

Your New Knife - Choosing the Right Tool

Whether you want to open letters or carry a knife as an EMT or bring a knife along on your African safari, you have hundreds of models of these tools to choose from. In fact, the choices can be overwhelming. Before we talk about price, style, or brand name, let's answer the basic question first. Will it have a single use or multiple uses?

Camping / Backpacking – If you plan to use your knife for camping, you will want it to perform several tasks. You can anticipate cutting branches or whittling an emergency tent stake so you'll need a blade with a straight edge. However, if the fish are biting, a serrated blade would be handy for filleting your catch. You need a folding pocketknife with at least two blades.

Of course, you could carry a second fillet knife in your food pack. But long trips with portages require packing light. For filleting, the serrated blade should be at least three inches long.

Another favorite of outdoors people is one of the many multi-tools. A scissors, pliers, or leather punch can certainly come in handy.

Hunting – If you're a hunter, you'll use your knife for field dressing and skinning the animal. You may even need to cut through bone so you'll need a stout blade with a straight edge. Serrated edges are not made for

sawing action or twisting since both motions can break off blade points.

Most hunters prefer a straight knife, as well. Folding knives have too many cracks and crevices where fur, meat and fat can hide. Blade length is also a matter of preference. Experienced hunters recommend a blade about four inches long.

Determine what the law is in your state on knife mechanisms and blade length. Then follow the law when making your knife choice.

Hunting knives should also have one of two design features for safety. A D-guard on the bottom leading edge of the handle prevents running your wet, greasy hand up the sharp blade. Another option is a deep curved indent between the cutting edge of the blade and the handle where you can nestle your index finger. Some hunters "choke up" on the blade and use the curved leading edge for skinning, so the blade should be short enough to hook one of your fingers behind the curved back edge of the blade or the D-guard.

Everyday Carry – The largest number of knife models falls into this broad category. These are generally some type of folding knife, usually with blades between 2-4 inches long, with or without a pocket clip. Once you define your use, make sure your choice is acceptable to carry or possess in your state.

Unfortunately, most American knife laws are 30-40 years old, were written without a reference to any federal law, and vary from state to state. For example, AKTI reviewed state statutes more than five years ago and found that about one-half the states had some restriction on knife carry based on blade length. A folding knife with a blade four inches or less was typically considered an "ordinary pocketknife" in many states. But other states decided they wouldn't permit carry unless the length of any blade was 3 1/2 inches

or less, or even three inches or less. However, we found no state that actually had a protocol or method by which to measure the blade.

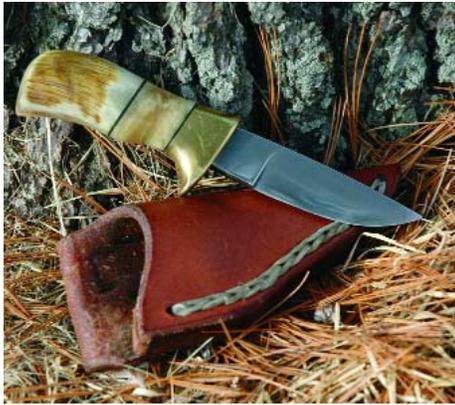
AKTI approved a national "Protocol For Measuring Knife Blade Length" that became effective in January 2005, but it is only advisory in nature.

If you plan to travel with your knife, we strongly urge you to check state law where you intend to travel through and to before taking your knife. Also check on the legality of the opening mechanism. Determine what the law is in your state on knife mechanisms and blade length. Then follow the law when making your knife choice.

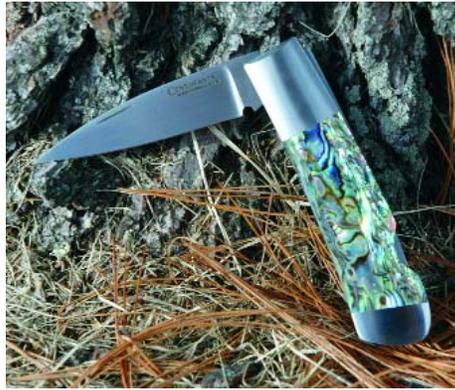
There are many mechanical innovations that affect the opening, folding and locking of knives that lawmakers couldn't have envisioned decades ago, in much the same way we couldn't think beyond our typewriter until Bill Gates and Steve Jobs came along. Fortunately, we didn't consider their innovative tools evil or try to burn their creators at the stake so we now have a world where personal computers and cell phones are common.

For instance, switchblade or automatic knives are outlawed by federal statute and in the majority of states (except for special users). Some states, however, permit their general ownership and carry. California is often considered to be an anti-switchblade state but they actually allow automatic knives that have a blade length of less than two inches.

