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Cheap knives and sharpener

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- Gear reviews and tests - Edged tools -



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Description :

Let's discuss the often forgotten cheap knives.

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Sharpening:

I've collected a bunch of cheap(er) knives over the years, and since none of them came really sharp I've had a lot of practise sharpening. I never did get it right though! Sure I could finally get a shaving sharp edge, but it took a lot of effort and time and I didn't believe I was doing things right. Eventually I found I wasn't even close. By this time I had quite a collection of stones varying from garage sale specials to diamond stones.

The technique that allowed me to get close was using a diamond stone to set a bevel, honing on a ceramic stone, and then using a leather strop. Pretty conventional and it should work. It does work to some extent - it just takes a lot of time and effort to achieve results, which seem to disappear fast.

Cheap blades suffer from poor final treatment. An edge is put on with a grinder with speed being the main factor. If you hold the straight part of your knife edge against a straight edge of a steel ruler you will see gaps with light. You just won't get a good edge until it's straight because it won't all sharpen the same. So with sharpening with normal (and usually smaller) stones you follow the curves rather than straighten them out. So when you slice paper parts of the blade do well and others just rip the paper. Using the method below changes all that. Because the abrasive is on a large sheet, it cuts metal much faster (having more contact with the edge), you don't get tired and change angles as much. The important part though is that the high points on the edge are removed rather than followed.

Here's something cheap to try. It sure works for me! I didn't invent it - just read about it and tried it.

1. Go to the hardware store and pick up some fine (600 grit) emery cloth and some buffing compound. For now just get the green buffing compound. It should be about \$5.00. The green is special as the chromium oxide particles are super fine but cut very aggressively. Other colors of buffing compound such as the brown "Tripoli" have much coarser particles. Some versions of white are extremely fine grained - but may not work too well on hard knife blades.
2. Start with a knife that you've put an edge on - but that just isn't that sharp. If you're like me you will have a few. Lay the emery cloth on a flat surface such as a counter top - if it tends to slide around lay a piece of damp newspaper underneath it. Hone the blade by holding the knife at the desired angle and pull the edge along the emery - leading with the back of the blade. After fifty strokes examine the edge with a magnifying glass if you have one, or just in bright light. You'll probably see that bits of the old edge are still there as the previous sharpening job was uneven. Keep at it until you have a consistent bevel to the edge, and the edge has a burr or wire edge to it. Now turn the blade and do the other side. The burr will come off then a new one will form. There are expensive honing guides but I put a band-aid on my thumb (to protect it from the emery) and use my thumb under the back of the blade to keep the bevel even. With Mora and other Scandinavian knives you just hold the whole bevel flat on the emery and things are simplified.
3. The knife should feel sharp before proceeding, but will still have a burr. Take a piece of cardboard and smear the abrasive on. If you've got old stuff like I did, you may have to soak it a little in solvent since the abrasive is in a wax base. Mine was SOLID, being well aged - cheap though! Make sure the cardboard is wider than the blade is long. Hold the knife at the desired angle and pull the edge along the cardboard. leading with the back of the blade. If you push the blade forward as with normal stone sharpening it will slice into cardboard. You'll notice that the cardboard soon has lots of black streaks because the green compound is very aggressive despite its fineness. You can tell how you are doing because the bevel will take a fine polish. Again a good magnifying glass and bright light will tell you lots. The burr will get very fine and narrow then pull off.
4. At this point you should have a knife that feels very sharp. It probably isn't consistently sharp though. Test

by slicing some paper - using the whole edge of the knife in a sweeping cut. You'll probably find parts of the edge "catch". If you have a high power magnifier you'll be able to see these as not sharpened because the edge wasn't straight. You might get by with more work on the cardboard but you may have to repeat the whole process. It gets faster as you get experience, and because each time you go at it the edge is a little better than before and requires less subsequent work.

5. Having a sharp knife (hopefully), you'll probably want to see just how sharp you can get. It's just a matter of repeating the process until the whole edge is level and straight so that the whole thing sharpens consistently without leaving unsharpened spots. You'll notice that your "sharp" knife becomes sharper and sharper as you go. Even after a whole bunch of whittling it takes only minutes to sharpen to a razor edge as you are just sharpening the blade now that you've corrected its inconsistencies. You'll probably find that the initial sharpening on a Mora takes an hour, but once the edge is good you can whittle hard wood for hours before the edge goes and then it will be less than a few minutes to regain an edge. Really!
6. Some people like to spend money, and don't like a cheap system to beat expensive equipment. As with everything you can buy yourself some advantages even to the above process. A 10" diamond stone will sure put an initial edge on faster than emery paper - but they're about \$100.00. Expensive buffing compound has more consistent particles and really will work faster. A good field lens of 16X magnification is about \$30.00 but will be useful for other stuff as well as examining blade edges. Since I have a lot of edges to sharpen I got a cheap bench belt grinder. You can't use a disc grinder or normal bench grinder without overheating the blade - unless you are skilled and careful.

