

# Subhex Wilderness Crawls

Random Local Terrain and Landmark Tables  
for Class-and-Level Exploration Fantasy RPGs

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## The Subhex Wilderness Crawl

We map wilderness with broad strokes, traditionally on a hex grid, focusing only on the general terrain. We don't say where the crest of a hill is, where a grove of trees is, or which way a stream turns. Players are usually not interested in every little hillock along a three-day journey.

But short trips or the areas around dungeon entrances ought to include such features. I call this the **subhex scale**. And this is a way to handle the details for spur-of-the-moment

### Subhex Assumptions

**Map Type** Grid or Hex, your choice.

**Time Scale** Five-minute moves.

**Distance Scale** 30 yards per hex or square.

Two squares count as one move for most travelers. Light travelers move twice as far, overburdened travelers move only one square. Sprinting, running, and terrain will affect this.

### The Subhex Process

1. Start at a permanent or temporary homebase;
2. Add a couple visible landmarks around homebase;
3. Follow a path to a landmark;
4. Add a minor landmark when the path changes direction;
5. Leave the path when a distant major landmark looks interesting;
6. Repeat Steps 2 through 5 as the party discovers new paths and landmarks.

I say “*follow* a path” and “*leave* the path” because one of the main reasons for subhex wilderness tools is to fill in details during play. You might set up a town with a convenient adventure or two, describe it to your players . . . and then they fixate on some throw-away comment about an old fort on a nearby hill. “Let’s go check it out!” they say, only you didn’t map it out. This process lets you fill in the details of the trip.

If you already know the names of a couple nearby towns and villages, they count as major landmarks. There’s a road or a river leading to each; these are your first few paths. Anything visible that doesn’t have a road leading to it still counts as a “virtual path”.

Each landmark may have additional paths extending in other directions, leading to more landmarks, and there may be a minor landmark beside the road anywhere the path changes direction.

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## Base Terrain and Vegetation

You need to know at least two things about your homebase: the kind of terrain and any major terrain differences nearby.

***Example:** Start in Plains/Grasslands, mountains to the north, hills to the east, sea to west.*

In broad terms, the base terrain will be either water (lake, sea, swamp) or land (flat, hilly, or mountainous.) Base vegetation on land will range from traces of small, hardy plants (lichen, cactus) through dry scrub, grasses or reeds, thick brush or vines, and trees. Again, you can always pick whichever you prefer, or use an overland wilderness map or random wilderness generator.

If you need a quick suggestion, roll on the **Random Base Terrain Table**. Use a d12 if you don't mind starting in water, a d10 if you don't want random seas, or a d8 if you want to start on land.

Table 1: Random Base Terrain

d12	Base Terrain	Base Vegetation
1	<b>Desert or Glacier</b>	None
2	<b>Badlands or Tundra</b>	Trace Small Plants
3	<b>Mountains</b>	Scrub (Grass)
4	<b>Hills</b>	Grass
5	<b>Wooded Hills</b>	Tree
6	<b>Grasslands</b>	Grass
7	<b>Light Woods</b>	Tree
8	<b>Forest or Jungle</b>	Tree
9	<b>Swamp</b>	Scrub (Grass)
10	<b>Lake</b>	Reed (Grass)
11+	<b>Seashore</b>	Reed (Grass)

Some of the results have two answers, based on climate. Glacier and Tundra only occur in arctic climates (or high altitudes, for glaciers.) Jungles only occur in tropical/sub-tropical climates.

Deserts can be either rocky or sandy. “Badlands” are semi-desert areas with more vegetation, in clumps. Results 4 and 5 distinguish between hills with sparser or thicker vegetation.

The Base Vegetation columnn will be explained later.

Random Paths

You can roll 5d12 for additional paths. Read each die as a clock direction: 12 o'clock is north, 3 is east, 6 is south, 9 is west.

