

wilderness skills



□ by Stuart Osthoff

Campfire Savvy

For many of us, the perfect canoe country day ends with loons calling to a gorgeous sunset while friends huddle around a flickering campfire to share the latest adventures. The loons and sunset are special gifts from the powers that be, but that campfire is another matter. Like any outdoor skill, you can often get by with a half-hearted attempt to throw something together. But in wet conditions, this kind of effort usually yields a smoldering, smoky mess and lots of cussing. On the other hand, you can pride yourself on doing wilderness campfires the right way. Guess which approach we're going to focus on here?

Evening is settling in on a late May trip as I make the final portage into Sturgeon Lake, where we'll camp and fish for the next four days. There is definitely a nip in the air. If it stays clear, there will be frost on the coffee pot in the morning. So on the return trip for the second load of gear, I pick up a couple handfuls of birch bark lying on the trail.

In birch bark, nature provides the ultimate fire starter. But lesson #1 in canoe country is you'll rarely find it lying around campsites. Plan ahead. Pick it up when you see it. Stash it in a zip-lock bag. Don't wait until you get to camp. Fading daylight will have you scurrying to set up the tents and get dinner and dishes done. You'll be tempted to yank a hunk off a live birch, possibly damaging the tree if too many layers are removed. Finding birch bark fire starter is easy, if you think ahead and



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With a little planning, elbow grease and the right gear, you can turn beaver wood into the perfect canoe country campfire. (William Lake)

PAUL WANNARKA




A full moon rising over canoe country usually means clear and cold. Time to gather round the campfire to warm the heart and soul. (Gabbro Lake)

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gather a supply on the portages.

Upon finishing the portage, I point the bow north to our island home, a mile and a half down the lake. We've been daydreaming all afternoon about having the lake to ourselves and maybe, just maybe, catching a trophy 30-inch walleye. But this is no time for idle daydreams.

As we paddle down the lake, I scan the eastern shoreline for gray driftwood, blown up onto gently sloping ledgerrock by dominant westerlies. And I'm checking out every bay along the way for tell-tale signs of beaver activity. Birch bark is nature's fire starter. The beaver is nature's provider of the perfect raw material for canoe country campfires. I smile with relief as a big old beaver lodge of gray sticks appears in a weedy little corner, only a half mile from the campsite.

It's been a long first day. We've been paddling/portaging for ten hours. The group is tired, sore and hungry. I've been in this predicament many times before and have the answer. I whip out the little camp stove and boil up a mess of polish sausage and serve it with a fresh salad—premixed lettuce, carrots and cabbage to which I add tomatoes, cheese, croutons and dressing. This meal takes only a one-burner boiling water. It's a fast, delicious gut stuffer with virtually no cleanup. I knew arrival at camp would be late, too late to go out and do things right for a campfire.

Overnight, temps drop into the mid-20s, and it is indeed frosty until the sun clears the pines. The gang, so full of fishing bravado yesterday, lingers in the sack, nursing muscles gone soft over the winter. I know when they do get moving, it's going to be hard-core angling for the next three days. In order to fish hard

from dark to dark, a comfortable, orderly camp is essential. So *before* fishing fever strikes, I grab life jacket, paddle and trusty camp saw and launch a canoe—careful not to bang anything that would wake the mighty anglers.

Within a few minutes, I glide up to the beaver lodge spotted last night. There are no green sticks around, a sign the local beavers are probably basing operations elsewhere. Beaver will pile birch, aspen and alder saplings/limbs into food caches above their lodges. They eat the bark and mound the sticks. With the bark removed, the wood air-dries and hardens. Some of the sticks will hang into the water, but any parts high and dry are the perfect fuel for cooking and storytelling fires.

