What You Didn’t Know About Starting A Fire

I see a lot written about starting fires. That makes sense in one way, as fire is an important part of survival.

There is no other single thing which can be used as part of providing us with our top three survival priorities. Without the ability to start and maintain a fire, it’s unlikely any of us would come out of a survival situation alive.

But what I’m seeing taught and discussed doesn’t match up with the need that I’m seeing. They violate the rule of simplicity. While it is possible to survive, without keeping everything as simple as possible, our chances of survival are always better when we allow simplicity to be our guide.

Don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying that there is anything wrong with knowing how to use a bow drill to start a fire or even that a Ferro Rod is worthless. What I’m saying is that those shouldn’t be our number one fire starting methods. Rather, they should be things we learn about for use when we don’t have anything else to fall back on.

Survival is difficult enough as it is, without using difficult methods to do the various tasks that we need to do. Therefore, it only makes sense to find the simplest possible methods and do everything we can to use them. Making a debris hut shouldn’t be our number one survival shelter, using a tarp and some rope should be. Foraging for edible plants shouldn’t be our number one means of feeding ourselves, fishing should be. Starting a fire with a flint and steel shouldn’t be our standard means of starting a fire, using matches or a lighter should be.

In each of those cases, I’m looking for the method that gives us the most bang for the buck. There’s nothing wrong with a

debris hut, but it’s a lot more work than rigging up a tarp to make a shelter. Nor is there anything wrong with foraging for edible plants; but you’ll get a lot more calories out of a fish. What we need to concentrate on is what is most effective, not what is the latest survival fad.

Yes, there are survival fads, I see them all the time. Some method or type of product becomes popular and everyone talks about it. A few years ago, space blankets were the fad. At the time, several companies were giving them away. Before that it was survival bracelets. Later it was grappling hooks. Again, none of those were bad, but they weren’t the do all and end all of survival.

It’s Not as Easy as it Looks

In reality, starting a fire in the wilderness is hard; much harder than starting one in your fireplace or fire pit at home. It becomes considerably worse, when you’re dealing with wet weather. Wet weather means wet fuel, but it also means that you need a fire more than ever. So you’ve got to be able to start a fire when it is wet out.

This means having fire starting methods that are sure and consistent in all weather conditions, especially in the worst of them. That means having fire starters which are designed for use when it is raining.

Yet there are many who haven’t thought this through. Take the butane lighter, for example. Disposable lighters have become the prime fire starter for many people. But have you ever tried using one in the wind? Anything more than the slightest puff of breeze will put one out. Starting a fire with one in the midst of a storm can be a real challenge.

Not only that, but butane has a very low boiling point. So if you are carrying one in your pack in cold weather, it probably won’t work. Rather, it will seem like it’s empty, even if it

isn’t. You can solve that problem by putting it inside your clothing and warming it up, but most people don’t know that.

Matches aren’t much better in wet or windy weather than lighters. While you can get them to light, once the chemicals at the end of the match burn out, the match will most likely go out. Getting the matchstick to light under those circumstances, let alone light anything else, is an iffy proposition.

To most people, matches and lighters are considered their primary fire starters. Everything else is secondary. So if the “primary” methods are that unreliable, what does that say for other methods that we talk about? Have you tried using a Ferro Rod when it’s raining? I’ve never been successful with that one. It’s too hard to find dry tinder in those conditions, which will catch with just a few sparks.

Pick the Best Fire Starters

This isn’t to say that all hope is lost. Waterproof matches have been around for a long time. Even better than that, there are stormproof matches. These are matches which have a match head that extends about half way down the stick. They’ll keep burning for more than a minute, even if you light them underwater. While stormproof matches are more expensive than even waterproof ones, they’re still worth having.

There’s also a homemade version of a stormproof match. Wrapping toilet paper around the match stick and then dipping the whole thing in melted paraffin is a great way of taking ordinary strike-anywhere matches and making them usable in the rain. They’re not as effective as the commercial ones are, but they’re a whole lot cheaper.

Like stormproof matches, there are also stormproof lighters. Someone got the idea that an electric spark can’t be put out by wind and rain. They’re right, just as long as the contacts

which make the spark aren’t wet. So a number of different stormproof lighters have been developed, often referred to as “Tesla lighters” or something similar. Some are battery powered and generate an electric spark. Others use a piezoelectric to generate the spark. Still others combine the spark with butane, allowing the lighter to produce a flame and not just a spark.

I have one such lighter in a waterproof case. The butane is refillable, ensuring that I don’t run out and the electric spark is generated by a piezoelectric, so the batteries can’t run out. I can use it anywhere, anytime, with the surety that it will always work, even in the worst of weather.

