Teaching Scouting Skills

Fire-lighting with Fire-Lighters

It is important for all Scouts to be taught the skill of lighting a fire with solid fuel firelighters. While illustrations abound of fire starting using sparks and natural kindling, for the average 12-year-old to light a fire and produce a hot meal relatively quickly in the average damp British field – fire-lighters make good sense. Therefore using common domestic firelighters instead is plain common sense. The skills of collecting and selecting wood, and of maintaining a strong fire stay the same, but the actual building of the fire is totally different.

Finding wood

First, teach your Scouts about wood collection. You could involve Young Leaders or Explorers by asking them to walk around with the least experienced in your Troop and show them how it’s done.

Look for whole dead branches, even small dead trees. Never damage living trees or shrubs. Never let Scouts go off with saws and axes, a short length of rope to timber-hitch branches together and drag back to camp will suffice.

Wood from pallets containing dangerous nails is common on many sites. I tend to avoid this as it burns too quickly and can lead to a ‘bonfire mentality’. However, it does have the benefit of leaving natural dead wood for those who can be bothered to collect it.

Sorting wood

Before starting any wood fire, collect and sort enough wood for an hour’s burning. You should accumulate quite a big pile – enough to fill a refuse sack. Snap, chop and saw the wood into four sizes:

1. thin as matchsticks
2. finger-thick
3. broomstick-thick
4. small logs.

Gather two handfuls of each. (For ‘natural fire lighting’ you need to add kindling – a ball of pine needles, dead moss, fine bark and flower-stalks.)
How to use firelighters

Break-off two pieces of white block the size of a matchbox and lay one against the other, holding the burning match in the space under one. When using gas lighters, never hold them like a match; keep it upright. Hold one block and light it, it is slow burning and will not explode. Place it on the ground against the other piece. Do not break the block up into lots of small pieces as you need a concentrated fire base. Once it’s burning, divide the smallest wood bundle in two and gently drop each half in a criss-cross fashion onto the burning blocks. Immediately do the same with each bundle until all the wood is piled onto the burning fire blocks. Now leave it for ten minutes without poking it. After a while you can offer a little fanning, but not until the starter wood is in embers. Wash your hands and put the fire to work, but do not cook sausages and twists in the flames for at least an hour after using fire-starters.

Top tips for all fire-lighting.

- **Actually show your scouts how to find dead wood, don’t just send them out ‘to find wood’, you know that will wander around for an hour and find little.**
- **Teach your Troop not to break wood up when they find it, as they can carry or drag more back if it’s intact.**
- Take a short rope – teach them the Timber Hitch.
- **Tell Parents you are teaching their children to use lighters & matches.**
- **Allow Scouts to spend relaxed, supervised time getting used to lighters and holding them while alight.**
- **Buy a load of hardwood off-cuts or bark trimmings from a timber yard. It’s worth it for slow-burning hardwood. In towns look for street trees being pruned, ask for some of the branches and larger chunks for ‘chopping blocks’.**
- **If you are camping on someone else’s property, always make sure you have their permission to light fires, they may be happier knowing you are using altar fires off the ground.**