

The Knot ~ A Woodsman's Skill

by Anthony Bush

We modern re-enactors who take off into the wilderness on an 18th- or 19th-century trek go heavily armed with all our skills, accoutrements, and dried foods; yet most lack one skill that our forefathers were skillful in: *knot tying*.

Knots have been around for centuries, and a good woodsman should know how to tie and use them, and know the different purposes each one serves.

As disillusioning as it may sound, the *square knot* that we all know how to tie is the most glorified and yet under-strength knot there is, and I am sure that our forefathers left it at home. Clifford Ashley, the author of the definitive encyclopedia on knotting, states that the square knot has been responsible for more deaths and injuries than all other knots combined, since the square knot unties itself.

The difference between a good knot and a poor one is *security*, a knot that remains tied. It is this security, rather than strength, that counts in a knot!

The main question is, which knot to use? Knots are tools, and are meant to connect and hold, and there are over 4,000 different ones. Here are a few of the most widely used ones.

The Clove Hitch

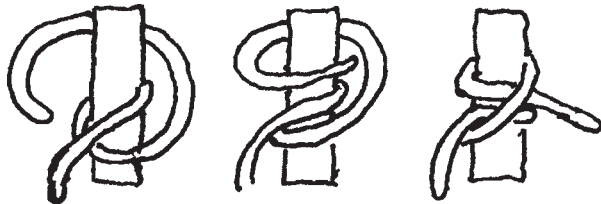


Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

The clove hitch is a good, simple, all-purpose hitch. It is one of my favorites among the hitches. This hitch is your run-of-the-mill kind that is simple to tie and untie, won't jam under strain, and is used to tie a thing to a post.

To tie this hitch, loop the rope around the post or object; see *figure 1*. Now stay above your loop and go around the post or object one more time; see *figure 2*. Now slide the end of the rope under the second loop as in *figure 3* and pull hard to secure it.

The Sheet Bend



Figure 4

Figure 5

The sheet bend is used to tie two ropes together, and we have all needed to do that at one time or another while on a trek. It is a simple, easy-to-tie knot, and it is strong.

To tie this knot, you will need two ropes. Make a loop in one end of one of the ropes as in *figure 4*. Now pass the end of the other rope through the loop, around the base of the loop, and then under itself, as in *figure 5*. Pull hard and you have it – a good, strong knot that will hold up under a load. This bend is best used when you have two short ropes and you need to make one long one.

The Fisherman's Knot

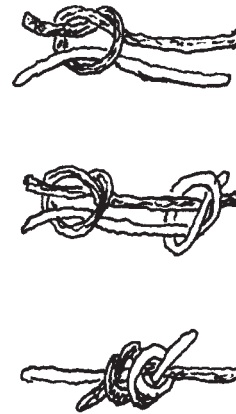


Figure 6

The fisherman's knot is another one that is handy to know even if you are not a fisherman. To tie this knot, start at the top of *figure 6* and work down. Make a loop and run the end of the rope through the loop, but do not tighten just yet. Now run the second rope through the loop as in *figure 6* and tie off as you did before. Now slide the two knots together and tighten by pulling on the ends of the rope. This knot is much easier to tie than the sheet bend, and with larger ropes it makes a strong, neat connection that is far smaller than the sheet bend.

The Two Half Hitches

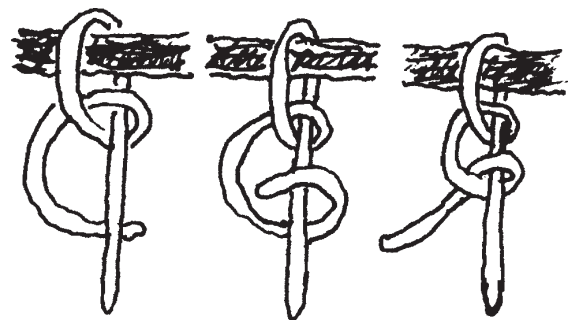


Figure 7

The two half hitches, like the one in *figure 7*, is the next best knot to know. This hitch is used on objects or in places where the clove hitch cannot be used. To tie this knot begin at the left side of *figure 7*, wrap your rope around the object and then behind the rope; bring the end of the rope through the loop

that was made. Now bring the end of the rope once again behind your rope and back through the loop that was made; pull to tighten. The two half hitches knot is good for both simplicity and security.

The Harness Loop

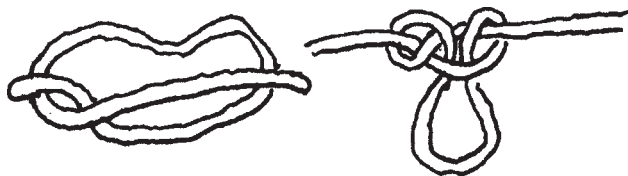


Figure 8

This knot (see figure 8) is one of the handiest knots. It is a simple knot for putting a loop in the middle of a rope or line.

To tie this loop, start by crossing the middle section of the rope to form a small loop. Now lay the section of rope that formed the bottom of the crossover across the loop as in figure 8. The rope should divide the loop in half. Now take the upper section and pull it over and down through the lower loop; pull hard to tighten. You should now have a loop tied as in figure 8. If not, try again; this is a specialist knot and practice is the key in learning how to tie it. This knot was originally used in hauling field artillery into place, but most now use it to tie down cargo.

The Bowline

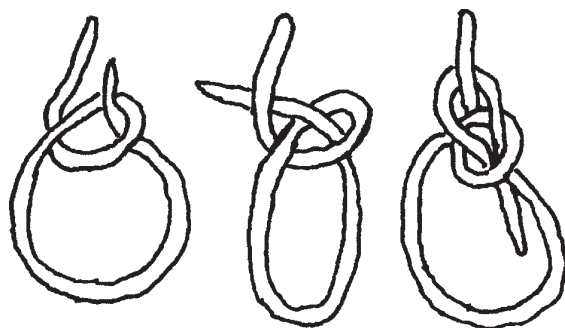


Figure 9

The bowline originated on the full-rigged sailing ships, and it was the preferred loop knot on board. When properly tied there is little danger of it slipping before the breaking point of the rope is reached.

Another important thing about the bowline is that it is easily untied even after being soaked with water and/or put under load.

To tie the bowline: first make a loop in the rope, then take the end of the rope and bring it up through the loop as in figure 9. Now take the end around the standing part of the loop and back down through the loop; see figure 9. Once this is done, tighten it and you have a bowline.

There is an old saying that goes with this knot that makes it easier to remember how to tie it: “The rabbit comes out of his hole, goes around the tree, and back into his hole.”

Now that you know six of the most widely used knots, there are two things you need to remember when tying these (or any) knot: First, *the crossing of the rope or line in the right order*; and second, *working the knot close* – that is, tightening it. It is the second task that most people fail to do when it comes to knots. Working the knot closed means the difference between holding and slipping.

There is only one more piece of advice that I can give you when it comes to knot tying, and that is *practice, practice, practice!* There are a few complicated knots out there to learn how to tie, but most are fairly simple, and once you get the hang of it, they become very easy to tie and use.

Knots have been around for many a moon, and although we are immersed in a fast paced, computerized, cell-phone world, knots still play an important role in our lives. Good luck tying, and *see ya on the trail.*

References and further reading:

- John Cassidy, *The Klutz Book of Knots*
- Clifford Ashley, *Encyclopedia on the Subject of Knotting*
- Maria Costanton, *The Knot Handbook* **MB**



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