The bottom line is that it sure doesn't sound like anything that spectacular and it isn't. The thing is though that you are using a large sheet of abrasive and the whole edge is getting honed at the same time. Given that the abrasive is fine you'll be amazed at how fast metal is removed. It's much easier to keep the angle constant when the whole edge is being honed at once. In the field you'll find that a piece of leather and the green compound will keep the rig sharp.

Leather holds the buffing compound well. Just check out the Salvation Army thrift store for old belts, and glue to a board. Using a leather strop without support defeats the purpose of straightening the edge. And to think I used one all those years - but it's never too late to learn! I still think cardboard is better to use at first: belts are too narrow. They work well though once a good edge is established, and you are just stropping the final edge. The chief advantage of a supported leather strop is that leather has more give to it than cardboard and so will form a very slight convex edge on the blade. As the edge is better supported it will stay sharper longer.

If you give this system an honest try as I did - I'm sure you'll see it work for you. You may even want to pick up some carborundum grinding compound and use it before the green buffing compound. This will cut metal very fast! You may also want to get some white or grey polishing compound - like the green only finer - to help put a finer edge on. No great expense, so it's worth trying! If you want to try a neat experiment try the above method on a cheap kitchen knife. I think you'll find that the edge holds longer - which just means that you've sharpened more of it properly rather than magically changed the steel properties. I finally got around to using the above process on my old Gerber Bolt Action. I had to set the bevel with a belt grinder to save time, then followed the normal sharpening. I can't believe the difference in edge holding! Naturally I'd been thinking that the steel was the cause of poor edge holding in the past!

Cheap Knives

Stainless steel has come ahead a long way in my lifetime! From everything I'm hearing it's as good as high carbon steel of the "rust" variety in expensive knives. So far though I haven't found any that's as good as straight carbon steel in cheap knives. I guess it's too much to ask for good heat treatment in a cheaper article. In contrast I think that carbon steel in cheaper knives has improved because of more constant heat treatment and the heat treatment for carbon steel is much simpler than for stainless. So as stainless has improved, so has carbon steel - so the carbon steel has stayed ahead. I may be wrong in this, as after trying some stainless knives I found that they are either too soft for my purposes - but easy to sharpen, or almost sufficiently hard but much harder to sharpen. Maybe manufacturers consider ease of sharpening to be more of a selling factor than edge holding in cheap knives. I'm quite happy with many of my cheap carbon steel knives! For sure though it stands to reason that my cheap knife made from 1095 steel is not going to be the same as an expensive knife made of the same because the latter is almost certain to have better heat treatment. The point is that my cheap knife may meet my needs just fine.

There's a lot of confusing information with regard to cheap knives with some people saying how great some of them are. Fred Perrin reported very favourably on the Schrade Sharpfinger, as have many people on the forums. Mors Kochanski uses a cheap Mora knife and praises it in his book on wilderness survival. Many other people with experience with knives are incredulous, and believe these knives barely capable of whittling for a few minutes without losing their edge. I believe that both sets of people are correct in what they have seen - at this point you are incredulous at what I'm writing, unless you've read AND tried the sharpening stuff above!

I believe that if you go down to your local Walmart to pick up one of these wonders at a good price, you'll find the following. It isn't very sharp initially so you give it a touch up until it is. You then try some whittling or paper cutting and most likely the edge goes pretty quickly. you may get lucky, but I'd figure the odds at 50/50. You then touch up the edge again until it feels sharp, and try some more. The edge goes pretty quickly this time too. At this point most people would give up. My idea is that the knife suffers from two problems that can be cured. Firstly the temper in the edge has been burned out by fast final grinding, and the edge isn't straight so only parts of it are really being sharpened properly. I believe that if you sharpen the edge past where the temper has been burned out, and straighten it, that you'll see a very different result. Heat treatment in cheap blades is pretty constant, so I really believe that if you use the aggressive sharpening technique above to get past the surface problems - that you'll see different results. It's easy to prove me wrong, just take one of those old beaters out of a drawer or borrow one and try. Please give it a good effort though - it takes some work!

Cheap knives are by definition cheap! That's pretty obvious. Naturally you get either a sheath that is downright dangerous, or downright ugly. Sometimes you can really strike it lucky and get both in the same sheath. Most of my knives are not in the original sheath - I value my hide too much - as old as it is. I've had a lot of fun moulding sheaths and sewing them up and riveting them. Copper rivets are getting harder to find, but pop rivets are easier if you don't mind the looks. A lot of people aren't into this sort of stuff though, and probably won't want to put a lot of money into a sheath for a cheap knife. That may not be a cheap knife if it hurts you. I've seen more and worse cuts due to knives sticking through sheaths than I have due to accidents in cutting.

