


Choosing the
**RIGHT
BLADE**





There is no one single perfect choice in either materials or design when it comes to knives... rather a series of compromises and judgments.

One of those pure essentials to any hunting trip is a dependable knife. Whether you have a successful hunt or not, knives play many key roles in any outdoor experience. In this article, we will focus on hunting; however, any outdoorsman will tell you the most important basic outdoor survival kit begins with your knife.

By C.J. Buck

Regular Member, Boone and Crockett Club
President, Buck Knives

The right type of hunting knife to carry is determined by what type of animal or animals you plan to hunt and what other limiting circumstances your particular hunt may dictate. Will you be deep in the field where skinning and quartering will be necessary before transporting your game, or will you have road access right to your kill? Will you be caping your trophy or delivering the head directly to the taxidermist? Will you be involved in dozens of wilderness situations where heavy duty chopping may come in handy? A final key consideration is how you wish to carry the knife. Answers to the above questions will suggest the blade shape, size and weight, fixed versus folding blade and steel advantages/disadvantages so you can make an informed decision.

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OUR FAVORITE KNIVES

B&C Members, editors, staff, and volunteers share some of their favorite blades

The brown leather case that carries three small caping knives and the Knives of Alaska folding caper have been in my hunting pack for the last five years. Superstitious...perhaps. Good luck charm... maybe. Hey, I try not to over analyze. If it's working don't change it.

Kyle Krause | Hunting and Ethics Editor

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KEITH

I grew up outside of a small town in rural Pennsylvania. As a child in those parts, there were three material things that marked your rights of passage. The first was a Cub Scout knife that you received at about 6 years old. It demonstrated that your parents trusted your judgment and ability to be safe. The second was a BB gun you received at around seven or eight soon to be followed by a .22 that again said the same about you. The most important item was a Buck Knife that symbolized your independent manhood. It was usually given to you by your father or grandfather just before opening day. It was meant to gut and skin your first deer. I wore it proudly at my side. In those days you took it to school to show your friends. Boy, have times changed! This knife is and remains the most prized possession I have that reminds me of those good old days. It's seen a lot of deer bellies. If you took care of it, it took care of you.

HOWARD P. MONSOUR | Editor-in-Chief

This knife doesn't have as much history as a few on these pages, but at 28 years old, I have been using for over 10 years of my 16-year hunting career. It was my first "good" knife since it was the first quality blade that I used that wasn't heisted from my dad's hunting pack. It has accompanied me on hunting trips in Alaska, Oregon, Montana, Idaho, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Wyoming. The sheath is custom made from leather and Birds Eye Maple and while I am not sure what the steel is, it sharpens quickly indicative of soft steel, but holds an edge through boning out an entire elk for packing.

JUSTIN SPRING | Assistant Director of Big Game Records

At age 13, 1955, I bought this Western brand hunting knife at a local hardware store in Tucson, Arizona. It cost \$3.45 of my hard-earned money, which made my mother very upset with me. I used it to field-dress my first big game, a javelina, at age 14. Since then, it has accompanied me on hunts from Alaska to Mexico, Africa to Europe. In 1984, I left it on top of a high mountain in southern Arizona after field dressing a Coues' deer. I was tempted to abandon it, but sentiment got the best of me and I made the long climb back for it. Though I have several more expensive knives now, I still use this one frequently, as it sharpens easily, and reminds me of numerous great days afield. It has suffered much abuse, as witnessed by the many dings on the handle where I used a rock to force it through an elk pelvis in my younger, more ignorant days.

ELDON L. "BUCK" BUCKNER | Vice President - Records of North American Big Game

This knife was made by Ken Henschel of Minneapolis, Minnesota. When I was young I always remembered the knife being in my dad's desk, until hunting season came around. Then he brought it out and sharpened it on a whetstone. The blade still bears scars from that stone. Every animal that fed my family was butchered with this knife and I am happy to continue to use it in this way.

REBECCA SCHOON | B&C Official Measurer

ft from Alberta guide and knife-maker, and Pietsch from Calgary has been my "lose or lend" knife of choice for nearly 20 years. It's a fixed blade, not too big, not too small, and tight, with a whole-elm edge, and a handsome wood handle I can't scratch.

BALFOURD | Director of Marketing

When my dad was a teenager in the early 1950s, he pulled together \$8 to buy himself one of Rudy Ruana's custom knives. According to my dad, Rudy (pictured below) crafted his blades from reclaimed Studebaker leaf springs. Dad faithfully carried his Ruana for the next 40 years until he handed it down to me in 1993 when I started working for the Club. I feel honored that my dad trusted me with his favorite knife and plan on carrying it in my pack for decades to come.