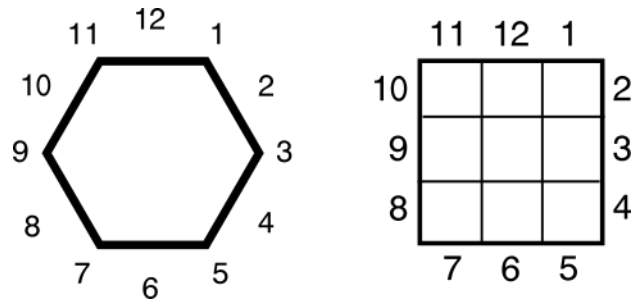


Figure 1: Clock Directions for Hex and Square Grids

Each d12 result represents one physical path. Ignore multiples. rolling five 6s means there is only one road, heading south, in addition to any predefined roads. The length of each path is based on estimated visibility:

- 40 squares in flat terrain,
  - 20 squares in swamps, small hills, or light woods,
  - 8 squares in forest or mountain,
  - 4 squares in thick jungle.
- For unusual terrain, figure out how it compares to the above in terms of visibility.

Table 2: Obstacles, Diversions, and Encounters

d6	Obstacle or Diversion	d20	Off-Path Encounter Types
1-4	<b>Terrain Feature.</b> Roll for water, elevation, vegetation, and debris.	1	<b>Landmark</b>
5	<b>Landmark.</b> Roll on the Landmark table.	2	<b>Path</b>
6	<b>Landmark</b> (if path ends,) <b>Fork in Road</b> otherwise. Roll 3d12 for additional paths.	3-4	<b>Landmark + Monster</b>
		5-6	<b>Monster Only</b>
		7+	<b>No Encounter</b>

Roll 1d12 for the next leg of the journey. If the direction is the same as before, the path continues straight, otherwise there is a terrain feature or landmark in the original direction and the path is diverted (see the **Obstacle or Diversion Table**.) If the die roll indicates the path goes back the way it came, the path ends abruptly. If it *almost* doubles back (off by one,) then the path continues in its current direction, but is joined by a path from the direction rolled.

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***Example:** A road heads east by northeast (2 o'clock,) but the next roll points west by southwest (8 o'clock.) The road dead ends. If the roll isn't an 8, but a 9 or 7 instead, another road joins it from the west or from south by southwest.*

If players leave the path, roll 1d12 exactly as if checking for change of direction. Ignore results that continue straight or almost double back, but other rolls indicate a terrain feature or landmark straight ahead. If you use encounter checks ("wandering monsters"), you can use the **Off-Path Encounters Table** for possible encounters with paths or landmarks.

## Terrain Features

Most of the time, paths detour around changes in terrain features: water, elevation change, vegetation, and/or debris. Check for each of the four.

### Water Features

On land (never in the desert.) a 5+ on 1d6 means a small pond or other water feature is present. (Optionally, roll 2d6 in desert; a 12 means water.) Roll on the **Water Features Table** for the water type.

Table 3: Water Feature Types

Roll	Water Type
1	Stagnant Pool
2-5	Large Pond
6	Spring

Each pond or spring is 2 to 5 yards in diameter in badlands or mountains, double that in hills, or ten times that in grasslands through forest or jungle. There will be 1 to 4 ponds, one in the original travel direction. Roll 3d12 for clock directions to additional ponds, ignoring results that would place two or more ponds in the same location, or optionally make that pond an oval, 2 to 4 times longer in one direction. Other details can be chosen as needed, or left up to a 5+ on 1d6 roll for each quality. For example, whether it's salt water or fresh, a mineral springs, a hot springs, or muddy water.

### Elevation Features

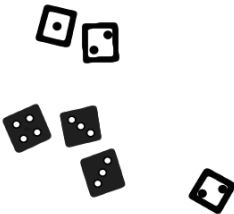
Use two sets of dice: three dark-colored d6s for slope down, three light-colored d6s for slope up. Roll them all together and read them as a line of terrain facing the path.

Interpret each die result using the **Elevation Features Table**. When a dark die touches a light die, it might be a cave if the dark d6 is a higher result than the light d6 or if both are 4+. Caves might be lairs (5+ on 1d6.)

A 6 result between two light dice indicates a mesa or butte (flat- topped hill.) A 6 result between two dark dice indicates a flat- bottom pit or trench.

Figure 2: Example of an Elevation Roll

Two light dice at the top indicating a hill, three dark dice indicating a deep L-shaped trench south of the hill, and the last light die marking a smaller hill east of the trench.



If there is a water feature and a pit, cave, or trench, the water is in the low-elevation area.

You can also roll 1d6 for the slope on the banks of a river, stream or canal. In mountain or hill country, the higher number is a slope up, the lower number is a slope down.

