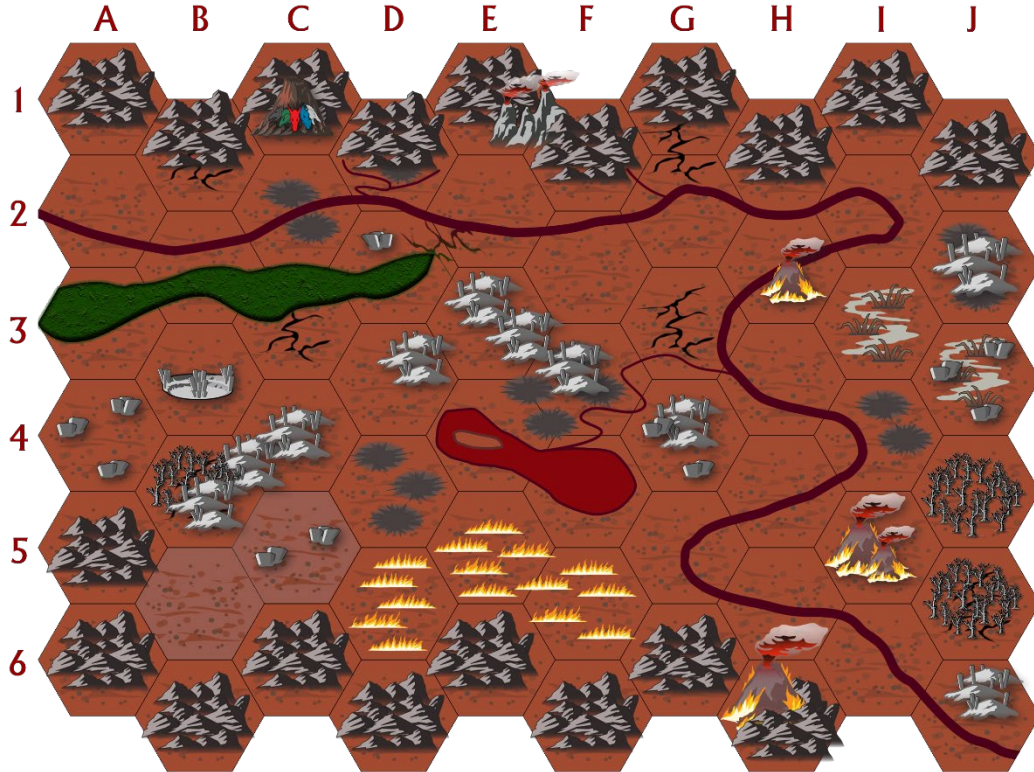
The [Avernian Hexcrawl](#) was designed for Act III of the [Alexandrian Remix](#) of *Descent Into Avernus*. Intended for a dedicated table, the primary assumption is that the PCs will likely be exploring the hexcrawl in pursuit of the components required to repair a dream machine. It features 40-mile hexes with [custom terrain](#), and we'll also be using a different set of optional rules, including:

- variable travel distance
- the [Avernian random encounter procedures](#)
- the advanced rules for expedition speed

The PCs are:

- Kerstina, an Elturian hell knight
- Ereshkigal, a tiefling warlock
- Adi Themis, a halfling artificer

BEGINNING THE SESSION



The PCs have arrived at the [Alvskraema caravanserai](#), located in Hex B2 next to the bridge which crosses the Pit of Shummrath. Ereshkigal's infernal warmachine was damaged in a confrontation with a darksphinx and they came here looking for repairs.

Adi Themis realizes that the Alvskraema is serving elf meat as a delicacy, so they decide to pass on both the good and the common room. But while settling payment with Meltrus, one of the two forgemasters, Ereshkigal decides to go fishing and see if Meltrus has any leads on dream machine components.

