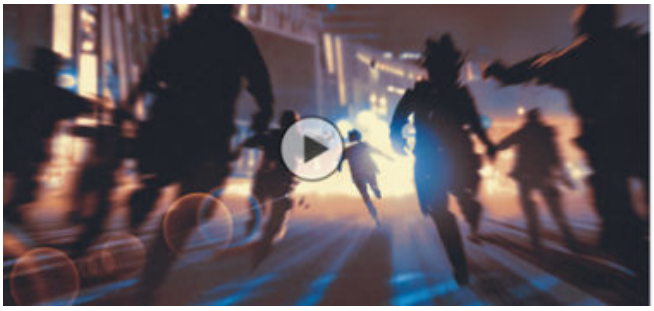
The Ultimate Survival Knife: How to Pick the Right One

The knife is the most basic tool ever created. As such, it is also the most basic piece of survival gear we can carry. This magnifies the importance of making a good decision on the knife or knives you're going to carry. The last thing you need, in any survival situation, is to have your tools breaking on you, especially your knife. I understand having to save money wherever you can, but buying a cheap knife isn't the place to cut costs.

One of the things that will guarantee that you're getting a cheap knife is to buy a "survival knife" which comes with a bunch of add-ons. I have a knife that was sent to me, which has a slingshot, of all things, built into the scabbard. It also has a Ferro rod and a couple of other things. Surprisingly, the price of this amazing piece of survival gear is actually really reasonable. That tells me that the way the manufacturer managed to add all those other goodies into their product, was to use lower quality steel in its product.



Another place where people make what ends up being lower quality knives, at least from a survival point of view, is using Damascus Steel. Now, we need to understand that the Damascus Steel that is used in modern knives is nothing like the Damascus Steel of fame and legend, that was created in the city of Damascus, back in the 1500s. That was an amazing product, which combined two types of steel together, giving

both strength and flexibility. It was noted for having and holding an extremely fine edge. What we have today is a decorative steel product, which uses two different types of steel to generate the same sort of pattern, but is designed for beauty and not to be the best steel in the world.

Knife Shape & Structure

The first thing you want to consider, when looking for a survival knife, is to the shape and structure of the knife. People make mistakes all the time, when buying knives, by not realizing the actual purpose of a particular blade design. The famous Bowie knife, for example, wasn't designed as a woodman's knife, like one might think; it was designed to be a fighting knife.

For your main survival knife, you're better off with a sheathe knife, than a folding knife. Folding knives are much more likely to break under hard use. Carry a folding knife in your pocket; but carry that as your backup, not your primary knife.

Not all sheathe knives are made the same. One key difference is what's called the "tang" of the blade. This is the part of the metal blade that extends through the handle. Knives can be made with a "full tang," a "partial tang" or virtually no tang. This is critical for a survival knife though, as a full tang knife will be much less likely to break when put under hard use. What do I mean by hard use? Using the knife to split a log for the fire is pretty hard use; probably about the hardest use you'll have in most survival situations, unless it you are using it for digging. A partial tang knife can break in such a situation.

The next thing to consider is the blade style. There is a huge selection of knife blade styles available, some designed for general purpose use, while others are designed for a specific purpose. Since the survival knife is a general-purpose utility knife, you want something that is single edged, not double

edged. Double edged knifes are fighting knives. If you feel that you need a fighting knife, then carry two knives; one for survival and one for fighting.

Point Style

The most common utility knife blades styles are the clip point, drop point and tanto. Of the three, the clip point is probably the oldest style, matching that of a bowie knife. While a very useful blade, this style of knife blade has a thinner point, which is more likely to break. Both the drop point and tanto blades have more material just behind the point, giving it more strength and reducing the chances of the knife's point breaking.

Blade Thickness

Finally, the knife blade needs to be fairly thick. I've owned a lot of knives through the years, and I've found that a lot of knife manufacturers save money by making their knife blades thinner. That's desirable in kitchen knives and even nice to have in pocket knives; but not in a sheathe knife that's your primary survival knife. You want a robust blade, with the spine of the blade being at least 1/8" thick.

Blade Length

One of the more common mistakes that we survivalists make is in buying knives that are too big for their intended purpose. Granted, if you are going to regularly use your knife for cutting down saplings to make a shelter and split logs for your fire, you will want a big knife, something on the order of a bowie. The tradeoff there, is that you won't need to carry a hatchet. But that knife will be all but useless for skinning and cleaning animals, especially small game.

It might surprise you; but the best size knife for skinning game is in the three to four inch range. This gives you

excellent control over the knife blade and is short enough to fit into tight areas. At the same time, it’s long enough for doing the task. However, it might not be long enough for other survival tasks.

