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## The Hatchets

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



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#### **Description :**

Using a hatchet, and hatchet considerations.

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## Hatchets

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While I was choosing the Iltis axe, I spied a neat little hatchet. Despite the fact that it cost \$4.95, I had to add it to my shopping - much to the hilarity of the store clerk who had watched me spend half an hour carefully inspecting axes.. And there starts a story.

The only hatchet I've had for years is a sorry thing left behind by my stepson. Thick of blade, thin of handle and ill balanced - everything is wrong with it. I used to own some good ones though, and I certainly used them enough over the years - so I felt it was time to revisit. I have lots of good books, which promote the hatchet as the ultimate outdoor tool - from Nessmuk to Chef - and from my own experience I know that a hatchet can be good. I also have a pretty nasty scar from one though..



Top is \$4.95 hatchet, bottom is junker ready to be re-handled.

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\$4.95 hatchet is very thin - junker is like a wedge!

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Mystery wood in \$4.95 hatchet on right at least has vertical grain.

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Junker has neater profile - for now. Soon comes the lightening of the \$4.95 hatchet when it meets the angle grinder!

I guess that I mainly wanted to find out what was wrong with a five dollar hatchet. The thing was well balanced with a nice handle (vertical grain), and thin blade - quite unlike anything I've seen for years. The first sharpening on the belt sander showed that the edge had decent hardness, and so I was getting more puzzled. Having used the hatchet for over two months, the only flaw I can see is that the poll is extremely soft. The second reason I wanted such a cheap hatchet was to lighten it by drilling holes and grinding. I want to see if such a thing as a one pound total hatchet/sheath combination is possible. I'm still working at that. The reason for lightness is so that it can be carried comfortably on the person, and to see just what such a light hatchet is capable of.

I'm not a great fan of regular hatchets - and I don't know that many people who are. The usual hardware store hatchet is really a one handed splitting axe, poor for chopping and really too heavy for anything but splitting kindling at a fixed campsite. What I'm getting at here is that the very leverage which makes a hatchet superior to a knife of the same weight is going to lead to problems if the swing misses its target. It's also going to lead to using the hatchet for jobs better suited to an axe - which is a sure fire road to an accident.

Anyway off I went along the coast trail brandishing a leuko, the hatchet and a light axe....

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First on the agenda was trimming back some devils club. This is really neat stuff being hard woody stems with large leaves. The stems and undersides of leaves absolutely bristle with very fine needles. These break off just below skin level and so are difficult to remove other than by cutting out. At first the area gets inflamed and hurts, later the inflammation leaves and you just get the sensation of needles under the skin.. It's nasty stuff since the needles never fester and take forever to work out. I once had some in me for a couple of years.

Cutting back the stems with the leuko was tough - the knife just wasn't heavy enough to get through the hard stems. The razor sharp axe trimmed them nicely with a short flick. The hatchet was tough to use with short chops and dangerous with long ones that cleared the hand from the devil's club.

Cutting shelter pole sized alders was simple with all three implements.

Fires are a real problem in wet weather here. Everything gets so sodden that the only fuel is dead lower limbs of conifers. They're easily broken off - but splitting them takes time. Usually I've split a few, shaved one and got enough of a fire going to dry out the rest. This time I was going to split everything to see how quickly I could get a large fire going. Splitting branches with a leuko and baton is pretty simple. I really have come to appreciate the design of this blade. I split the ends of 3' (1 metre) pieces and pried the pieces apart. Then I split again. Simple and safe it is - but time consuming. Often the split runs out making more work. Next came the hatchet, but this time I split the branches over a log. I split the branches in the middle driving the hatchet into the log below: a twist of the branch caused the split to travel to both ends. The bottom line is that the hatchet was incredibly faster to use. The axe worked just like the hatchet being easy to use one handed - but the larger head being slightly more awkward. I'd also set up a coffee can stove since this works well with small twigs due to the draft: it'll dry out and burn stuff that would never work in a regular fire.

The bottom line to my little experiments is that I can see a real use for a very light hatchet. A one pound total rig would be all that's needed to split kindling and drop shelter poles. Given the speed of splitting kindling to the point where you can have a big fire going in a very short time - this is a better idea than a can stove. Make no mistake though: the can stove properly designed will keep burning with just about anything dropped in it, and will get a pot of water boiled in a very short time. It takes a lot to beat one with a regular fire in very wet conditions! Certainly the main advantage of the hatchet is that it could be constructed weight wise to be carried on the person at all times. I still can't see any advantage whatsoever to a heavy hatchet, which would be better, replaced by a light axe. In deciding whether a light hatchet would have advantages over a leuko - I'm still undecided. Certainly in special conditions the hatchet will win out. The leuko has a lot of advantages of its own though and overall will be the better tool.

