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Saws for the Outdoors

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- Gear reviews and tests - Edged tools - Saws -



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Description :

Since a saw is definitely not a weapon, it's usually considered somewhat unglamorous. That's a pity because it sure is an effective tool combining high efficiency with light weight. I'm referring of course to variations of the Swedish bow saw....

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I've been working with a cheap Canadian tire bow saw that was on sale for half price. Just another bow saw of 30" which is about the most length one can pack easily and still cut through large logs. For a cheap saw it's pretty decent, and while it seems a lot flimsier than the Sandviks of many years ago - it's held up well. We tend to be ignorant of the tremendous effect of saws on logging, in the early days, which outclassed axes for speed on big trees. Those were heavy saws, and later the thin bladed bow saws came as quite a revelation! So a bow saw of any type is not something to be despised. I came to greatly dislike one when I had to cut a winter's wood with it, but it worked! Then I resharpened it and it worked again and again. Pretty effective for a few dollars. That was a 36" Sandvik, though. The longer the blade on the saw, the more critical it is that the frame holds the blade under a lot of tension and keeps it in line.

The Canadian Tire bow saw isn't quite as impressive as those Swedish models, being quite a bit lighter and cruder. Having gotten some good cuts from saw teeth in the past I quickly noticed that the sharpness wasn't up there either. I was quite surprised that the saw held up well, and while the teeth didn't sharpen themselves they held their sharpness. Eventually it came time to get a new blade but I wondered if these cheap blades would resharpen. The good news is that they will, and the saw will be vastly more effective once you have sharpened it. Just remember that those sharpened teeth will also slice you pretty well... More of sharpening later - for now it's just a simple matter of picking up some tubing to slit and use as a blade guard, at the same time as getting the saw. The cheap plastic blade guards sold with bow saws break almost right away..

All of the Options:

Since there aren't a lot, here are a few pointers..

The Steel Bow Saw:

My cheap Canadian Tire bowsaw is 1lb 11oz total without blade guard for the 30" version. It cost about \$10 on half price sale and blades are about \$8 Canadian. With a small file for sharpening, this saw and a spare blade is good for a few years and a lot of cutting. It's held up well, and cuts better than one would suspect if you hadn't used one a lot. I'd still like a good frame, and I've found one but only in a small size. This tool is the standard - that's all there is to say. A little tough to pack is the only caveat.

A Wood Frame Bow Saw?? It's called a buck saw.

This is the same design as the new take down aluminium frame models. Unless you are desperate for memorabilia, there's not much point in searching for one, or like the early users making your own. The general concept is a bow saw that can be taken down for packing. You need decent hardwood so forget the idea of these being lighter than aluminium frame models. They work as well as a bow saw. I actually found these saws sold new as "The Schmidt Saw" at Piragis - click the icon for a link. Older used saws of this type might not be a great deal unless you can get to use them before buying to ensure that the wood is unwarped. The big advantage of going the wood frame route would be if you are going to use the saw in very cold places where metal is a poor choice of handle material.



Make Your Own Frame?

The lightest saw would be just carrying the blade rolled up into a large circle and placed inside a large pot. You then let it spring open and made your own handle out of wood on the spot. That sounds pretty good in theory, most people thinking of bending a thin sapling. That's not quite the way it works since the blade has to be held rigidly under a lot of tension in order to be an effective cutter. You'd probably end up constructing something like a regular wooden buck saw. This was done though by people packing a lot of stuff into a region to build a cabin for trapping or mining - a number of LONG Swede saw blades weigh very little. For short term stuff forget the idea until someone comes up with how to make a rigid frame fast.

The Aluminium take-down Buck Saw:

My buddy brought me back an 18" Trailblazer from Lee Valley tools. Basically this is a buck saw that all packs neatly into an aluminium tube that constitutes the handle. My first thought was a sort of sinking feeling in the stomach as the only saws like this that I'd seen in the past were triangular in overall outline. Not much you could cut with those as the frame got in the way of any decent saw stroke. This one though is a real H frame buck saw. Decent! As the pictures show everything locks together solidly, and the blade is well tensioned. Everything stores together in the handle, so you're left with 19" of 1 3/8" tube to put into a pack. It only weighs 18oz so a lot of cutting potential in a reasonably sized package. The clearance between blade and handle is about 7 1/2" so you'd have to work around the log to get the capacity to cut 15" logs as stated by the manufacturer. That's the normal way of working though, and my 30" bowsaw is the same.



When you first take the components out of the main tube and see the steel rod tensioner, you get the idea that this comes apart with wingnuts to lose. Well it doesn't and in fact the end of the thread is pinned over so that the wingnut cannot be removed. All in all with a few practise sessions all goes together quickly - and comes apart just as fast. The main tube acts as the handle and is more comfortable by far than the regular bow saw handle. The one possible

Saws for the Outdoors

downfall is that aluminium is cold to hang onto in winter unless you wrap the handle with tape.



This picture shows the common mistake of just putting the tensioner rod into the tube. By fitting it inside the rectangular tube spacer more room is left for extra blade.



The centre spacer only really fits one way. The tensioner rod is of course placed backwards - not to worry it only fits one way too, and that's easy to figure. The bottom line is that once you've fitted the saw together a couple of times and taken it apart and placed the components in the tube - you'll be able to assemble or disassemble blindfolded or in the dark. Well who knows? You might want to do some late night woodcutting..



And here it is together. Just don't forget to put the clip back into place so you don't lose it. Anyway all feels really solid.

It's going to take months of cutting to find out how this saw holds up - but for right now it's fair to say that it looks like a winner. It's a pretty good bet to get one. This is a \$25 CAN tool so the handle part only costs \$15 above the price of the blade. It doesn't seem worth the trouble of making your own handle. The blade comes about as sharp as you are going to get these days.

A second take down aluminium frame saw sold by the same company is the Sawvivor. This one is only 9 1/2 oz for the 15", but has pretty small clearance so the listed greatest size of logs that can be cut is listed as 5".

Meat blades are available for both versions. I was able to pick up a spare blade for the Trailblazer at the local Canadian tire. This can be kept inside the long tube during saw use with some duct tape.

Sawing and Safety:

A saw appears to be much safer than an axe, and it is if you use it properly. If you don't use it properly you might be in for a nasty surprise - especially if you've sharpened it well. It's very easy for a saw blade to jump out of a cut when you just starting. If you're holding the log with the back of your hand close to the blade it can cut you brutally. If you are cutting a horizontal log, pass your arm through the bow of the saw until the cut is deep enough to ensure that the blade doesn't jump out. It looks awkward and it is somewhat, but it beats a vicious cut. If you are dropping trees watch out for leaners that might barber chair or springboard. You are pretty close if they do. The simple remedy is to

put in side cuts as you would with an axe, making the trunk far less likely to split up.

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