Here's another tip. Police officers have an incredible amount of discretion about how



Hunting knives such as this one made by Ed Fowler are typically straight knives that can be easily cleaned. The D-guard on the leading edge of the handle protects the fingers and the sheath insures safe carry on the belt. D.D. Kowalski photo.



Custom maker Frank Centofante created this pearl-handled lock-back folder. Handmade knives range from the utilitarian to the ultra-beautiful. D.D. Kowalski photo.



Here's a "classic" folding pocketknife, a three-bladed Trapper with a jugged bone handle from W.R. Case & Sons Cutlery. D.D. Kowalski photo.

they interpret the law. Knife laws are still used in some jurisdictions to hold a suspect until the prosecutor can decide whether you have violated any other laws. When choosing a knife, remember that "smaller is better" in these cases of doubt. If you choose a knife that is as large and "menacing" as possible, it could still fall within what you believe is your state's blade length restriction. But possessing such a knife will always draw more law enforcement scrutiny, even during a simple traffic stop.

Handles, Prices – When you add the ingredients of handle material, blade steels and ornamentation, knife prices can start to climb rapidly. Handle materials range from nylon variations to bone to leather to exotic pearls. Exotic and rare, as in most things, means expensive. If you want gold and jewels, or Damascus steel, they're available for a price.

Knifemakers conduct debates on which knife steels hold a better cutting edge. If you stay with a major manufacturer, they will have made that choice for you. But you could choose to purchase a custom knife at a show or over the internet. There you will pay for the fame of the maker and the level of ornamentation of the knife handle and blade.

Specialized Knives – There are four U.S. magazines that focus on knives, their makers and manufacturers. If you are interested in antique knives, many shows spotlight them.

Some knife users require very specialized tools. If you're an electrician or a scuba diver, your work knives will be vastly different from each other. In such cases, ask your knife retailer to make a recommendation.

One-Hand Knives Are Often Life-saving Tools

The files of every U.S. manufacturer of knives are filled with testimonial letters from customers whose lives or the lives of loved ones have been saved by having a knife available in times of crisis and accident.

Any police officer or fire or emergency volunteer who has been on the job for more than a few months has probably seen knives in action, saving lives. Whether cutting a seatbelt or prying a piece of metal to release a trapped crash victim, there are some life-saving rescues

that only a knife can perform. Ask any victim who was able to free themselves before the car burned what their knife means to them.

Some 20 years ago my then farmer-neighbor told me how he was able to get his knife out of his pocket and opened quickly enough to cut the sleeve of his coat caught in the power takeoff of his tractor. Ask him what his knife means to him.

Walk into any gathering of experienced mountain climbers, rock climbers, campers and wilderness canoeists and ask whether they would face the unpredictable forces of nature without a good knife strapped on their belt. They would be shocked you could even pose the question.

Ask any plumber, electrician, carpenter or mechanic whether they could do their job without a reliable knife.

Ask any of the millions of hunters or fishermen in this country if they would trade their skinning or fillet knife for the caveman's small, sharp stone when they went afield or climbed into the boat.

Ask any gardener, greenhouse owner or orchardist whether they could practice their hobby or business without a knife.

Statutes in many states have recognized that some people, literally, have only one hand, yet they shouldn't be denied access to America's hunting tradition. Several states allow bow hunters with a qualifying disability to use a crossbow to hunt deer.

This progressive attitude, protected by law, helps natural resource departments deal with the growing "plague" of out-of-control deer herds. Farmers are pleased because crop predation is reduced. Insurance companies expect fewer deer/car collisions that threaten life and property. The affected

hunters, of course, are pleased.

But here is a question that must be asked. If we assume that one-armed people are responsible enough to use a crossbow, why do we assume that people with two arms are not responsible enough to

They are law-abiding citizens whose mindset is not changed by the type of knife they choose to carry and use as an everyday tool.

do so?

As you contemplate your choice of a knife, even if you have two arms and hands, ask yourself whether you might ever have need of a knife that can be opened with one hand. If you were ever in an accident where one arm was holding on for dear life or pinned or your clothing caught, could you open your knife with the other free hand?

There are literally hundreds of models of modern-day knives from dozens of manufacturers that can be opened with one hand. When they are in your pocket, however, they have a bias toward closure or a detent in the handle that ensures the blade doesn't pop open until you want it to.

There are also millions of owners of these hundreds of models who behave responsibly. They are law-abiding citizens whose mindset is not changed by the type of knife they choose to carry and use as an everyday tool.

D.D. Kowalski – AKTI

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