Sticks of 3- to 4-inch diameter are the perfect size, split in halves or quarters they burn hot with minimal smoke. This lodge has more than enough to meet our needs for the next three nights. First, I load half-a-dozen 8-10 foot "logs" into the canoe, all 3 to 5 inches in diameter. No cutting here; just pick them up and place ahead of my stern seat. Next, I gather several arm loads of shorter 2 to 3 foot lengths, most are 2 to 4 inches in diameter. Last are the smaller beaver sticks, from pencil size to an inch thick. These are perfect for kindling.

Back at camp, I make no effort to be quiet pitching the wood out of the canoe onto the rocks. Next, I carry armloads of wood up by the fire ring. The twisted roots of a log act as a vise to hold the sticks for sawing into one-foot lengths. Before pulling my camp saw from its plastic sheath, I put on a pair of leather work gloves. The 7-inch blade with razor-sharp offset teeth cuts on the pull stroke. If you short stroke it or let it bounce out of the cut, you can hit the hand steadying

the piece of wood. You'll be nursing a nasty gash for the rest of the trip, just like those painful northern pike slices that take forever to heal.

In 15 minutes all the sticks are cut cleanly into foot-long pieces. Next comes the splitting. Good dry beaver wood has few knots and usually splits very easily. I split all the pieces that are large enough to get the axe into. My Gerber sport axe is just right for this job. I stand each piece on end, leaned against another log and gently snap the axe into the foot-long chunk, just enough so it bites an inch or so. Then finding a flat piece of ledgerrock, I moderately hammer the other end of the chunk down onto the rock. Beaver wood splits without a lot of force. So occasionally I inadvertently strike the rock. Every couple of trips, I touch up the edge with a file.

Next, I neatly stack all the split wood next to the fire ring. Then another stack of the pencil like beaver wood kindling. Most of this can be snapped into one-foot lengths by hand. Stack it out of the cook's way and where those gathering around won't trip on it. I despise arriving at a campsite to find old gnarly, green brush and half-charred logs strewn about. The first thing I do is haul it all way back into the brush. It's a wonderful, ethical practice to leave the next party a neat stack of split wood/kindling. But don't leave a mess of crud that doesn't pass for firewood.

With the cut, split and stacked beaver wood, kindling and your bag of birch bark fire starter, there is one last step before any fire starting. I walk way back in the woods, 100 yards minimum from camp, and break off the lower dead branches of balsam fir trees. Many areas will have standing dead balsam, killed by insects. These are perfect. If none are

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available, the lower dead branches of standing live balsam will do. And when it is raining, the overhead canopy of the live tree will shelter these lower dead branches to some degree.

It takes a lot of rain to really soak these bottom branches. We're talking twigs, smaller than a pencil in diameter. If they snap off easily with your fingers, they're dead and it won't harm the tree. Just do it back in the woods where nobody has to see it. Don't denude the lower branches of the trees everyone has to look at right in camp. What I end up with from this is a couple of basketball sized wads of clingy balsam twigs.

Taking this to camp, I'm ready to build a campfire. First, wad up a softball sized cluster of balsam twigs. Thread a couple pieces of birch bark into the wad, lay some 1/2 to 1 inch thick pieces of beaver wood on

the balsam, then top off with 3 or 4 larger pieces of split wood. Ignite the birch bark and the balsam will erupt hot enough to penetrate the beaver wood kindling which will in turn get the larger split pieces going. The balsam wad will quickly turn to ashes giving more space to add more beaver wood. You want to have that initial rush of kindling fuel to get the bigger stuff going. Skimp on kindling and it will burn out before the real wood catches, and you're starting over. Once going good, just maintain the heat you need with your handy stockpile.

For cooking fires, it's best to build up a bed of coals—especially for bacon, baked potatoes, steak or fish. Bring along tinfoil to cover the metal grate. You can't just throw good meat on the BWCAW fire grates. They are full of who-knows-what, the meat will stick and the old char will taint it.

By thinking ahead, picking up birch bark on the portage trails, looking for beaver lodges/driftwood on lakes where you camp, collecting balsam twig kindling (back in the woods) then sawing, splitting, stacking and tarping enough for the duration of your stay, that's the basic method for canoe country campfires.