Be Sure to Have Good Alternates Too

There was a time when my favorite secondary fire starter was 0000 steel wool and a battery. But, while that makes a great party trick to impress your friends, it’s really not very effective. It becomes even less effective if the steel wool gets damp and rusts.

So we’re back to the Ferro Rod, right? Wrong. I’ve got lots of Ferro Rods, mostly because they seem to come with other things I buy. I’ve even had a few very nicely crafted ones given to me as gifts. But considering how few sparks a Ferro Rod produces, especially a small one, I just don’t have a lot of confidence in it.

Rather, I prefer a spring-loaded push sparker for my backup fire starter. There are a couple of these on the market. They work by pushing the end of the Ferro Rod down against a hard surface and a steel blade scrapes the side of the rod, generating sparks. But instead of just a few sparks, it generates a shower of sparks.

These are the kinds of fire starters we need and we need to seek out the best ones we can find. Quite literally, our lives

depend on it. I’m still seeking out others, trying to find methods and gear that I can count on.

Sometimes a Fire Starter isn’t Enough

But sometimes even the best of fire starters isn’t enough. Any fire has to start with tinder; that’s what the fire starter ignites. But finding dry tinder in wet weather is all but impossible.

This is why our ancestors carried a tinder box with them when they traveled. Tinder boxes were small wood or tin boxes (think Altoids tin) where they carried a flint and steel, as well as tinder. They would replenish the tinder whenever they found some, always making sure they had dry tinder available to use, when they needed it.

Carrying good tinder is probably even more important than carrying a good fire starter. You can start a fire with a bow drill or a Ferro Rod, if you have good tinder to work with, even in wet weather. Granted, it’s still easier to use stormproof matches, but it will work.

I’ve seen videos about making char-cloth for use as tinder. That’s good; but if I’m going to carry something to use as tinder, I’m going to think wet weather. In other words, I’m going to want to carry some form of tinder that will work, even when it’s trying to ignite damp kindling. So, I want a bit more than just char-cloth to work with.

The best tinder around contains what fire investigators call “an accelerant.” This refers to nothing more than a highly flammable substance, like gasoline. Tinder with an accelerant not only lights easier, especially with a sparker, but it burns hotter and longer, helping to ensure that even damp kindling can be ignited.

Once again, there are commercial tinder options, with an accelerant, available on the market, some of which work extremely well. When looking for one, you’ll probably find them listed as “fire starters” even though that’s a bit inaccurate. Always be sure to look for one that is designed for use in wet weather, as that’s when you’re really going to need it.

You can also make your own tinder with an accelerant. I’ve seen a number of different formulations through the years. My two favorite are:

Cotton Balls and Petroleum Jelly

This one is extremely simple to do, yet quite effective. All you need is normal cotton balls, like the ones sold in the cosmetics department and petroleum jelly. You can even use the generic brand, making them quite cheap to fabricate.

To make them, place a cotton ball in a bowl. Scoop up about ¾ teaspoon’s worth of petroleum jelly with the back side of a spoon. Then, using the spoon, work the petroleum jelly into the cotton ball, being sure to soak it thoroughly all over.

These burn for about three minutes and will readily ignite

with the spring-loaded sparker I mentioned earlier. They produce enough heat that they will spread that fire to kindling, even if it isn't totally dry. However, they must be kept in an airtight container, especially if they are in a survival kit kept in a hot place (like the trunk of a car) as the volatiles in the petroleum jelly can evaporate.

Black Powder and Nail Polish Remover

When I really need kindling that works with wet wood, I use this one. Harder and more expensive to make, I've used these effectively with wood that has been rained on and is wet. It consists of 5FG black powder (the finest grade) and Oily Nail Polish Remover. It has to be the kind which uses acetone as the solvent.

To make these, put about a tablespoon and a half of black powder in a bowl and cover it with the nail polish remover. Allow to sit for a minute, then pour off whatever nail polish remover hasn't been absorbed into the black powder. What is left will be a thick putty. Take it in your hands and knead it, like bread, folding it over and squishing it together, over and over again.

The idea here is that you're making layers of the mixture. Those layers are important, because they control the burn rate of the mixture. You'll want at least 50 layers, so take plenty of time to knead it well.

As with the cotton balls, these need to be stored in an airtight container as well, for basically the same reason. Once this fire starter dries out, it is no longer usable. It has to remain moist for use. It will burn at something over 400 degrees, allowing it to dry out the wood and ignite it.

One Final Point

One of the mistakes I've seen over and over again is people not taking enough fire starters and tinder with them. A dozen waterproof matches in a waterproof match holder isn't enough to start more than 12 fires; and that's assuming everything goes well. I carry my stormproof lighter, 50 stormproof matches, my spring-loaded sparker, 10 of the black powder tinder balls and 50 of the cotton balls. That's actually very little weight or bulk, but it ensures that I have enough, no matter what I end up facing.