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An Ittis Axe

OldJimbo

- Gear reviews and tests - Edged tools - Axes and hatchets -



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Description :

Another axe to test

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Update: I decided to replace the handle on this axe because it just never seemed quite right. That's hard to explain, but if you use axes enough, you'll get to feel when something just doesn't feel right. I cleaned off the end of the handle and found that it is wood wedged. I drilled out the wedge and around the tube like wedge until I could pry it out. It's only 1/2" long. I was then able to remove the head with very little trouble - which is not a good sign. Part of the problem was that the wooden wedge wasn't thick enough and had bottomed out on the bottom of the slot cut for it. Inside the axe head I found a wooden (veneer) shim at the back. Basically there was not 80% wood contact between the handle and the head. This is surprising to me since I'd soaked the head in linseed oil. I guess I didn't clean off the paint around the head/handle junction enough to allow lots of oil to soak through - maybe the shim was the problem. Anyway I'm still impressed with the axe head, and right now I'm trying it with a much longer handle to see how it balances and uses. If you have such a complete axe, though, you might want to carefully scrape all the paint around the handle/head junction and leave in a bucket of regular (non boiled] linseed oil for a while. Or of course you could re-handle the blade too. It really is a great axe head and it really does ring like a bell - and a nice sound it is too!

Lee Valley Tools still lists just the axe head for the larger Iltis - 2 1/2lb and \$53CAN. They do though have a special orders dept which will get you stuff. I just found that out after I enquired about other Gransfors models. I'm definitely ordering a heavier Iltis head to try.

The axe described is the 2 lb head light axe. I haven't seen one for sale by Lee Valley etc. - but such an axe exists..
Update - this axe is sold in catalogues as the Cruiser Axe and advertised with 1 3/4 lb head. Mine has a head weight of 2lbs 2oz - measured when removed from handle.

I went shopping for a good light axe in the fall of 2000 without success. This spring I went looking again and found an Iltis with a decent vertical grained handle. Naturally the grind on mine was the poorest of any of the examples I saw but I figured I'd be honing it anyway..

Firstly - why a light axe and what is one of these?

I guess that this is the place to start. If you read Mors Kochanski's book you will read that this is the one tool he would take above all others. That sounds pretty extreme and strange in a world where people who write about survival are always writing about knives. A light axe has a head usually less than two pounds and a relatively short handle for axes. If you tuck the head into your armpit, you'll be able to cup the end of the handle in your palm. Now that's pretty short and light for an axe! So why not go even lighter and shorter and get a hatchet or go the whole route and get a real axe?

Unless you are "into" axes and have used a good light one, you'll be sceptical of what one of these will do. Balance and thinness of the blade are critical. There simply is no comparison with thick hardware store axes which are intended for splitting. A good handle will give a good grip for one handed use and they are much safer than a heavy

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hatchet because the handle fits under the forearm for control. The edge will be sharp enough to use as a knife. All very good stuff until you realize that such an incredible tool can do an incredible job on you if you let it. There are few minor injuries with such axes - any injury will be major!

The only tool which routinely causes more severe injuries than the short axe is the hatchet. I believe a light hatchet to be an incredible tool too - but a really light one is almost impossible to find or make (out of a heavier one). A light axe will so outcut a regular hatchet as to make any normal hatchet of two pounds total or so total pointless to carry - a light axe only weighs about 3 lbs total. A hatchet that is light enough to carry at all times on the person - say 1lb total is a valuable wood shaping tool and will split dead spruce branches for a fire in soggy weather so it might be a much more valuable tool than a knife of the same weight up here.

A good full axe is capable of far more work than a light axe - but is too unwieldy and heavy to carry. It is also too much to use one handed.

If you don't buy into the lore of axes - you're in good company: lots of people choose saws which are even lighter and work well. The saws are cheap, light and not likely to cause great injury. You can cut limbs above your head and do all sorts of neat stuff with them. A good axe is an incredible tool to use though. If you are used to nibbling away at trees - an axe that will bite in and then remove a plate sized chunk of wood on every second hit is something to behold.

Very few axes are used any more. Around here light brush is removed using a brusher or Sandvik. This is a pole with a D head the straight part of the D being a replaceable blade. Any wood that requires more is left for a chainsaw. This means that the skills of using an axe have to be learned from books and experience - not great! Good axes too are hard to find - even the best are pretty poor.

The advantages of a good axe are impossible to deny. A saw may cut wood but it won't split and shape it. Nor can it be used as a knife. A good axe trivializes all of these tasks. The problem is getting a good axe! Such an axe will have a very thin bit swelling out to a single bevel. Since the edge will be sharp the steel must be good and well tempered to keep the edge. The handle must be vertically grained prime hickory for strength and finished with tung or linseed oil for wet grip and secure holding without raising blisters. Basically a good axe is a knife on a stick. Except for the handle getting in the way with cupboards - it should be easily used as a kitchen knife for slicing onions and tomatoes.

