

SCOTT BATTY sits back and enjoys *Woodcraft: A practical celebration of the tree*.

## WOODCRAFT: A PRACTICAL CELEBRATION OF THE TREE

**John Rhyder**

Practical Nature

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It's fair to say that I have been looking forward to the release of this book for a long time. Having first visited John Rhyder's Woodcraft School in 2013 and returned for several courses since, I realised early on that there's much to be learnt from Mr Rhyder. So I was especially pleased to discover that far from being a small and discreet offering, this book is nearly 400 pages long and well-illustrated throughout with colour photographs.

'Woodcraft' in this book includes bushcraft techniques as well as woodworking, or as John says in the introduction, 'I explore the possibilities that trees offer to the woodsman, and the places where knowledge of tools and materials can lead.'

John's lifetime of experience in conservation management and teaching woodland skills shines through each one of the nine chapters, which begin with felling and harvesting. This is about how the non-arborist can take down the odd tree, perhaps for ride management or for craft purposes, and it is work that can be done with an axe and saw.

Moving on to the critical area of choosing and maintaining tools, there is a clear run-down of the features to consider in selecting the holy trinity of knives, axes and saws. This chapter concludes with an explanation of tool sharpening which includes useful step-by-step photos. John goes on to discuss using tool safety, with suggestions for effective carving techniques, grips and projects. There's an entire chapter on bow-making, which walks you through the process with plans and photos, right through to finishing your bow, and making your own bowstrings and

arrows. A chapter on dyes, glue and charcoal further illuminates how to make useful substances from natural resources.

John's experience in all manner of outdoor activities seems encyclopaedic. The section on bark, roots and withies discusses weaving bark, making cordage and tinder and how to make a fish hook using roots. If you've not come across withies before, they can be used like wire or thick cord for binding and are made from the small stems of flexible trees (like young hazel). The chapter on 'Foliage, features and fungi' offers an introduction to tree and fungi ID, focusing on ten common species (ten trees, ten tree features and ten fungi), so that the reader is not overwhelmed.

A book of this nature would be incomplete without a chapter on fire. From friction (think rubbing sticks together) to troubleshooting, it then moves on to siting fires, as well as discussing different fire lays – various ways of setting up a fire to optimise it for a particular function. Do you want a low maintenance, fuel-efficient fire? Or one for cooking on? This part of the book will guide you through how best to achieve it. Leaving no trace is also covered, and I think this is something

many of us aspire to.

The final chapter is about ropes and knots. You may find some of these useful when felling a tree or when making a bow for creating fire by friction.

Alternatively, you might just be glad you read this review first so that you can skip straight to Chapter 9 and learn how to suspend your tarpaulin and hammock safely so you can read the rest of the book relaxing between two trees. Lovely.

If you like spending time in woodland, then I am confident that there is something for you in this book – whether you have your own small woodland to manage or are interested in trying some of the craft work. Far from advocating the exploitation of resources, it has been written with sustainability in mind. When people are able to engage with and take pleasure from the natural environment, they come to value it – and that can only be a good thing for our trees and woodlands.

