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Mora and other Scandinavian knives

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- Gear reviews and tests - Edged tools - Fixed blades -



Publication: Friday 6 September 2002

Description :

Introducing cheap Nordic knives.

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I'd been reading a lot of posts on Bladeforums about how great Scandinavian knives are, and I like Mors Kochanski's book, "Bushcraft" in which he promotes them. Trouble is - I've owned some over the years and I mostly gave them away because I really didn't like them. We're talking about the cheap and ugly stuff here, not the beautiful puukkos. I remembered that I still had a Martini filleting knife with a cut down blade so I decided to clean it up and see why I didn't like it, and what it would really do when properly sharpened...

It didn't take me long to find out that I still hated it! The problem was that front tapering slippery handle. That varnished handle is really slippery when wet - an accident waiting to happen! I decided to remove the varnish and fire harden the birch handle all at once with a propane torch. I just heated and brushed the carbon off with my brass brush. I even modified the shape slightly by burning. I scrubbed the handle off leaving some black, dried the wood with the torch, and soaked in some thinned linseed oil (1part linseed, 2 parts gum turpentine). A few days later I came back to try the knife again and found that I liked it! I like it more than a little - it's now my #1 kitchen knife. I use the sucker for peeling in water all the time with never a thought of slipping or the lack of a guard.

After the handle fixing being a success, it was time to sharpen. I guess everyone has heard of legendary Swedish steel like Sandvik - well you aren't going to find any of that in a cheap knife. Nope - Euro mystery steel is what you get (This means whatever they could get a good price on at the time, not some highly secret new formula.). The stainless steel sure took a lot of honing even with my rig - stainless is tough, it just may not be hard. Eventually I had an edge that would slice paper, and I was really curious as to how long the edge would last. It did very well compared to cheap stainless in my Gerber. It didn't hold up as well as carbon steel though.

By now I was really wanting to try some Frost's of Sweden carbon steel blades. I kept getting delayed with ordering - but eventually found a shipment of Mora 6" sheath knives at the hardware store in town. I just had to get one at the princely sum of \$8.95! Here's what I found, and what shocked me - from my post to Bladeforums:

"There's been a fair bit of discussion in the past on Mora blades and why they are recommended in the Bushcraft book. I believe that this is the most appropriate forum to discuss them since people here are constantly experimenting with jobs that such knives are appropriate for. The knives and blades are cheap and easily found so even people who have never used one can pick one up to try if they want.

I guess that the reason I would like discussion is that with these knives we can have a benchmark to discuss what they can do, and realistically what other knives can do better (and why). They come in many blade lengths and widths - all with the same steels and general construction, so people with different preferences in blade length can still discuss them, and why they prefer their model.

I was at the store and picked up a Mora knife for \$8.95 CAN. It's the red handled plastic sheathed ugly one - this one with a 6" non laminated carbon blade. I'll be getting a full set to try out different blade steels (laminated and non laminated, stainless..) and blade lengths. I've owned some before - but always gave them away. I always considered them toolbox knives.

So in the store I picked one up at random out of 50. When I have time I can pick over the rest more critically! The first strange point is that now I've obviously become more interested in knife function - the looks don't offend me so much!

It was quite true that one of these selected at random will slice paper. It looked as if the blade had been polished to an edge with some rounded grind marks still apparent. When I examined the blade with a 16X magnifier, I saw that I was wrong. There is a minute secondary bevel, quite steep too. The saber grind is also slightly hollow ground.

Mora and other Scandinavian knives

It's quite a bit of work with a glass plate and abrasives to get the edge straight, and get past the bits where grinding has altered the temper. If you don't do this you'll end up with a blade that cuts paper very well - but parts of the blade will seem to blunt quickly and tear while others seem to just keep going. I wanted to follow the saber grind taper. I'm prepared to believe that this blade is somewhere around R60+ as the ads say. Subjectively it is harder to sharpen than a Schrade carbon blade, and it seems to hold an edge better in paper cutting - both being sharpened past factory edge defects. I haven't yet checked to see if the edge chips easily with this degree of hardness.

The handle always put me off in the past because I am used to handles with guards - or at least some sort of grip to stop slipping onto the blade. I consider this one quite dangerous since the red paint becomes VERY slick when wet. Peel a few potatoes and you'll see just how slick it can get. I believe that others - like me - will feel much better about the knife after taking a propane torch to the handle: you can only improve the looks of this knife. Birch fire hardens very well so go slowly but thoroughly. Eroding enough wood to bring up the grain gives a much more secure grip, as does grinding, filing, or even burning a few dimples to give more contact with surface of fingers on underside. As long as you weren't expecting to find any curly birch under the red paint, I would expect most people to be much happier at this point: the knife actually looks OK. An oil finish rubbed in will give protection and surprisingly more grip even if finished to a slick finish. Leaving enough blackened wood on the final finish will leave the wood quite hard. Once so treated the knife can be used quite safely with wet hands. I can see daylight through the handle on my knife. The main supports seem to be where the blade meets the handle and at the back rivet on the tang. You'd sure want to soak some glue down the handle hollow (as suggested by James Mattis) before using this knife to cut up chicken and stuff. I'm wondering just how well this knife handle will hold up with use of a baton.



