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By Kevin Finney

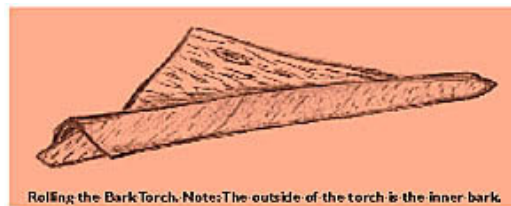
“There is one peculiarity among these Indians however, that they entrap deer by fire, and shoot from their canoes at night. The Indian hunters drift down the stream towards them; and in his canoe an Indian will make less noise than in his soft moccasins on the snow. In the bow burns a light or a torch, which they make very neatly of birch bark. The strips of such torches are bound together with a quantity of rings. The flame burns down from one ring to the next, and bursts them one after another, while the lower ones keep the torch together.”

Johann George Kohl 1855

Although you will probably never use a birch bark torch for shooting deer from a canoe, they are a useful tool to have on dark nights in the north woods. Making a birch bark torch is simple. As long as you follow a few basic rules it will work.

The first step is the bark. You can contact lumber companies to find out about clear cuts, or keep your eyes open for construction sites and lots where birch is being cut. Always obtain permission before peeling bark sheets as the fines for peeling trees without permission are stiff. Once you have found your tree or trees it is time to start peeling bark.

Make a vertical incision from as high as you can reach down to where the bark starts to look coarse. Now work the edge of your knife between the bark and the inner wood to loosen your sheet. Remember to pull the sheet off slowly. If it starts to catch on a knot, a bit of pounding will often loosen it. Barks peel most easily from early to mid-summer when the sap is up, but with a little more dedication can be peeled late into the fall.



Rolling the Bark Torch. Note: The outside of the torch is the inner bark.

Now that have your bark, **you are ready to roll your torch** . I have found from experience that thinner bark seems to work

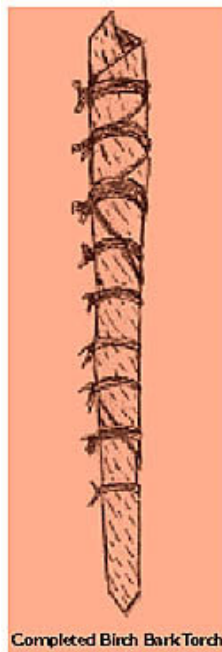
better than thicker bark, although that may not be completely true. I have mostly used inner bark because I generally save thicker sheets for birch bark makuks and other containers.

The torch is rolled at a slight angle forming a cone shape, with the smaller end being the handle. It is very important that the center of the torch is hollow, the bark forming a large tube. This allows air to move through the center of the torch, feeding it with oxygen. My first bark torches were plugged with finely shredded bark scraps, only to burn out after about 20 seconds. After thinking it over I emptied the center of the tube and found this it burned just fine this way.

Next you need to tie up your bark

roll. I generally use the un-retted strips of the inner bark of basswood (also known as American Linden), but I have also used spruce root, dogbane, thin grape vines and a lot of other things. The basswood works well because it ties up tightly, is unlikely to break apart and it involves very little preparation; I tie my torches about every 3 to 4 inches down. This may sound a bit excessive but it only takes one time strolling through the dark woodlands with your trusty torch illuminating the trail, and have the thing blow apart, sending flaming chunks of birch down on you because the two or three you used burned through.

Now that you have your torch tied, **you are ready to light it**. Remember that your torch will burn longer if you hold it vertically. Watch out as even a well made torch will occasionally drop a flaming chunk down (I'm still working on perfecting this).



Completed Birch Bark Torch

Have fun, but don't
burn the forest down!

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