

Campfire Basics

By Bud Journey

YES, of course you know how to build a campfire. Everybody knows how to build a campfire. That said, may I timidly offer some suggestions that could facilitate things a bit for you? During a lifetime in the outdoors, I've learned from some of the best.

In places where they are legal, campfires can serve as anything from warm friends that are centers of social gatherings to life-saving measures, during times of potential hypothermia. Knowing how to build one can be a convenience or a necessity.

The key to getting a fire going quickly is in selecting the right tinder. Naturally, if you have paper, that's good tinder. Other good natural tinder is dry moss (wet moss is terrible); a thin layer of leaves (with enough open spaces to allow air through); very small, dry twigs (a couple of millimeters in diameter); dried pitch nodules; a handful of shavings from a dead, standing tree; the paper-like dried outer layer of birch bark; and dead brown needles from any type of conifer tree.

In my opinion, the last is the best. It will get a fire started quicker than anything else I've found, including pitch (which is also very good). I once started a warming fire during a hunts trip in the British Columbian Rockies when it was raining, and there were six inches of wet snow on the ground. All the materials I used were wet, and I had no paper. My tinder for that fire was dead fir needles. Dead pine needles would have worked equally well.

After you have found the tinder, the next thing to look for are small dead limbs - the drier the better. A good place to find such limbs is low on the trunk of a live tree or the interior of a dense shrub, where they are protected from moisture. Break off the small ends of these twigs and place them immediately above the tinder, then use the slightly larger butts for the next layer of campfire material.

Next, look for slightly larger firewood that is suspended off the ground, such as limbs that are still attached to dead logs. Other limbs and small trees that are not lying directly on the ground also make good firewood.

Don't bother with wood that is in contact with the ground or wood that has begun to rot. They make poor burning material.

Preparing the Materials For a Fire- I seldom use an axe to cut firewood. It's easier and quicker to break the large pieces over a log or a rock. Gloves come in handy to protect your hands from vibration. The smaller twigs are easily broken up by hand.

It pays to break your firewood into relatively small pieces, not more than two feet in length. It is wasteful and unnecessary to make huge, roaring campfires. Small ones will suffice nicely for both warming and cooking.

Rock fire rings can leave long-lasting scars on the land and are unnecessary. If I'm not using an established campfire site, I place one or two flat rocks next to my fire bed to set things on. When I'm done, I put the rocks back where I found them and eradicate the fire bed, returning it to its original appearance.

The area around the fire bed should be scraped down to mineral soil to reduce the danger of igniting nearby materials. More often than not, in a forested environment, this means you will be building a fire on damp soil. Damp soil is difficult to build a fire on for two reasons: 1) The dampness tends to reduce the temperature, which inhibits the flames ability to grow; and 1) as the fire heats up, the water in the soil begins to steam, which will also cool the fire - or put it out altogether.

To overcome the damp soil problem, put a layer of insulation between the ground and the fire. Cardboard from a food package, a paper bag, or several layers of paper towels, or some other combustible material that will last long enough to let the fire mature before burning up is all you need. If you have no man-made material to use for this purpose, a tight layer of small, dry limbs will do.

Building the Fire - This is the part where you Boy Scouts will differ with me. The Boy Scout method works fine. This is an alternative.

Set two pieces of wood about four to six inches in diameter about six to eight inches apart. Green ones last longer, but dry ones work fine. Put the layer of insulation next to the ground. The tinder goes between the two pieces of wood, then the layer of very fine twigs goes across the top, followed by another layer of slightly larger twigs. Start the fire now, by touching off the tinder. Don't add any more wood until the largest of the twigs are well ignited. Then slowly add slightly larger pieces of broken limbs. When this third layer of fuel is well ignited, the fire will continue to burn well even if the insulation next to the ground is destroyed.

It's important to remember during these early stages to layer

your combustibles carefully. The pieces of firewood should be far enough apart to allow oxygen to the flames, but they must be close enough together to maintain enough heat to keep the fire going.

After building a few fires and studying them, you will get a feel for the optimum spacing. This is important, especially in cold and/or wet weather.

You can start cooking on a campfire as soon as the third layer of wood is burning strongly. This is a good time to start boiling water. Vigorous flames create a lot of heat, and it's easy to burn food over them. I like to pile a pretty good stack of medium-sized branches (about an inch to two inches in diameter) on the fire and let them burn down to a good bed of hot coals before I put the skillet over them.

Once the cooking is done, and the campfire turns into a cozy spot for socializing or reflecting on the aesthetics of the outdoors, larger, slower burning pieces of wood work fine. By that time the hot bed of coals has sealed off the steam from the soil and created enough heat to keep even damp and rotten logs going. Again, frugal selection of proper firewood will almost always provide all you need from a campfire. I seldom use wood larger than six inches in diameter and eighteen inches long.

There is nothing quite like a campfire in the great outdoors. It can save your life, or it can just keep you company. Either way, it is a useful tool. If you follow these suggestions, you will be able to start and maintain a campfire under almost any kind of weather condition; you won't exhaust available firewood supplies; and you won't scar the land.