A light axe should weigh about 3 lbs total with sheath and if you hold the head in your hand - the end of the handle should fit into your armpit. That's easy enough. The next bit isn't - the head of the axe should be concave ground behind the bevel and should be no more than 1/4" thick, even a couple of inches behind the edge. Most axes will be closer to 1/2". That's just too thick for proper efficiency in cutting. So far as I know the only good examples of a light axe are the Iltis and Gransfors.

The Iltis

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I got to choose from six. The one I got was the only one with anything like vertical grain in the handle, and it was also the only one where the head wasn't mis-aligned. The head is of good quality but the bevels didn't meet - instead someone had ground on a secondary bevel so that it would sort of feel sharp. It sure took some time on a belt sander to correct that. When I first used it, the head loosened on the second alder.

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It was impossible to remove the wedges and replace them since Iltis uses a piece of tapered steel pipe as a wedge. To remove it without destroying the handle would have been some task. Instead I soaked the head in linseed oil for a few weeks to swell the handle where it fits into the head. I also removed the wax coating from the handle and sanded and oiled it with tung oil. It sure has taken a lot of work to put this axe into shape. I spent all kinds of time honing the bevels with a belt grinder and even polished the flat of the blade to prevent sticking. You don't have to do the whole flat, but polishing the BACK of the bevel is a pretty good idea. For sure the axe is some great tool - but it took a lot of work, time for the linseed oil to swell the handle at the head, and power tools to fix the bevel. If you have those things then you can get a fantastic light axe for \$56 CAN. If I'd have told the store to ship me an axe at random though, I could have got a real lemon with horizontal grain in the handle and a misaligned head. I guess the bottom line on this axe is that you can do well if you have someone to pick one for you.

In use the axe is terrific. I compared it against an older light axe that I had re-handled and of course my reprofiled Canadian Tire Special. There just isn't any comparison: it isn't a little different, it's a world of difference. With the other axes with less acute bevels the axe has to be driven with great force to chop in deep. The Iltis just glides into the wood. All of the axes had polished bevels and sharp edges so the difference was entirely attributable to the angle of the bevel. What really surprised me was the excellent feel and balance of the Iltis. I had thought that the other axes were pretty good until I used them side by side with the Iltis. I was also surprised by the quality of the steel - or rather by its temper: working with a belt grinder and in use the Iltis was far better than either the older axe or the CT. I had thought those were pretty decent - even the cheap axe. there's little comparison though, the Iltis really is harder - and yet doesn't chip out. I have been wondering a little about hardness: on both my Hults and with the Iltis it's hard work to get anywhere with a Nicholson axe file. It could well be a problem with the current quality of files since axes are hardened to be around R50 - R57 which is OK territory for a file - just tougher to get anywhere with at the upper end. Since I have a cheap belt disk grinder - no problem. A regular hand held belt sander can be used to great effect too - just be careful with overheating! I don't see how a regular bench grinder could work at all without making the bevel concave which is something you don't want, or overheating the steel. All that I can say about polishing bevels, and even the concave back of the bevels is that I've found it to make a big difference on all axes. I think you'll see that too. What I'm trying to get at with all of this detail is that you'll hear that thinning a bevel will just lead to the axe sticking in the cut. For sure such a blade will cut so deep that you'll be amazed or downright scared of it - but no it won't stick if the bevel is properly flat or slightly convex and polished. My belief is that many people have tried thinning the bevel on a poor axe to the point where the widest part of the bevel is at the same level as the blade behind the bevel. Then sticking is inevitable. There's a reason why the blade is concave behind the bevel: in the cut the only point of contact between the wood and the axe should be the bevel itself (We're talking chopping here not splitting). Splitting with a light thin axe is a joy with easily split wood like green alder or dry

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cottonwood: obviously though it's a pain with large chunks of knotty wood where a real prying action is required.

In conclusion - you sure can get a decent axe for under \$40US and some work. I think though that I'd recommend that people who can't pick their axe out go with a Gransfors of which I've never heard a bad word. An axe will last a lot of years and the extra cost will prove out to be a saving. If you just casually camp and want to split wood at campsites where chunks are likely to be gritty - stay with a cheap axe: it will be more durable and the less acute bevel will split knotty stuff better. I'm not being patronizing here - I own such an axe for just such use! If you decide to go whole hog and get an Iltis or Gransfors - take your time getting to know it!!!! You'll be used to other axes and chop hard when limbing expecting to maybe go 3/4 of the way through an arm sized limb of soft stuff like alder. When the axe just glides through without slowing, you have a dangerous situation. Even if you are used to fine bevelled razor sharp axes - most people aren't so you have to make sure no-one decides to check out your axe - ouch slice spurt! The only thing more likely to spill blood than a sharp axe is a 2 1/2" puukko. For some reason no-one seems to believe that such a cute little thing could be seriously sharp, so they test it with a thumb.

Post-scriptum :Original article at [OldJimbo's site](#).