The Art Of Making A Fire

Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

(Above) There is something mesmerizing about a fire, even if it is in your fireplace at home. Proper fire making skills are an important part of outdoor survival. (Left) Wonderful outdoor memories can be made around an open fire. Here, Garret Tulley (L) and Jim Cravey enjoy a shore lunch. (Special to the Montrose Press/Mark Rackay)

There is something mesmerizing about a fire. Have a campout with a nice campfire, long after the kids are in their sleeping bags. Only the adults remain, each staring silently into the fire, mesmerized by the dancing flames. It is truly a mind clearing activity. Some of my greatest outdoor memories involved a roaring campfire and star lit skies.

When the caveman first discovered fire, I imagine he stumbled upon the remains of a tree that was smoldering after a lightning strike. Being somewhat mesmerized by the flames, he probably tried to pick up a well-lit branch, and proceeded to burn the snot out of himself. More than likely, it was many years before he tried that stunt again and finally figured out a use for that fire.

Once early man discovered the use of fire for heat, light, and barbequing brontosaurus steaks, problems came with having ready access to fire. He probably had to carry something burning around with him everywhere he went. Surely this made for some awkward social situations, dragging a burning log to someone else's cave for a dinner party.

Prehistoric man did not have a way to make a fire anytime he wanted one. Matches were not invented until 1826 by a gentleman named John Walker. These early matches were not particularly easy to use and very unreliable, although an improvement over the burning log.

In 1831, Charles Sauria of France developed a match using white phosphorus. The problem with these bad boys was they worked a little too well, often igniting when you did not want them to. Had to make for some interesting moments when you carried them in your pocket. It was not until the 1900's that white phosphorous was replaced with a more stable chemical.

Lighters came into existence over a series of inventions. First came a German chemist named Johann Wolfgang Dobereiner, who created Dobereiner's lamp in 1823. The lamp worked on a chemical reaction involving a platinum sponge and hydrogen, giving off a great amount of heat.

In 1903, inventor Carl Auer Welsback patented the Ferrocerium, which operated similar to a flint. It was this invention that made lighters of today possible. In 1931 the Zippo lighter was developed, which used Naphtha as fuel, using a scratch for spark and flint for ignition.

During the 1950's, Naphtha was mostly replaced with butane as a fuel source. Then in 1998, the "child proof" metal shield was installed on butane lighters. This invention, like "child proof" lids on prescription bottles, means only children can open them. Us older folks continue to have our troubles.

A skill we should all try and master is the art of fire building. A fire can serve many useful purposes to a person found in a survival situation. Aside from the obvious, which is warmth, a fire can cook food, act as a signal to any searchers, purify water, provide a base camp and generally give a person a feeling of comfort and security.

I build a fire in my woodstove just about every evening during the winter months. It creates a false sense of security because it is much different than having to build a fire in the woods. At home, I have a nice supply of cut, split, and seasoned wood. I light up one of those fire starters and adjust the damper, and all's right with the world.

Such is not the case in the great outdoors. You will not find a supply of split and dried firewood. Add a pouring rain or falling snow and suddenly, you have a problem.

Most people think that a cigarette lighter in the pocket is all that is needed, however, such may not be the case. Butane lighters do not work well in extreme cold, when you need the fire most. I usually carry several options in my pack in case something fails.

The lighter I carry is one of the extreme all weather windproof type lighters. These are more of a mini-torch so be sure you don't have one in your pocket when you try and board a plane, or you may be faced with a bunch of unhappy TSA agents.

In addition to the lighter, I also carry several packs of waterproof and windproof matches. These matches have an extended burn time and can withstand a pretty strong wind. Usually they come in a plastic case with about 25 matches in them.

There is a product called a metal match, (a magnesium fire starter) where you scrape off some of the combustible material from one side and strike the other side with a knife to make sparks. This in turn ignites the material and starts the fire. It is also possible to start a fire with a battery and some steel wool.

My favorite method, especially during wet conditions, is a small flare. You can purchase these in a small size, around 5 inches long, and they fit nicely in a pack. A flare will usually burn for quite a few minutes at a very high temperature, and is a very effective fire starting tool. I realize they are bulky but worth their weight in gold during an emergency.

There are of course the more primitive methods such as a bow or rubbing two sticks together, but I have found all I get with that is good cardio exercise and no flames. It may work on television, but for me, I carry matches and lighters.

You are going to need some tinder to get the blaze started. An excellent product that fits nicely in a pocket or pack is Wet Fire. About the size of a pack of sugar, it will burn for around 5 minutes even during harsh conditions.

If you are going to seek tinder and fuel on site, avoid wood lying on the ground.

This wood will have absorbed moisture from the ground and make it near impossible to ignite. Pulling dead branches off trees is a much better choice and finding a beetle killed spruce still standing is the jackpot.

Try breaking a piece of wood from the tree and see if it makes a nice snapping sound, indicating dry wood. With a knife, whittling off the wet outer areas and exposing the dry inner fuel can make a fuzz stick. Grass, milkweed, dry sage, inner bark from a dead aspen, old bird nests, all make good tinder.

Once the tinder is burning well, we will need some kindling. These are dry sticks smaller than a pencil to fuel the tinder with. From there we progress to squaw wood, which is up to a half inch in diameter.

Finally, you can begin adding the last wood that is called fuel wood. This is the good heavy stuff that will burn longer and provide the nice bed of hot coals. A good idea is to have pieces of fuel wood drying around your fire so you have a source of dry fuel at the ready. For an overnight fire, collect about 3 times the wood you think you are going to need. You will be surprised how fast your supply dwindles down and you don't want to have to look for more in the dark.

Where you build your fire is as important to success as what fuel you have.

Try to have a large rock surface on several sides so the heat can be reflected back on you. If rocks are not available, logs can be stacked or an emergency blanket from your pack will work, but I have melted them before so beware.

It is also a good idea to look up and make sure there is no snow-covered branch above your fire pit. Don't ask me how I know this.

The art of fire building is something you should practice. On your next outing, build a campfire the way you would during an emergency and don't use a half can of lighter fluid. It is not as easy as you might think and best to practice this important skill. Then sit back and be mesmerized by the flames, and build some outdoor memories.

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