## The downside of hatchet use..

I didn't manage to chop off any vital appendages - but I did manage to cut myself. Any primary cutting instrument is in constant use, and with a well designed sheath knife and knife this is no problem. That leuko is in and out of its sheath so often it thinks it's homeless. The problem with a hatchet is in designing a sheath that allows that sort of access. It's really easy to get cut while replacing a hatchet into a regular belt sheath because you're holding it by the head while dropping the handle through the sheath bottom. Eventually it'll get you if really sharp. The main concern I have with both pocket knives and hatchets is that because it is harder to remove and replace them from sheaths - or open/close, one is tempted to walk around with an exposed blade. Eventually an accident will happen. A lot of thought on sheath design and carry is required as well as searching for that light hatchet.

You either view the hatchet as a light tool for wood shaping, cutting and kindling preparation - or take it beyond its design. If you like heavy chopping with one then you need a 3/4 light axe. Don't stop until you get one. Used one handed it will beat the usual hatchet and used two handed it's a real chopper.

## Conclusions:

Hatchet meets angle grinder is coming. For right now after buying an \$11.00 CAN machete to test against an old Barteaux, and making it look like a pretzel in less than 30 minutes in regular testing... this \$4.95 CAN hatchet was some deal!

I've done a lot of chopping and splitting with a machete lately, and despite all of its advantages I sure intend to have a light hatchet or two around for when I'm not carrying a light axe - especially in winter. It's the fact that it will split dead lower branches of conifers so quickly that makes the choice easy.

Let's finish off with some writing by Nessmuk illustrating his use of his very light hatchet. It's worth trying some of this with a large knife to see how it makes out:

"Let us say that you are out and have slightly missed your way. The coming gloom warns you that night is shutting down. You are no tenderfoot. You know that a place of rest is essential to health and comfort through the long cold November night. you dive down the first little hollow until you reach a rill of water for water is a prime necessity. As you draw your hatchet you take in the whole situation at a glance. The little stream is gurgling downward in a half choked frozen way. There is a half sodden hemlock lying across it. One clip of the hatchet shows that it will peel. There is plenty of smaller timber standing around: long slim poles with a tuft of foliage on top. Five minutes suffice to drop one of these, cut a twelve foot pole from it, sharpen the pole at each end, jam one end into the ground and the

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other into the rough bark of a scraggy hemlock, and there is your ridge pole. Now go - with your hatchet - for the bushiest and most promising young hemlocks within reach. Drop them and draw them to camp rapidly. Next you need a fire. There are fifty hard resinous limbs sticking up from the prone hemlock: lop off a few of these, and split the largest into match timber; reduce the splinters into shavings, scrape the wet leaves from your prospective fireplace and strike a match on the balloon part of your trousers. If you are a woodsman you will strike but one. Feed the fire slowly at first; it will gain fast. When you have a blaze ten feet high, look at your watch. It is 6:00 PM. You don't want to turn in before ten o'clock and you have four hours to kill before bedtime. Now tackle the old hemlock; take off every dry limb and then peel the bark and bring it to camp. You will find this takes an hour or more.

Next strip every limb from your young hemlocks and shingle them onto your ridge pole. This will make a sort of bear den, very well calculated to give you a comfortable night's rest. The bright fire will soon dry the ground that is to be your bed, and you will have plenty of time to drop another small hemlock and make a bed of browse a foot thick. You do it. Then you make your pillow. Now this pillow is essential to comfort and very simple. It is half a yard of muslin, sewn up as a bag, and filled with moss or hemlock browse. You can empty it and put it into your pocket, where it takes up as much space as a handkerchief. You have other little muslin bags-an' you be wise. One holds a few ounces of good tea; another sugar; another is used to put your loose duffle in: money match safe, pocket knife. You have a pat of butter and a bit of pork, with a liberal slice of brown bread; and before turning in you make a cup of tea, broil a slice of pork, and indulge in lunch.

Ten o'clock comes. The time has not passed tediously. you are warm, dry and well fed.."

A chisel ended pole will remove bark - but it's tough with a knife. Nessmuk omitted to say that if you cut branches from a hemlock NEVER cut them where they meet the trunk, as hemlock secretes siliceous material there that will blunt anything. He glossed over the clip of the hatchet to see if the hemlock would peel - many don't.

And then there's "Brian's Return" the final book of the "hatchet" series by Gary Paulsen:

"There were many variations he could have gone with, as with knives, but he chose a plain belt axe, not unlike the one his mother had given him when he started north the first time. Like the knife it was always on his belt and would always be there. He had learned that it was much better to have a tool-weapon with you and not need it than to need one and not have it. "

So go find a thin bladed \$4.95 CAN hatchet and try it! If it works for you then you can consider the \$80 CAN Gransfors.. How cheap and easy can it get? The warnings are to make sure that the head isn't tempered hard and easily shattered - or too soft to use, and to make sure that the handle has vertical grain and is firmly attached.

More in [Hatchets continued \(2\)](#)

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