

# Using a firebow a difficult skill to master

## Method of starting a fire to be used only when all other techniques not viable

The psychological realities of wilderness survival dictate that the victim utilize every available technique to create fire. The firebow method is, comparatively speaking, a difficult skill to master; I do not deny this reality. On the other hand, the more ways an individual knows (and masters), the better his chances of surviving a wilderness ordeal.

Next to the hand drill technique, the most primitive method of firestarting is using the firebow. This is a very difficult way to obtain fire and should be used only when all other firestarting methods are not a viable option. For me, the firebow produces fire approximately eight out of 10 times, even though I've had many years experience using this technique. As well, one of my ex-students, Les Stroud, TV's famous "Survivorman", explains that his success rate is comparable to mine. Yes, this is indeed a difficult skill to master. In conjunction, all the various factors affecting the firebow's efficiency (i.e. proper woods used, dry climactic conditions and skill level, to name a few) have been near perfect.

All the required materials needed to construct a firebow are available in the woods. Whether in the boreal forest, mixed woods, desert badlands, or coastal rainforests, all materials can be

found, if the survivor knows what to look for.

The firebow works as a result of friction created when its parts rub against each other. The friction produces a hot dust which, when allowed to harden (sinter) into a pile, can be coaxed into a cinder. Knowing this, one should first master easier methods of firestarting, and be efficient collecting proper tinder materials so that the cinder created from the firebow can be transformed quickly into a flame. Experience dictates that since this technique is difficult to master and internalize, survival students need to practice frequently. They require great persistence, preservation and patience. When I spent 29 days surviving in the wilds of northern Ontario, it took almost seven and a half hours to start my fire using this technique. As such, my fire never, ever went out during the entire duration.

There are four components to the firebow, including the socket, spindle, baseboard and bow.

### THE SOCKET

The socket holds the spindle in position while it's being turned. It is held in one hand and made from any piece of hardwood, stone or antler. A small hole is carved on the underneath, just big enough to hold the spindle in place. This hole should be lubricated, thus enabling the drill to spin freely. I rub the spindle's top end through my scalp\hair, or utilize ear wax for the same effect.

### SPINDLE (OR DRILL)

The spindle should be as straight as possible and completely free of knots.

Ideally, it is 2 to 3 cm thick and approximately 20-30 cm long. It's smooth, rounded and almost pointed at the top to minimize friction. As previously mentioned, this top end should be well lubricated. At the bottom end, since a maximum amount of friction is needed, make it blunt and rough. Cedar, poplar, and basswood make great spindles. Avoid resinous woods such as pine, tamarack, spruce or fir.

### BASEBOARD

This component is made by splitting a dry branch, approximately 2 cm thick, 10 cm wide and 30 cm long. Carve a hole 1 cm from the board's edge. This hole should match or fit the end of the spindle's blunt end. Fashion a 20-30 degree angled notch from the board's edge to the hole; wide end is at the board's edge, while the narrow section touches the hole. It's this notch that enables the hot, black powder produced by the drilling process to fall into the tinder massed at the bottom of the notch. Cedar seems to work best for me. Again, avoid resinous wood.

### BOW

It's fashioned from any green piece of wood, approximately 2-3 cm in diameter and 40-50 cm long. The string, consisting of any strong cordage ranging from boot laces to twisted rawhide, is tied at both ends of the bow, but leaving enough slack to allow it to be twisted once around the spindle.

When ready to put everything together, find a flat, sturdy ground surface on which to place the baseboard. Make certain the ground is dry; other-

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wise, add several layers of birch bark pieces under the board. Have all required dry twigs, tinder and wood on hand before starting to use the firebow. Place spindle in bow. The roughed up end goes onto the board. Using the top block, press down on the spindle's smooth end. Begin "sawing" the spindle back and forth with the bow, using a steady, rhythmic pace. Work bow faster, never stopping the smooth, swift action. Hot, black powder will be produced; this will fall and collect on the bark beneath the board; you'll also see plenty of smoke.

Once the resulting ember is glowing, allow the pile to sinter or harden. Blow softly until it glows, then add it to the prepared tinder nest. Blow gently until a flame appears.

There are four distinct phases to this firemaking process: warm up, speed, speed\pressure, and slow. Initially, when starting, go slowly, thereby warming up the baseboard and spindle. Next, speed up, forming the powder in the notch. Thirdly, apply more pressure and speed up the sawing motion. This is when the ember is formed. Finally, slow down, easing up on the

pressure, thereby allowing the ember to settle and harden.

If the spindle seems to squeak while being turned, stop working. Roughen up the bottom end and start again. In most cases, the best cinders are produced when a soft, grinding sound is heard.

Once someone learns how to start a fire with the firebow, he appreciates and respects the difficulties, frustrations and troubles involved. You'll never again catch such a person without matches, lighter or magnesium stick. As previously mentioned, it took me more than seven hours to start a fire under survival conditions. Now, waterproofed matches are always in my kit.

You'll notice that no mention is made regarding the kneeling position required to execute this firestarting process, or how to lock your wrist thereby preventing the spindle from wobbling, or the desired shape of a spindle's bottom section. This was intentional, since it's next to impossible to describe these details with only words. Hence, I'll be hosting a series of brief workshops for all interested individuals. At these sessions, all firestarting techniques will be shown and fully explained. Other clinics will feature various survival skills, including wilderness navigation, "bushproofing" your children (Project S.T.O.P.), various seasonal shelters and the edible wild.

All clinics are free of charge and open to the general public. They'll be held at the Owen Sound campus of Georgian College. Details pertaining to these workshops will be highlighted in an upcoming article. For further information, e-mail gferri@wightman.ca