Table 4: Elevation Features

d6	Slope	Description
1	Light Slope	10 to 25% grade (steep enough to be noticeable.)
2	Medium Slope	up to 50% grade (risky, but still walkable.)
3	Steep Slope	up to 100% grade (45 degree slope.)
4	Cliff	150% grade or more (can't walk, must climb.)
5	Ledge/Overhang	Unclimbable slope, must use free-hanging rope.
6	No Slope	If all the dice are 6s, there is no ridge/trench.

Vegetation Features

The **Random Base Terrain Table** gives ten types of base vegetation. Adding Brush as another vegetation type, we get a range of four plant density values: Trace, Grass (and Scrub, Reed, Small Fern,) Brush (and Thick Fern,) and Tree. Vegetation features are exceptions to the base vegetation: areas of thinner or thicker vegetation, or even barren patches. Roll 1d10 on the **Vegetation Features Table** to check for these exceptions. Always try the Density column first. If your result is the same density as the base vegetation, use the result from the second column instead.

Results 0-7 on the table occur in patches, handled like ponds: same size, same 3d12 roll for the location of other patches.

Table 5: Vegetation Features

d10	Density	Alternative Vegetation
0		Barren, no vegetation.
1	<b>Trace.</b> Sparse, tiny plants.	<b>Lone Tree</b> , dead if 5+ on 1d6 rolled.
2	<b>Grass, Scrub, Reed</b> (as appropriate.) Calf-high to chest-high.	<b>Withered Plants.</b> Blighted area is normally circular, but it's a symbol if 5+ on 1d6 rolled.
3	<b>Brush/Thick Ferns.</b> As high as Grass/Scrub, but slows movement.	<b>Berries</b> , poison if 5+ on 1d6 rolled.
4	<b>Trees.</b>	<b>Burnt</b> (Remains of forest fire.)
5	<b>Trees + Brush</b> (possibly a thicket.)	<b>Fruit trees</b> , poisonous if 5+ on 1d6 rolled.
6		Shift down one step on density scale.
7		Shift up one step on density scale.
8-9		No change.

## Debris Features

Roll a d10 on the **Debris Features Table** for rocks, boulders, logs, and minor geological features. Place patches of loose rocks or any of the “Pit” results as if they were ponds or vegetation.

For boulders, water spouts, and logs/stumps, there will be only one “patch”, in the original direction of travel, but there will be 1 to 6 objects in that patch. Roll a d6 with spots on it for the number and arrangement.



One solitary boulder, geyser, fallen log, or tree stump.



A pair of boulders, geysers, logs, or stumps.



Three objects in a line or possibly a triangle.



A circle or square of four boulders, geysers, logs, or stumps.



Like the previous one, but with a fifth in the center.



Two lines of three boulders, geysers, logs, or stumps.



Table 6: Debris Features

d10	Debris Type	Other Rolls and Notes
0	<b>Rocks and Gravel</b>	In circular patches. Roll 3d12 as for ponds or vegetation features.
1	<b>Boulders</b>	Roll 1d6 for number, using spots on the die as the arrangement.
2	<b>Water Spouts</b>	Erupt if 5+ is rolled on 1d6. Water is near boiling.
3	<b>Tar Pits</b>	Hot and bubbly. Roll 3d12 as for ponds.
4	<b>Fire/Lava Pits</b>	Roll 3d12 as for ponds.
5	<b>Logs or Stumps</b>	Petrified in deserts, frozen on glaciers, rotting everywhere else.
6	<b>Sand Pits</b>	Except in sandy deserts. Roll 3d12 as for ponds. In swamps, 5+ on 1d6 means means quicksand instead.
7	<b>Mud Pits</b>	Warm and bubbly, but not boiling. Roll 3d12 as for ponds.
8-9	<b>No Debris.</b>	

## Landmarks

Although any unique group of objects or large, visible terrain feature counts as a landmark, here we are specifically concerned with man-made features, such as towns, keeps, or scattered huts. Roll a d10 on the **Wilderness Landmarks Table** to determine the landmark type. Follow up with the rolls mentioned in the Notes column. If there is any question of arrangement, such as for the “standing stone” result (under Monuments,) you can optionally roll a d6 with spots on it, as you would for boulders or fallen logs.

Most landmarks will be in the same direction the path was heading before changing direction. A bridge, however, assumes that there is a road crossing a river or chasm. The road and the river or chasm count as two perpendicular paths. The bridge is straight ahead, if you were mapping the road first, or directly above, if you were mapping the river or chasm.