But play this game long enough, and there will come times when it has rained steady for three days. There are no beaver lodges around, and you need a fire NOW! In this circumstance, the *last* place to look for wood when you need to make a fire is around camp. I *never* even consider looking for the main firewood supply here. Even if there is wood for the cutting, if we all cut branches and trees as close to camp as our lazy carcasses can get away with, every campsite will be an eyesore of stumps and slash.

Don't cut firewood, even from dead trees, in sight of camp. The lone exception to this would be in the massive blowdown zone, where cleaning up around camp with a saw would actually be a positive influence. Part of the "Leave no trace" approach to wilderness camping is leaving no sawed-off stumps, at least not visible from campsites, portages and lake shores.

Even in cases where there is no beaver wood around, I still take my saw and canoe and go down the lake. I hike back into the woods and cut a couple of 4- to 5-inch diameter down or standing dead spruce. Even in a rainy stretch, you can split dead spruce to get at the inner dry wood. Select trees that are gray and have lost their bark. These are trees that have been dead and drying for many years. Anything pulpy, you don't want. With spruce, delimb it at the start and saw into 8- to 10-foot lengths and haul down to the canoe. Saw and split it back at camp.

Stop and think about it a second. By canoeing down the shoreline a quarter mile, then hiking 100 yards back into the woods, you're going to find an untouched supply of wood and leave no human disturbance where others would typically see it. If you remember nothing else from this article, remember this. *Get away from camp to get your firewood.* It's better for you, those who follow and the land itself.

North country residents who heat their homes and cabins with wood, usually use birch. Birch has more BTUs than other area trees. Birch used for home heating must be sawed, split and dried for one year before burning. But birch is almost never an option for canoe campers. Any dead birch, down or standing, will typically hold its bark. This birch bark will keep the wood from drying out and turn it pulpy. Only birch worked on by beaver is likely to be a good source of fuel for wilderness campfires.

If you can find it, red pine and jackpine can be handled similar to spruce. If I had my choice, I would use white cedar for all my campfires. It's relatively free of limbs/knots, splits like a dream and burns clean and hot. The problem is, it's tough to find. Even when wind blown or crunched by another falling tree, cedars are really tough to kill. It's common to see cedar snapped clean in half and still sprouting new green growth. I love the aroma of cedar campfires on a cool, bugless autumn night. It doesn't get any better than that.

In Quetico, where you pack in your own adjustable fire grate, you'll often need to rearrange the fire pit rock piles. Don't create new fire pits. Many are too tall for good small cooking fires. You want the grate within a foot of the ground. Stack flat rocks carefully so the grate is nice and

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stable. It's embarrassing to have a couple heavy cook pots of water collapse into the perfect fire. Or worse, drop dinner down into the ashes.

In the BWCAW, the fire grates are provided. They are driven into the bedrock so they are very stable. Use them. Don't build new fire rings. Keep your fire in the fire grate. It's safer, easier, and it's the law.

It's inevitable, you'll spend a lot of prep/cooking time hunched over the campfire. You're going to be down in the dirt, dodging the smoke and stoking the fresh wood when needed. It's not convenient like the modern kitchen, but the view is a whole lot better.

The golden rule with canoe country campfires is if you leave, drown them out good. Many a campfire has started a

wildfire while "just taking a short nap or swim." It doesn't take much to blow an ember into the surrounding dry duff of most campsites. Drown it, stir it and when dead out—clean out any tinfoil or garbage. Pack this out.

Campfires are a classic part of the canoe country wilderness experience. Canoe tripping during fire bans quickly reminds us of this fact. But like most things in life, the more you put into doing it right, the more you're likely to get out of it. Get yourself a good saw and axe, plan ahead and devote the time and energy to lay in a supply of good dry wood and kindling for the duration of your stay. Then sit back, get comfortable and let the tall fish tales be told. □