FIELD GUIDE · NO. 05

Building a Fire

A reliable fire is built in stages — and put out completely when you are finished.



FROM THE BOOK

1. Prepare first. Gather tinder, kindling, and main fuel and keep them within reach before you light anything. Lighting the fire should be the last step, not the first.
2. Think in three layers: tinder that catches easily, kindling of small twigs that burn hotter and longer, then larger fuel for lasting heat. Skipping a stage almost always leads to frustration.
3. Choose dry wood. Dead branches still attached to standing trees are often drier than wood on the damp forest floor. Green wood is hard to burn efficiently and makes more smoke and less useful heat.
4. Place tinder where your ignition source can reach it and light it in one or two places. Give kindling time to catch before adding larger wood. Resist constantly rearranging the fire; small adjustments are sometimes needed, but continual disturbance usually works against you.
5. Wind and rain change the job. Protect the fire from the strongest gusts, and look for dry wood under evergreens, in standing dead branches, or by splitting a log to expose dry wood inside. Prepared tinder such as commercial starters or cotton balls with petroleum jelly helps when natural materials are damp.
6. Add fuel gradually. A modest fire with a healthy bed of coals is usually more useful than a large blaze. Never leave a fire unattended. Keep water or a shovel nearby. When you leave, drown the coals, stir the ashes, and feel them with the back of your hand — if they are still warm, the fire is not out. Build fires only where they are permitted.

PRACTICE IT

On a day when fires are allowed, gather a full set of tinder, kindling, and fuel first, then build a small fire in an established ring and practice putting it completely out.