Again, you can overcome this problem, by carrying multiple knives. I know it might sound ridiculous to carry three knives: one for hunting, one for self-defense and one for skinning; but as I mentioned before, different knives really are designed for different purposes. The way around this is to look for a knife that is between different needs, which will fulfill different purposes. For example, use a true bowie as both a defensive knife and for survival tasks, while carrying a smaller knife for hunting. Another option is to carry a self-defense knife with a spear point, plus a general-purpose knife with a five inch blade that you can use for hunting and general survival tasks.

Steel for the Blade

If we go back to the 1800s or earlier, most quality knives were made from what is known as “high carbon steel.” This steel was highly desired, because of its excellent edge retention. Sharpen a high-carbon steel blade and it stayed sharp for a long time; unlike cheaper steel blades, which didn’t hold an edge as well.

Today, it is difficult to find a knife that is made with high-carbon steel, especially if you’re looking at commercially manufactured knives. Almost all of today’s knives are made using some sort of stainless steel or other. while this change provides us with knife blades that don’t rust, that comes at a price. Stainless steel is harder than high-carbon steel, which also means it is more brittle. So, the finely sharpened edge on the knife will start to chip, dulling the blade. You can’t see most of these chips, because they are too small; but you can tell the difference in how well the knife cuts as it get

duller.

Some of the better steels we have available to us today for holding an edge include:

First, we'll look at a couple of low-end knife steel types. These are lower cost; but don't give you the best edge retention or corrosion resistance.

420J – A general use knife steel, with a relatively low carbon content and high corrosion resistance.

AUS-6 – The Japanese version of 420J. Slightly better edge retention and corrosion resistance.

These steels are rather common and considered mid-range. They are rather common, will outperform the low-end steel variants; but not perform as well as the premium steel grades.

420HC – A higher carbon steel that is in very common use for affordable knives. Very corrosion resistant and easy to sharpen.

440A – Very similar to 4240HC with a slightly higher carbon content., giving better edge retention, but lower corrosion resistance.

440C – A common stainless steel used for commercial knife blades. Reasonably wear resistant, with some corrosion resistance.

1095 – A standard high-carbon steel, with low corrosion resistance. Highly resistant to chipping and easy to sharpen; but doesn't hold the edge all that well. Expect to sharpen often.

Now we move up into higher end steel, where you can expect both increased edge retention and corrosion resistance. The price for this is generally knives that take more work to sharpen.

154CM – An upgrade to 440C, providing improved edge retention, with similar corrosion resistance.

D2 – A “semi-stainless” tool steel, sometimes used for knives. Fair corrosion resistance; but not as good as a true stainless-steel. Harder than some lower-cost steel, holding an edge better.

H1 – Excellent corrosion resistance; a true stainless-steel. However, edge retention is poor.

These steels are considered to be premium, providing better performance than the ones previously listed.

CTS-XHP – This can be considered as an upgrade to D2, with improved corrosion resistance and edge retention.

CPM M4 – Probably the best carbon steel for holding an edge; but at the cost of not being very corrosion resistant. You won’t have to sharpen often, but you need to keep moisture off the blade and might need to grind off rust from time to time.

CPM S360V – Combines excellent corrosion resistance, with excellent edge retention. Often used for high-end pocket knives.

This group of knife steel versions are considered to be ultra-premium. That means they also have ultra-premium prices.

CPM S90V – A high-carbon steel with excellent edge retention. Extremely hard to sharpen and not a stainless steel.

M390 – Combines high edge retention with excellent corrosion resistance.

ZDP-189 – Combining high levels of carbon and chromium, to give an extremely hard steel. Great edge retention, difficult to sharpen and not really all that corrosion resistant.

Elmax – A true stainless-steel, with good edge retention,

while still being fairly easy to sharpen.

CPM-20CV – One of the newer blade steels, combining excellent corrosion resistance, with excellent edge retention.

The Handle & Sheathe

The knife handle and sheathe are probably the least important parts of the knife to concern yourself with. Nevertheless, they should be considered, before making your purchase. More than anything, the knife's handle needs to fit comfortably into your hand, so that you can work with it easily. If you're going to use the knife for tasks where you might end up pounding on it, make sure that there's a metal end cap on the handle. That will save you from breaking your handle. I like wood handles, but some of the softer rubberized materials are actually better.

As for the sheathe, the main concern is that it is rugged. Many manufacturers are switching over to polymer sheathes for knives; but a quality leather sheathe is going to last longer. Make sure it is real leather, not a leather composite; preferably top-grain leather. You can always make or have made a sheathe for your knife, if the one you select doesn't come with an adequate sheathe.

Finally, if you can get a sheathe or modify a sheathe to have somewhere where you are carrying a honing stone right with your knife, that is great. Many preppers forget to pack a

honing stone in their bug out bag, leaving them without a means to keep their knife sharp.