Rolling on the [Avernian rumor tables](#), I get this result:

Nirvanan cogboxes are used by modrons. I heard that the warlord Algoran recently captured a modron. His lair is located at the far end of the Ashlands. (Hex B6)

That's perfect, so I just need to put that into Meltrus' mouth:

Me (Meltrus): He strokes his wriggling, prehensile beard. "A Nirvanan cogbox, eh? Haven't seen one of those in years. They're mostly used by modrons, and there aren't many of those around here. But you may be in luck. One of Algoran's gladiators was in here a few days ago, spending his winnings on avariel goulash. He mentioned that Algoran's out-riders had captured a modron recently."

Ereshkigal: Algoran, huh? Where can we find him?

Me (Meltrus): "He founded a gladiatorial arena. It's almost due south from here, built into the mountains that ring the far side of the Ashlands."

The lead seems a little thin, but it's close. So the PCs decide to check it out.

STARTING OUT

The PCs mount up on their infernal warmachines, which have a speed of 100 ft. They decide to travel at a fast pace, which means (using the advanced rules for [expedition speed](#)) that they'll have a base pace of 60 miles per watch. This also means they'll have a penalty to navigation checks, but they decide speed is more important and they won't be able to get too far off course before they can see the mountains and [navigate by landmark](#).

They're starting in Hex B2 and heading south, intending to enter Hex B3. The terrain in both hexes is Wastelands and it's Trackless, so they'll be moving at ½ speed (30 miles per watch). They've already traveled one watch today to reach the Alvskraema, so they only have one watch of travel left. But they only need 20 miles of progress to reach Hex B3, so I know they'll be getting there right at the end of their traveling day.

The group has a standard operating procedure while traveling: Kerstina takes the Navigator action, while the other two PCs take the Sentinel watch action.

As they start heading south:

1. I make a **random encounter check**, rolling 2d10 and 1d12. No encounter is indicated.
2. In addition to the normal random encounter check in Avernus, I also make an **oppressive environment** check. I roll 1d6, but no oppressive condition is indicated.
3. Kerstina makes her **navigation check**. The Wastelands are Navigation DC 12. She rolls a natural 20 for a total of 21. (20 + 6 for her bonus - 5 penalty for fast travel pace.) The groups heads due south without any difficulty.
4. Ereshkigal and Adi Themis make Wisdom (Perception) checks, but there's nothing unusual to notice out here. I describe the broken scree of the Wastelands churning under their serrated wheels.

I mark 20 progress, which — as we determined — brings them to Hex B3. I check the key for Hex B3 to make sure there are no special conditions or visible landmarks (there isn't), then I reset the progress counter to 0. They'll need another 40 miles of progress to cross Hex B3 and enter Hex B4.

MAKING CAMP

Finished with travel for the day, the PCs circle up their warmachines. They decide to all take an active watch action, then take shifts for the rest of the night (with Kerstina, then Ereshkigal, then Adi Themis taking a watch with the Sentinel action).

For the first watch:

- Adi Themis [makes camp](#).
- Ereshkigal reads some arcane texts they purchased in the Purple City.
- Kerstina takes the [Forage action](#). The Wastelands Forage DC is 20 and, as a mortal, Kerstina has disadvantage on the check in Avernus. She fails. (But it was worth a shot.)

Although they're not traveling, I once gain make a random encounter check. No encounter is indicated.

However, when I make the oppressive environment check, I roll a 1, triggering the condition. I then roll d12, getting a 3, which indicates **extreme heat**. I describe the temperature skyrocketing until the wasteland scree is steaming. Everyone needs to make a saving throw, and Kerstina fails. She comes stumbling back into camp not only empty-handed, but having suffered a level of exhaustion.

The PCs decide to shuffle things up: Kerstina needs to rest and can no longer take the first watch, so Adi Themis swaps with her. They decide to just wait out the extreme heat, as traveling under those conditions

would be extremely debilitating. But they get lucky: The following watch I roll another 1 on the oppressive environment check, ending the condition.

I finish making the rest of the encounter checks for the night. During the sixth watch, an encounter is indicated. I roll d100 and determine the encounter would be with 5d10 imps. However, when I make the % Tracks check, it indicates that it would be a tracks encounter. That would be an exploration encounter, and since the PCs aren't currently moving the encounter doesn't happen.

