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# Gransfors hatchet

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



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## **Description :**

I have been doing a bunch of chopping with a Gransfors Wildlife hatchet and a Scandinavian Forest Axe

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# Introduction

I'd waited until my buddy went to Vancouver on business and he could pick out the tools. This paid off in that the axe has vertical grain in the handle, and the hatchet has almost vertical grain. They only had a few of each in stock but there was variation (just not as much as seen with other brands). So if you are able to select rather than taking the luck of mail order - it's wise to do so. An axe even with horizontal grain in the handle might hold up for years - but when it breaks it will give no warning. This could be immediately dangerous as with a flying axe head, or could be a real inconvenience as with your only axe breaking when you are miles from anywhere. While I haven't heard of a Gransfors with a loose handle, this is common with other axes and you have no alternative in the bush but to soak in water. The practise of soaking axe heads in water to swell the wood is a guaranteed recipe for eventual sudden fracturing. I hear all the time that axes should be soaked periodically to tighten the handle - but I'd sure advise that only linseed oil be used. Anyway the handle on Gransfors axes protrudes through the head and is properly wedged - the handle should be easy to tighten even if it does loosen which is a nice touch. The heads on all of the Gransfors that my buddy examined were perfectly aligned.

The best axe handles are made from young hickory which means small trees and high cost. You can see from the curve of the grain on Gransfors handles that they are cut from small trees. If you have a good hardware store, which carries axe handles, and ask, you'll find that premium hickory handles are twice to three times the cost of the regular ones (and that's why they don't have any in stock..). I don't know whether the added cost of premium handles is worthwhile. You get added strength and flexibility - but I think you'd be actually be logging with the axe to see the difference. The bottom line is that Gransfors say that the total package is made from the best materials and that's so with the handles. Take time to select one with vertical grain and you've then got the best available these days. The handles are not varnished or painted: this is an advantage in that you can finish them to the level of smoothness you want and use linseed or tung oil to finish.

I was extremely impressed with the workmanship in the blades and we immediately went out to spend time cutting through fallen birch to clear a road. I haven't seen an axe recently other than these where this would have been possible with a brand new axe since most axes don't come that sharp and many have loose handles! My buddy had really wanted a 2 1/2lb Iltis, but he couldn't find a good one in the store. So the closest competition never even made it to the cutting grounds. If it had, I'd have expected some problems close to what I found in the review of my Iltis on my webpage. I actually did find a 2 1/2 lb Iltis with a new shipment in a local store. This has vertical grain (the others in the shipment don't), but a mis-aligned head. The Hults axe (which is very close to the same league as the Gransfors) actually comes with a special label telling you that it's unsharpened and that you better get it sharpened properly before using! There's a reason for that - and even so it comes sharper than many cheap axes... It is astonishing, though to find an axe that will shave hair right out of the sheath, and really work. Learning about axes before spending all of your hard earned cash is quite simple: just take time to examine all axes you see for sale. Just follow the selection criteria to see if what you are looking at is worthwhile for use

1. Is the blade thin: 1/4" thick - 2" behind the edge? If so continue.
2. Is the grain in the handle vertical? If so continue.
3. Lay the axe on a flat surface with the blade vertical. Stand back a bit and sight down the blade to see whether it points at the end of the handle or off to one side. If it lines up continue.
4. Is the handle pretty? It shouldn't be! You don't want any brown heartwood in it, knots or other pretty stuff! These are weaknesses!

5. If you've got this far, check the blade to handle attachment for cracks, and the head for any obvious problems. If you find none buy it immediately! I guess if you are really picky you might want to read the page on advanced axe selection first.

I don't think you'll end up at the buying stage in too many cases! Notice that sharpness isn't included because most axes aren't sharp when purchased. In most cases secure head attachment is only proven in use. The only trouble with being picky and frugal is that you'll soon see that there are very few good axes around. This could lead to a major buying spree when you visit a store with Gransfors axes.

Now cutting large deadfall with a small axe usually isn't much fun once you've played with the new toy for a while. A large axe makes the job much easier, but I'd taken it out of the truck for sharpening... We did have a bow saw too, so things weren't that bad. Now the Gransfors axes are pretty and sharp, but the light axe did seem incredibly effective for its size. Not being a believer in magic, even for those prices, I decided to find out why. So I've been running some comparisons between the SFA and a light Iltis and between the hatchet and my cheap hatchet. Both my Iltis and my hatchet are thinner bladed than their Gransfors counterparts and properly sharpened.

Not surprisingly the cheaper stuff cuts just as well as a Gransfors. I have a belt grinder and even a leather honing belt now, and I can put sharp convex edges on stuff. The cheap hatchet quickly loses its edge as soon as it is used on harder wood, but it does last long enough to do most work required, and is easy to resharpen. The Iltis is fairly close to the Gransfors in edge holding. That doesn't however tell the whole story (see advanced axe selection).

