



There are more ways to incorrectly sharpen a knife than there are correct ways. Choose the right tool or destroy a fine blade. (Mark Rackay/ Special to the Montrose Daily Press)

Sharpening your knives — it’s important

When you asked my grandfather if you could borrow a pocketknife, he would ceremoniously reach into a pocket and pull out a nice folding blade. With the flick of a wrist and finger, the blade would appear, almost magically. As he would turn it around and hand it to you, he would always say, “Careful now, that blade is sharp enough to shave a bug’s whisker.”

My grandfather could sharpen a blade like an expert. He would use a whetstone and some mineral oil for the task. Within a few minutes his blade was sharp enough to perform surgery. Although he tried many times to teach me, I never learned how to sharpen a blade properly.

Sharpening a blade is an art form every outdoor person should master. You can’t filet fish, prepare a meal, field dress an animal or any other task, with a dull knife; believe me, I have tried.

Generally, I take a whetstone, a quart of mineral oil, a handful of Band-aids, and in a few minutes, I can completely ruin the most expensive of outdoor knives. When I am finished, the knife is



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

duller than English class, half its original size, and will not cut through a dab of peanut butter.

If you want a properly sharpened knife for your outdoor activity, start with the right blade material. There are basically two types of blade material: stainless steel and carbon steel. Choose the right one for the intended purpose of the knife.

Stainless steel is great for fishing and use in humid climates because it resists rust and flaking. There are more than 150 grades of stainless steel to choose from, and you could get an engineering degree in the process of learning about them. I won’t get into all the grades here, except to say, avoid the cheap stuff and go for a quality blade.

I used Forschner filet knives for all my time in

the Florida Keys. These knives were moderately priced and withstood all the abuse of daily sharpening and fish cleaning in the ocean environment. Remember that stainless steel knives won’t hold an edge very long and must be sharpened more.

Carbon steel blades are also available in hundreds of grades. Carbon blades are designed to be harder and hold an edge much longer than stainless. These are the ideal blade for hunting and general outdoor work but must be watched for rusting. Remember that the harder the blade, the more difficult it is to sharpen.

You must also have a close idea of the angle of your blade. You can’t properly sharpen a blade if you don’t have the right angle. Generally:

- Hunting knives, survival knives and pocket-knives have a 25-degree blade
- Boning knives and filet knives usually have a 20-degree blade
- Razors and scalpel blades are 12 to 18-degrees. Sharpening these require special tools and skills

When it comes down to the actual sharpening

of the blade, the best method is to use whetstones. You will need one in coarse grit, one medium grit, and one in fine grit. There are many tools available out there from electric sanders, small belt sanders, and a dozen types of sticks and carbide cutters. The diamond grit stones are also very good to use.

An old knife maker told me that he loved it when people used all those sanders on their knives because they would be back real soon for another knife. These items work but remove much of the blade in the process.

Before starting, make sure the stones and knife blade are clean and free from residue. Soak your whetstones for at least five minutes in water before using, and then, keep them well lubricated with mineral oil while working the blade on it. Use the stones on a flat and solid surface.

A good trick is to draw a line over the bevel of the knife blade with a Sharpie marker. Stroke the knife a few times across the stone. If you held the knife at the proper angle for the bevel

of your blade, the Sharpie mark will be gone. If you see markings on the knife’s bottom, the angle is too flat. Of the markings are on the top, lower the angle. This is the easiest method to control the angle of the bevel on your blade.

If your knife is dull, start with the coarse grit. Fifteen strokes per side of the blade is a good point to start with. Always sharpen the same number of strokes on each side of the blade. If your blade is still pretty sharp, and you want to just touch it up, go with the finer grit stones instead of the coarse grit. Harder blades usually only need the medium and fine stones because they wear slower.

When you sharpen the blade on one side, a burr will build up on the other edge. Sometimes you can’t see the burr but can gently feel it. When you can no longer feel or see a burr on either side, it is time to move to a finer stone.

I carry a small, hand-held ceramic tool for sharpening a blade in the field. Look for the one that has a ceramic coarse and fine set of sharpeners. Avoid the carbide

cutters at all costs. These carbide cutters will chew up a good blade in no time at all. When you get home, run the knife on your whetstone a few times to be sure it is ready for more outdoor action.

Remember to sharpen up your blade before it gets dull. A dull knife is useless and dangerous. When you start sharpening a dull knife, you eat up more steel than would if you just keep it sharp with the fine stone.

I finally learned how to sharpen a knife, after ruining several dozen blades. My knives are all razor sharp. My grandfather would be proud.

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