I like the handles on the cheap knives that I've kept over the years. I see a knife as a tool, and mine get used harshly, so I'm not too worried about looks. Even I choke with the red handles on the Mora knives though. As much as I like my Schrade fixed blades - I had to work at them with a file and emery cloth to make them comfortable. I'd sure want to sand any varnish off a hilt-less handle (like the Mora) to make it safer - but I don't see any real problem with the overall design as long as it's used properly. Certainly if you are going to be in very hot or cold places, you will find the metal on handles to be a major disadvantage.

My Cheap Knives

In the last few months (now years - how time flies..), I've gone into Mora knives in a big way. I now have just about every model of the red wooden handled type. All in all, I'd have to say that the Moras are superior to the knives below - for cutting wood, not for skinning which is best done with a coarse edge on a softer blade. The blades are very hard and tough and hold an edge far better than the Schrades. The handle is more comfortable to use when cutting fuzz sticks out of really hard wood. Certainly the Gerber tool steel knives are as far above the Moras as the Moras are above the Schrades, being made of M2 steel. The problem with the Gerbers is the skinny handle on the trout and bird, and the strange balance of the A425. The tool steel Gerbers are hard to sharpen - better have a whole set of big diamond stones - or a large sheet of glass and abrasive!

I know that the Gerber tool steel knives are not exactly cheap any more - going for \$50+ on ebay. You may still get them the way I got mine though, by knowing people who have them in drawers because they could never sharpen them properly.

Everyone should have a big tough survival knife. Here's the one that I've used most...



Gerber Trout and Bird

No it didn't shrink in the wash - but it is the knife that I've used most over the years. It's not that great for

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moose or dropping large trees, but it sure has done all of the rest. So many years ago when my stepson (then seven) wanted a knife I got him a Western cutlery sheath knife of about the same size. It ended up being the knife we used the most so when he lost it, I had to get a small knife of my own. It's the Gerber with the tool steel blade. About the only thing I don't like about it is the small handle, which has become slippery as the armorhide has worn off.

For sure I always had a hatchet for heavier tasks, using that for most jobs a heavy knife would be used for - and I used one of the larger knives below for butchering. There's nothing new with the idea of a tiny fixed blade being the most useful of all - tiny because if we are honest the knife we use most around the kitchen is a paring knife, and you do much the same in the woods: fixed blades are just less bother than folders when used constantly.

More in line with what most people would think of as a real blade is its big brother, the Gerber A425 tool steel. As you can see by the handle this one has had a lot less use over the last quarter of a century. My only real complaints with it are that the balance seems strange, with the handle being too heavy, and the aluminium handle is hard on the hands in cold weather. Every time I pick up this knife I'm amazed by how well it fits my hand: then I whittle with it for a while and find that it gets very uncomfortable. I guess you have to use to learn!



Gerber A425

I've tried to find another Gerber tool steel knife somewhere between the two on ebay - but they're going for way too much money. If you have a hankering for a super steel knife at a good price - just keep looking for someone to have one that they were never able to sharpen properly. That's the way I got mine cheaply! You won't have any problem getting a super edge with the method above - but expect it to take much longer than with other knives. I finally used a belt grinder on mine. The steel is supposed to be M2 and I believe it. Once sharpened properly it holds an edge forever.

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Here's a heavy knife - just not such a large blade. I've used this Schrade for many years in all sorts of ways. It hasn't let me down yet - despite stuff like using it with a baton to cut through large branches. It's the model with the thick blade, so it can do all the prying stuff that a bush knife is supposed to do. Strangely I always wish the blade was thinner, and that it didn't have those stupid brass bolsters to add weight.... The only reason it has got a lot of use is the comfort of the handle while being used in many positions - my perfect handle shape!



Schrade 130T

If I had to design a tactical knife, this is what I would come up with. Not needing one I always wish the blade was shorter. I like the thin slicing blade, and it's a good skinner though not nearly as much better than the 130T than the size thinness and bevel would suggest. It works for everything from skinning to peeling potatoes and cutting toenails. While its handle is almost perfect, it isn't quite as comfortable in heavy cutting as it might be.



Schrade Deerslayer

My pocket knife is a Gerber Bolt Action. I got it at a steal of a deal, and I just love the handle and locking design. The blade has stayed tight over many years of rough use. The downside is that the blade just doesn't hold its sharpness very well, and for many jobs the blade could be a lot thinner and narrower.



Such are my rambling observations. Like I said I have enjoyed my cheap knives - and even the work that I've put into them. For me it's been recreation, and generally I have more time than money - though I have little of either. I think I have to be honest and say that if I took the time I put into a cheap knife and worked that time even for low wages, that I'd be as far ahead going for an expensive knife....

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