JULIE T. HOUK | Director of Publications

I wish I could tell everyone that this Camillus Woodsman, with "Official Knife of the Boy Scouts of America" engraved on the side of the 4" blade, and I had a long and illustrious history that goes back to my scouting days in the 1950s and 1960s, or that it was with me when I field-dressed my first bunny or buck, but I can't. The truth is that I have gone through a number of knives over the years and this is one of two that I have faithfully carried to the top of many of Montana's mountains since a good hunting companion introduced me to it a dozen or so years ago. I like it because it is an especially sturdy folding knife. The combination of the knife and saw blades come in very handy when field-dressing deer and pronghorn.

JACK RENEAU | Director of Big Game Records

My favorite hunting knife is the 691 Zipper by Buck Knives. I was on a deer hunt in California where we were field-testing a new knife. We were riding in my truck when a small buck crossed in front of us. As I sat there relishing the first sight of a deer, the individual riding shotgun opened the door while I was still rolling and ran into the woods after the buck. We followed him only to hear two shots ring out ahead of us. One of the lessons I learned that day was about being ready at all times because hunts throw opportunities at you with no warning. I also learned that our first attempt at putting a guthook on the back of a blade did not work worth a darn. I returned to Buck Knives with my story. The final design worked so well one field tester said it worked better than a zipper, thus the product got its name. The following fall I had that knife in my hunting pack and there it has stayed.

C.J. BUCK | B&C Regular Member

Rudy Ruana
circa 1950



BLADE SHAPES

Skinner

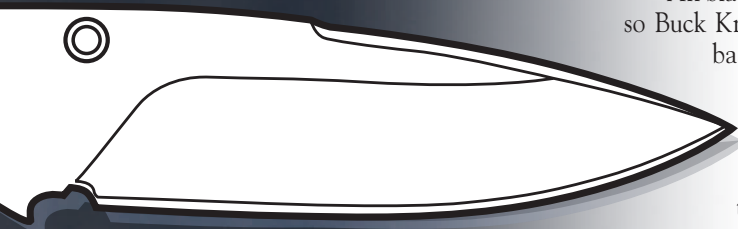


First, you must decide between a fixed blade or folding blade. Fixed blades are heavy duty, easy to clean and easily accessed with a sheath. Folding blades are very safe; most lock open and won't accidentally open in your pack or close on your hand. They may be harder to clean and you have to be careful of keeping the folding mechanisms clean, but they are safer, easier and more convenient to carry.

Whether you decide on a fixed or folding blade, you also need to pick a blade shape and steel that best suits your needs.

All blade shapes have pros and cons, so Buck Knives recommends these five basic blade shapes. Usually a combination of knives with these shapes will best suit your needs, if you are willing to carry more than one blade.

Drop Point



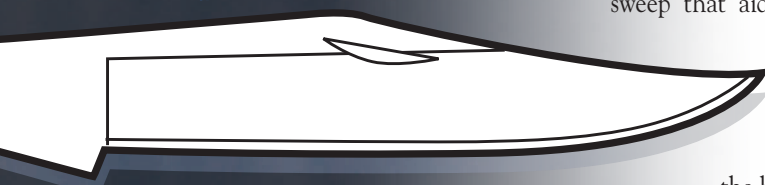
have the same belly width as the skinner which makes it a little less perfect for skinning but better suited for finer tasks and thus used as a general work knife. As with the skinner, the top of the blade drops down toward the tip, which provides a nice thick tip and minimizes accidental puncturing while skinning. Overall, this blade is strong and very versatile.

The negative to the drop point is that the thicker tip makes it much harder to do fine cutting or create puncture holes when needed.

Clip Point: The clip point blade is probably the most common blade and was the shape of the legendary Bowie knife. The front end of the blade is concavely ground to a crescent tip, which makes it thinner and with a much sharper point. This shape provides good fine control for detail work and cutting in tight places. It is well suited for intentional punctures such as new holes in your belt.

A disadvantage is that while the point of the blade is effective for detail work, it's not as strong as the thicker points on drop points and skinners. You have to be careful putting too much side pressure on the tip or you will break your blade.