Outdoors people get pretty obsessed with blade hardness, and actually there is a reason so it isn't just hype. Up here especially in winter you are going to be dealing with dead spruce branches. Shaving and splitting these is pretty important to getting a fire going. I've rambled on about carbon steel Moras and Lauri's being just great in edge holding compared to stainless varieties of the same or other carbon steel knives. A light axe is used in much the same way as the knives and most will quickly lose their edge when used as a carving tool. A certain degree of hardness and toughness is required to keep the edge. What you are looking for is the optimum trade-off between having a blade hard and tough, sharpening time, and liability for breaking. Now both the Iltis and the Gransfors are hard and tough. The cheap hatchet isn't so it will chop green stuff just fine and do a certain degree of spruce shaving - but will lose its edge far more quickly. With cheap tools you get hardness or toughness - but rarely both at the same time. Cheap Chinese hatchets and even cheap pulaskis often come with very hard blades, but the steel isn't tough at the same time so hit something hard like a hemlock knot and a big chunk of the blade will fall out. For sure doing such a trick with a good blade will lead to damage, but usually just minor fixable damage. It should be no great trick to get both hardness and toughness in a cheap blade since Mora knives have both and are cheap mass produced articles. I'm sure that many cheaper axes and hatchets have blades that are both hard and tough enough for serious use, but normally they come with blades that are too thick and so their steel advantages are negated. The Canadian Tire axe is an example of this.

What I'm trying to get at in all of this is that with the Iltis or Gransfors you get what you pay for. You are going to get the most cutting for the least sharpening at the best price. Move down a few points in hardness and you'll get frustrated if you use your axe or hatchet for hard wood. I'm sure that it would be possible to build an axe with a much harder and tougher blade, but it would come at a much higher price, and what we have is quite sufficient. You can do an awful lot of cutting and put an edge back on in minutes in the bush. You can't do a lot a lot of cutting of nails or frozen knots, but seriously how many of us would do so? That's most certainly not a cut down of Cliff Stamp's work since to really test blades you have to get pretty extreme. I'm just more concerned about my purposes, which I feel are typical of woods use. In my tests I found that the SFA showed results pretty representative of what Cliff found. The hatchet did not until the bevels had been corrected. From what I have observed the results that Cliff Stamp achieved should be equalled or exceeded with any properly sharpened GB axe - most likely exceeded if the edge is honed and polished back properly.

When you first see and examine a Gransfors axe, I believe that you'll be very impressed not having seen an axe that well sharpened as new. After a great deal of chopping and shaving, the SFA shows one single small chip out of the edge. Careful examination with a 16X lens shows a pretty smooth grind over the whole bevel and fair polish right at the edge. The hatchet had a fair grind and so an uneven edge - though you need magnification to see this.

Outdoors people aren't lumberjacks, and an axe or hatchet is used for shaping wood and cutting as much as chopping. Here is where you will see the Gransfors shine. There is just no comparison to them - at least for me. The balance of the axe used one handed for small jobs or the hatchet held close to the bit is incredible. It might be very different for you depending on your hand size and a whole bunch of factors. Personally I would like a lighter hatchet, but I have to admit that other than for carrying the 1lb head is as close to perfect as anything I could imagine.

The axe sheath fits pretty well: you just have to make sure that you squeeze the sides together before removing or placing the blade into the sheath. The hatchet sheath was too tight and already has cuts through the folded part. The usual criticism of the Gransfors hatchet sheath is that it isn't a belt sheath. I'm still trying to figure how to construct such a sheath that would be safe with a very sharp hatchet. As far as I can see, it will be very difficult to come up with a design that will allow fast removal and resheathing of a very sharp hatchet - with any type of belt sheath. The problem is that you'll want to remove or sheath the hatchet quickly without really looking at what you are doing and that's when problems will arise. I often carry the hatchet tucked into my belt and surprisingly it's quite comfortable. A frog or loop would be better. You pull the hatchet then unsheathe it in front of you: other than taking two hands it works well. The problem is where to store the removed sheath..

## Conclusions:

At first I thought that the Gransfors axes might not be worth their high price compared to other axes. Now I believe that they are the best value in cutting tools out there. Most purposes could be served with one of their models, and for the price of a good large knife you could have all three of the main models - the hatchet, the small Forest axe (or Hunter's axe) and the Scandinavian Forest axe. The real bottom line is that you'll want every model.. The new tiny hatchet or the large axe which are not likely to be in great demand show the real cost of production of hand made axes, being substantially more expensive than the rest of the range. Even they are much cheaper than other hand forged axes.

For general work limbing fallen timber then a heavy axe is needed that will take abuse. That's when an axe like the Hults comes in handy. The same goes for removing heavy deadfall from roads. There are lots of axes for such jobs and price matters because they will get abuse, or be left in vehicles and likely to get stolen. You'd also need to use the axe to hammer wedges and the Gransfors aren't designed for this. For a bush survival tool, though, the Gransfors axes are superb. You even have a choice of weights and configurations.

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