The plastic sheath is secure if ugly. It could serve as a good blade protector to build a leather sheath around for looks.

Oh well off to test with a baton.. One thing I won't try today is Mors Kochanski's notion of how to test a knife for strength. Pg 111 in old book says to drive knife into tree 4cm at right angles to grain, then stand on handle. And I thought I was thorough...

Update:

I must admit that I'm shocked that the handle of the Mora survived the baton beating of the blade. The baton didn't do too well since I didn't bother fire hardening some birch - and the back of the blade is very rough. One way of getting kindling splinters in a hurry. No problem smacking down 3" alder in quantities to build a shelter frame - if you need them that thick. Using a rock instead of a baton is improving the looks of the back of the blade, giving it the crafted hammered look. Chopping small 1" alders is no problem despite the lightness of the knife and the handle was quite comfortable for this. The burning and brushing (with a brass brush) has created shallow ripples in the handle which give a very stable grip while not affecting comfort.

Shaving a whole pile of dead lower branches from various conifers was no problem, and was a lot more comfortable than using my Gerber Bolt Action pocket knife on a few. Dragging cuts produced fuzzes that curled at the tips. I had a lot more length of blade than I needed and I still don't see much point to such a long blade - but that's just my preference. I find the handle too narrow at the front too - but maybe that's a reflection of what I'm used to using since it isn't uncomfortable - just doesn't feel quite right. If the handle were turned around I'd find it perfect.

The downside of the knife is the lack of lateral strength. I don't think you'd get very far with prying with this knife. I bet I could wrap the blade and bend the knife permanently at the blade/ handle junction with my hands.

Anyway I came home, picked up the weekend advertiser newspaper and no problem shredding it all despite all the cutting the knife had done. I don't think that the only comparable knife I have (a Schrade Deerslayer) could do this despite similar sharpening - I'll have to test them alongside each other."

Test them I did - - and nothing came close to the edge holding of the Mora except a Gerber tool steel blade. Amazingly I later found that the edge of the Mora still wasn't perfect when viewed with a 16X lens. I had been concentrating on sharpening the competition too much! It takes a lot of sharpening to remove all of a steep secondary bevel and true an edge. I'm expecting quite an improvement given the results of parts of the blade on cigarette paper.

That Horrible Handle

If you like to make an engineer scream, have him/her test out a Mora, then disassemble the handle. It's incredible that they hold up! Behind the front guard is a huge round cavity with no glue. This goes back for a couple of inches with sawed slots for the front end of the tang. The last part of the tang at the back is held with a 1/2" long metal split collar which butts onto the wood.

With the first two pictures notice that the tang is softened to where I've placed the guard in the top picture. The front part is still tempered to R60+. The taper of the tang is fine where the handle meets the blade. On the lower picture the back of the handle is cut off to show attachment of split collar, which is compression fitted over back of tang.



Here's a close up of the split collar. The hole for the last part of the tang is drilled to size, with a slightly larger hole drilled from the back to hold the split collar. There's not much holding the knife together. But it does hold together - we know that!



The last two pictures show the large round hole drilled in the front of the handle with sawed slots to take the wide front of the tang.



So basically the handle is held on by the front guard, the slots at the front protected from splitting by the front guard, the narrow hole for the last 1 1/2" of tang and split collar. It's just a compression hold front and rear. Most of the tang is just floating in the handle.

Handle Fix

The fast way is to open holes in the guard on either side with a nail or punch and force in some metal epoxy to add strength and close up the hole in the handle. For sure the knife holds up better than expected but that hole is waiting to collect garbage and poison you.

A neater method is to saw around handle 1/8" from the end and split off the last section of handle. This will let you grab the split collar with a set of vise grips and twist it out. Fill handle with metal epoxy, reassemble and grind the last section of tang off.

Conclusions:

1. The first has to be that these knives are a lot for the money - they'll beat many expensive knives. Really.
2. It's a lot of work, but little cost to bring one into shape. Getting the edge into shape will be at least an hours work, since you have to hone down the bevel. The handle will take from 10 minutes to a couple of hours depending on how far you want to go.
3. A perfectionist won't be happy. Most of the blades have a slight warp. If you use these knives though and like them - sure you can get a much better blade along the same lines - at a price..
4. Anyone can afford a bunch to compare the carbon steel to the laminated to the stainless - maybe to try handle types, or blade lengths and so forth.
5. What a knife for the hobbyist! A few old chair legs and a friend with a drill press and you are set. Sure you can get good materials to work with if you become obsessed - but the start can be cheap!
6. Just use one of these knives for a while and probably you'll start to like it. You may be selling off a lot of your other factory blades to buy more of these, Dremel tools, components.. Maybe though at the end of it all, you still won't like the knife - but then you'll know what sort of full tang thick bladed knife to go for.

Essential Links:

[Components and Ideas](#)

[Components and Ideas 2](#)

[Hoodoo's Sheath](#)

[Hoodoo's Sheath - Instructions](#)

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