Clip Point



Skinner: This blade shape is best suited for skinning game. The tip is narrow, while the wide curved belly gives a nice skinning sweep that aids in separating the hide from the meat. The downward-angled, more blunt point makes it harder to accidentally slice through the hide by mistake. The blade grind itself leaves a thicker point, which can be a leveraging tool when popping joints for quartering. Since these are heavy, thick blades, you want to make sure you have a fully hollow ground blade, instead of a thicker flat grind, so you can sharpen it to a razor edge.

The negative here is the wide blade is not suited for fine detailed work or everyday chores.

On a side note, skinners are somewhat similar to the "spey" blade—a smaller blade originally designed and named for castrating farm animals.

Caping: This is a function that has defined the blade shape over generations. It is a small, slim knife, almost scalpel-like in shape. It has a very mild drop point, with nearly a spear-tip shape that is especially useful for the delicate removal of the hide off the face of a trophy animal. The shape also makes caping knives a perfect choice for birds and small game.

The negative is that caping knives tend to be slim and light duty so they are not always a good choice if you only intend to carry a single knife.

Caping



Guthook: The guthook (which we call the zipper) is meant to "unzip" the hide and can be used as an amazing aid to skinning, as in opening the hide on the legs as well as to avoid cutting into the entrails while gutting. Buck's patented guthook design is unique because the cutting edge of the gut hook hits the skin of an animal square and keeps the skin or hair from bunching up in the process.

There are no negatives except the very specialized functionality of the guthook. A special note here is that the worst thing

Guthook



Drop Point: The drop point blade is generally full bellied with a strong, thick point for heavier tasks. It does not

you can do to your knife edge is to come in contact with the hide or hair of a fallen animal. If you use the guthook to open up the hide then there is not much underneath that will dull your skinning knife. A guthook used in tandem with a sharp knife is the truest and safest way to field prep your animal.

BLADE STEEL

Blade steel is an important factor to keep in mind when choosing the right knife. When in the field, performance qualities such as edge retention, corrosion resistance and ductility are very critical. As a general rule, the harder the knife the better it will hold an edge, but it will also be more brittle (less ductile) and therefore more liable to break or shatter if impacted sharply. The steels that combine the best hardness with ductility are high carbon steels, but they also tend to rust the quickest. When it comes to rust or corrosion, it is more than just spots on the blade. Think about how fine the cutting edge of a really sharp knife is. Now think about how much rust it would take to remove that fine edge. Sometimes a softer, but more corrosion-resistant steel will serve you better in the field. If you are the kind of person who cleans and oils his tools every night, then high carbon steel is a fantastic choice. Otherwise I would suggest a better

balance between edge retention and corrosion resistance.

It is important that the steel is properly heat-treated to the appropriate Rockwell Hardness for maximum results. Buck Knives is famous for its heat-treating process and offers a lifetime warranty on every knife.

In the following paragraph we will be referencing RC numbers (degrees of hardness according to the Rockwell "C" scale). The Rockwell scale provides a measurable numeric value that allows us to compare the hardness of different steels: the higher the rating number, the harder the steel. We know how the different steels underperform if they are too hard or too soft so we track hardness numbers regularly.

FAVORITE STEELS USED BY BUCK KNIVES

S30V: We consider this the absolute best all-around blade steel available, and it is made in America. S30V contains carbon as well as high amounts of chromium, molybdenum and vanadium. This steel combines fantastic edge retention and high ductility, yet still maintains some moderate corrosion resistance. Double-tempered, it can be hardened to a Rockwell hardness of RC 59.5-61.

12C27MOD Sandvik: This is a Swedish steel which has great corrosion resistance with great ductility and strength for wear resistance and durability. For best performance, we harden to a standard RC 58-60.

13C26 Sandvik: This is a very similar steel to the 12C27 and also delivers great edge retention and hardness for wear resistance and strength. For best performance, we harden to a standard RC 58-60.

420HC Steel: This is Buck's standard blade material because it approaches the wear resistance of high carbon alloys while delivering the corrosion resistance of chromium stainless steels. Add our exclusive heat-treat process and you have a very user-friendly combination of amazing corrosion resistance with decent tensile strength, hardness and edge retention. 420HC steel is a high carbon (HC) version of standard 420 martensitic stainless steels. They can be hardened to a Rockwell hardness of RC 58.

The key point of this article is that there is no one single perfect choice in either materials or design. Knives are a series of compromises and judgments between corrosion resistance, edge retention, ductility, convenience to carry and ease of use. It pays to take your time and really think about how you plan to carry and use the knife. Informed decisions tend to be better decisions. ■



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