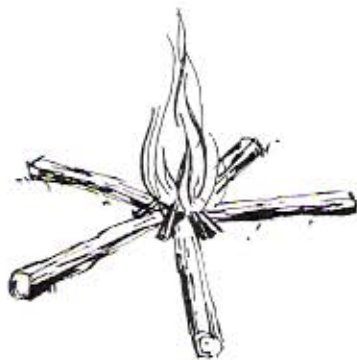


How to Build a Campfire in Deep Snow

by Dick Anderson



Any outdoorsman worth his down vest can build a crackling campfire. Simple—matches, some tinder and dry wood. But remember Jack London's tale about the sourdough in *To Build A Fire*, or the fate of the Donner party in the High Sierra?

The combined elements of high-mountain country, deep snow and freezing temperatures can elevate the most rudimentary task the realm of the near impossible—even in our age of down and nylon. Many of us venture into the winter wilds without sufficient knowledge of how to deal with an unforeseen emergency.

Each winter, groups of ski tourers and backpackers become stranded because of injury or broken equipment, often having to remain immobile for long periods of time. With nighttime temperatures dipping well below zero, the message is clear: build a fire or perish. When the human body is unable to sustain its normal temperature (a condition known as hypothermia) the only salvation is some source of outside heat—a hot drink and a fire.

But the conventionally constructed campfire will not do. It will

burn down through the snow until the walls on top of it cave in or melt away clear to the ground. The ill-fated Donner party had fire holes 15 feet deep.

The first step in building a deep-snow fire is selecting a site. Choose a fairly level spot with an accessible supply of firewood. Avoid overhanging snow-covered branches.

Use skis or snowshoes to tramp down the area. Even in deep powder a packed-out platform will set up firmly enough to allow walking without breaking through the crust.

Gather large pieces of wood for a platform to keep the fire above the snow. The platform will sink slowly but will remain close enough to the surface to maintain a satisfactory base. Make it as level as possible, using larger logs on the downhill side if need be. If you must remain in one spot for some time, it is imperative that you use *green* logs for the platform to prevent their burning through. Only in an emergency should you cut down a living tree.

The best kind of kindling, especially if fresh snow has fallen, is the sheltered undersides of pine or

spruce trees. Dried pine needles and dried sap (pitch) will also catch quickly.

Never try to light a fire with a piece of wood larger in diameter than a match. Select sticks at least eight inches long so that plenty of air can reach the fire. Start it at the *bottom* of the kindling and protect it from the wind.

Add wood while the fire is burning well. New wood, particularly in cold temperatures or at high altitudes, will steal enough heat from a dwindling fire to extinguish it completely.

Should you plan to melt snow over the fire for water, don't repeat the mistake often made by the inexperienced winter camper. A surprising thing happens when a full pail of snow is placed over a fire. Only the bottom inch or so will melt and then boil away without melting any more snow. The result is not only no water but also a badly burned pail. Instead, add snow slowly in small amounts.

Even in our age of down and nylon, building a deep-snow fire is an indispensable procedure for the winter backpacker. ■

It is hard to believe that the good old campfire is no longer the key to backwoods success or survival. But most backpackers have adjusted to the idea. Contemporary ecological concerns have forced us to change many backcountry habits.

We're not arguing that you shouldn't try to start a fire if you find yourself in that very exceptional emergency when it seems to be a

practical way (or the only way) to obtain heat. Fine, go ahead. But we do say that such situations, like snakebite incisions, are too rare to justify every backpacker's learning to perform the skill under adverse conditions. And just imagine what a tremendous amount of fragile vegetation would be destroyed every year in the process of teaching the art of fire building to everybody.

So why burn down the woods practicing fires that aren't really needed, wouldn't keep you warm and are out of step with today's environmental concerns? Read up on how to build an emergency fire because you just might need to, just as you might need to perform an emergency tracheotomy. But as for practicing—keep away from our throats with that pen knife and leave the trees alone. ■