HEADING SOUTH

The next day, the PCs load up and continue heading south. (Setting the same pace and so forth from the day before.) With 30 miles of progress per watch, I know they'll reach Hex B4 during their second watch of travel (assuming nothing goes away).

In the first watch, I generate an encounter:

- d100 roll comes up 67, indicating a 1 [yagnoloth](#).
- Tracks check and Lair check are both negative, so it's definitely a yagnoloth.
- I roll a [random encounter distance](#), determining that the yagnoloth will be detectable at 840 ft.
- I roll on the [Avernian Reaction Table](#) and discover that the yagnoloth will be Cautious/Threatening.

What's the yagnoloth doing? Well, the write-up in [Tome of Foes](#) indicates that they're often employed as contract negotiators. I decide he must be carrying (2d6) 4 pacts and (1d6) 2 soul coins to the adjunct court of Hell in [Hex G1](#). Since he's carrying some important material, I decide to go with Cautious more than Threatening.

And because the yagnoloth is Cautious, I decide to also make a Dexterity (Stealth) check, setting DC 13 for opposed Wisdom (Perception) checks.

The exact time of this encounter doesn't seem to matter, so I don't bother making an additional check to nail it down.

I now call for the PCs' skill checks from their watch actions: A navigation check from Kerstina (which she passes) and Wisdom (Perception) checks from Ereshkigal (6, failure) and Adi Themis (18, success).

Since the PCs are traveling at a fast pace and can't use Stealth, the yagnoloth has no difficulty spotting them.

I describe to Adi Themis the yagnoloth crossing the wastelands about several hundred feet off to the right of their path. I probably also hold up a picture:



So now what will the PCs do? Given the encounter distance and their relative speed to the yagnoloth, they may simply choose to steer wide and pass the yagnoloth by. Or perhaps they'll approach, hoping to glean more information about the region. (In which case, perhaps the yagnoloth will be the one to reveal how they can break the pact binding Elturel, if they haven't figured that out already.) Or they may think the lone figure will be easy pickings and a chance to enrich themselves on whatever loot it may be carrying. (If so, who do the pacts the yagnoloth carries belong to? And will they come looking for them?)

A bit of local color to their journey or a pivot point which may change the entire course of the campaign? That's the beautiful, emergent play of the hexcrawl.

HEXCRAWL ADDENDUM: CONNECTING YOUR HEXES

[by Justin Alexander - August 29th, 2022](#)



In its most basic form, of course, the [hexcrawl](#) is a collection of hexes. Each hex contains some form of keyed content, and the PCs move from one hex to the next, encountering whatever each hex happens to contain.

Insofar as it goes, this basic functionality is just fine. Essential, really. It's what makes the hexcrawl a fundamentally robust structure in which the players can never truly become stuck, because they can always just choose another hex to explore.

But if this basic functionality is the only thing a hexcrawl has to offer, then the hexcrawl becomes like a game of *Memory* with no matching tiles: You just select a tile at random, flip it up, and collect it. In order for a game of *Memory* to become interesting, there has to be a connection between the tiles (i.e., the pairs you're trying to match). By learning these connections, the choice of tile in *Memory* becomes meaningful.

Similarly, for a hexcrawl to truly come to life at the gaming table, the players need to be able to learn meaningful information about the hexes and use that information guide their exploration of the hexmap.

- "Those bandits told us their main camp was located in a cave three miles west of the waterfall. Let's head there and shut them down for good."
- "Do you want to go back and check out that weird tower with the bleeding walls we saw sticking out of the Sepulchral Holt?"

- “I don’t know where this map leads, but there must have been a reason that demon was carrying it.”

As the PCs gain information like this, they transcend random wandering and are able to set goals. Aimless curiosity is transformed into purposeful searching and [true exploration is achieved](#).