Several of the additional rolls are given as 1d6-2. Negative results are treated as zero. This means that there might be zero statues, zero pillars, zero fallen towers, and zero intact buildings in ruins, in which case it is just walls and rubble.

Landmarks will require more interpretation than the results of other tables. Who is in the fortress? What kind of a tunnel is it: just a straight bore, a mine tunnel with timber supports, or stone masonry and flagstone floor? If you want to leave extra details up to chance, you can phrase each detail as a yes-or-no question and roll 1d6: on a 5+, the landmark has that feature.

Table 7: Wilderness Landmarks

Roll	Landmark Type	Additional Rolls/Notes
0	<b>Ruins</b>	1d6-2 statues, pillars, fallen towers, intact buildings (roll for each.)
1	<b>Bridge</b>	River or chasm perpendicular to road.
2	<b>Wall/Ditch</b>	Crosses original path. If you follow it, any "bridge" result is a gate.
3	<b>Tunnel</b>	Slants up into mountain. Landmark at end of tunnel. Second "Tunnel" result means tunnel emerges.
4	<b>Fortress</b>	Stone or wood keep, wall, 1d6-2 towers and heroes, 1d6-2 x 2 mercenaries and 1d6-2 servants per man.
5	<b>Village</b>	Base population 1d6-2 x 100. If walled (5+ on 1d6,) add 1d6-2 towers.
6	<b>Shelter</b>	1d6/2 cabins, huts, or other buildings with 1d6-2 inhabitants. May be abandoned, but still in good condition, possibly with supplies.
7	<b>Monument</b>	Standing stone or cairn. May have carvings or mark burial/cache.
8	<b>(Un)Holy Shrine</b>	Chapel or monument. May bless or curse those who defile it. Unholy shrines always curse.
9	<b>Graveyard</b>	2d20 x 10 graves, 1d6-2 barrows or mausoleums (based on culture or 5+ on 1d6 chance of mausoleum.)

## The Drop-Dice Option

There's a slightly quicker way to make a map, but it requires rolling dice directly on a sheet of graph or hex paper and paying attention to where the dice land. This is called the "drop dice" technique; it's been around for a while, but it's best known from the work Zak Smith did in his **Vornheim** book. Using drop dice for subhex wilderness generation works basically the same as described above, but skips the *nd12* rolls, using the physical position of the dice instead.

To start, roll 5d6 on the map of the starting point and remove any that land on the town or village itself. The remaining dice are roads out of town; the direction from town to a given die is the direction of the road, and the position marks the point where there might be a landmark, if the result on the die is 5+.

Next, drop three dark d6s and three light d6s on the map and remove any that land on the town. This represents hills and trenches in the landscape. You might want to use d4s instead of d6s, to avoid the "flat" result, although you will also lose ledges and overhangs. Draw ovals around the dice, merging any ovals that are close together.

Drop the dice for water next, using 5d6 and the **Water Feature Types** table. The usual order for water and elevation is swapped so that you can merge ponds with any low elevation zones they touch. Drop 3d10 twice for vegetation and debris. If any of these dice rolls overlap a path that's already been drawn, try to make the path

run through the feature if possible. If not, the path diverts around the obstacle. Paths that pass through water features can be turned into streams or rivers, while the rest will be roads.

Finish off with rolling a d10 for the actual landmarks already marked on the map, then dropping 5d10 for some extra landmarks. Extend the paths already on the map in the direction they were heading, but when a path reaches a landmark or terrain feature, make it curve around it or turn towards another nearby landmark. Once a road hits a map edge, you can start a new sheet and repeat the process.

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The original subhex wilderness crawl posts appeared on my blog around January 2012. It was in direct contrast to some more traditional wilderness hexcrawl tools I did for barony and kingdom level terrain. It didn't include the landmark table, which was partially influenced by the Quickie Dice Tool chart and partially by a similar landmark table for the traditional hexcrawl posts. Instead, it just gave examples of landmarks and how to roll for their placement. It was also based around "drop dice" techniques: the optional method presented on pages 8 and 9 is a simplified version of this.

The barony/kingdom level material will be available as a free PDF, **Wilderness Sandbox Tools**. Eventually, these will appear in an expanded version as part of the **Last-Minute Game Master** series.