There are a number of ways that the PCs can get this information. **Rumors**, for example, can either be freely distributed or gleaned from urban locations. **Tracks** can turn almost any random encounter into an information source. (“We can follow these goblin raiders back to their village.”)

But one of the most powerful technique is to **connect your hexes**: By exploring one hex, the PCs gain information that leads them to another hex. In this way, the random hexes of aimless curiosity are transmuted into purpose, and that purpose becomes self-perpetuating as each additional hex the PCs explore teaches them more and more about the area they’re exploring.

CLUES & LEADS

At a basic level, you’re including **leads** in your hex key that point to other hexes.

- The goblins are working for the necromancer, so if you raid their village you might maps or correspondence with the necromancer; or you might interrogate them or follow their tracks to the necromancer’s tower in the Sepulchral Holt.
- Conversely, if you go to the Sepulchral Holt you’ll find goblins from the village serving there (offering any number of opportunities for planting leads). Also, the necromancer is trying to help the goblins wipe out the bandits in the area (to eliminate the competition), so there’s a map indicating the location of the cave where they make their lair.

And so forth.

Since we’re talking about clues and leads, your thoughts might naturally lead you towards the [Three Clue Rule](#):

For any conclusion you want the PCs to make, include at least three clues.

When it comes to hex connections, however, this is not strictly necessary. Remember that the hexcrawl structure itself provides a default method for discovering keyed content, so it’s okay if the clues for a location “fail.” So it’s fine if you only have two or one or even zero clues pointing to a location. (For the same reason that you don’t need three clues pointing to every room in a dungeon.)

Nevertheless, in keying your hexmap, you might want to keep a [revelation list](#) of your hexes to track how the various locations are being connected to each other. This may be particularly useful if you haven’t designed a hexcrawl before and want to make establishing hex connections a point of emphasis.

As a rule of thumb for your first hex key, for example, you might just make sure that every keyed location has at least one clue pointing to another location. That will likely result in some locations have lots of clues pointing to them and other locations not having any clues pointing to them, but it *does* make sure that the PCs are likely to quickly to find specific information they can pursue if they’re currently without a specific goal.

TREASURE MAPS & RANDOM GENERATION

An interesting feature of the original 1974 edition of D&D is that its random treasure tables featured treasure maps. Lots of treasure maps. (25% of all “magic item” results, for example, would actually result in a map.)

This is a very interesting mechanic, because it systematizes the injection of hex connections (or to similar effect in a megadungeon). Rolling to generate a monster’s treasure would periodically prompt the DM to provide a clear-cut (and very tantalizing!) lead to another location.

(A similar system was that monster treasure was, by default, only found in the monster’s lair. So if you encountered a monster as a random encounter, you would need to track them back to their lair – which would likely have other encounters in it – in order to get your pay day.)

These systems were removed from the game, most likely because being randomly prompted to provide a full-blown treasure map to your players was daunting for many DMs, but I take a couple of lessons from this.

First, literal treasure maps are awesome. Include them in myriad forms. (Tattered parchment. Scrawled in charcoal on a ruined wall. A small blue orb that vibrates when you head in a particular direction.)

Second, some degree of randomization can be an excellent prompt to challenge ourselves and seek creative solutions that might otherwise have never occurred to us.

You can play around with this in all kinds of ways. For example, a fun exercise might be:

- Roll 1d6-2 for each keyed location to determine how many leads should be there pointing to other locations.
- For each lead, randomize the hex that the clue points to.

Trying to figure out how/why these connections exist will likely enrich your game world in fascinating ways.

(And if not, [just ignore it](#). It’s a fun prompt, not the dice gestapo.)

VISIBLE LANDMARKS

As a final note, I’ll point out a form of hex connection that might not occur to you even though it’s in plain sight. Literally.

Landmarks which can be seen from a great distance – i.e., in another hex – are technically connected to all of those hexes from which they can be seen. (In a very literal, but nonetheless significant, way.)

Conversely, a high vantage point that allows you to spot is *also* a form of hex connection, allowing PCs to learn information that they can use to guide their navigation and exploration of the wilderness.