

Wilderness Way Tips
By Tamarack Song

Finesse in Firemaking

What is the magic of fire? Could it be that our relationship with fire is shared by all humans, no matter how or where we live? Maybe it is that even our very young are instinctively drawn to it, whereas it instills fear in all other animals. Or is it because our lives have been centered around fire for half a million years? Even in this modern day, fireplaces, backyard grills, and campfires attest to that intrinsic allure. Fire so defines our species that I believe our relationship with it fueled our evolution from primitive to modern humans.

Not surprisingly, making fire by friction is hands-down the most regarded and sought-after skill here at the Teaching Drum School. At the same time, it turns out to be the most intimidating. Nearly everyone can crank out a coal when they are provided with the materials and conditions are favorable; however, real-life situations are seldom as generous. Following are some skill-honing tips that can make the difference between failure and success when you really need a fire. (For basic firemaking skills, refer to the great articles in [Wilderness Way](#) back issues.)

- Rather than relying upon coals or fire extenders, make a new fire each time you need one.
- Forgo easy fire starters such as birch bark, creosote bush, and pitch wood.
- If nothing seems to help your malfunctioning handhold, replace it with a denser material.
- To get a faster, easier coal, sprinkle some of the coal from your last firemaking effort, or pulverized punky wood, into your fireboard hole.
- Do the same if your hole is glazing.
- Use as little tinder and kindling as possible.
- Around a small amount of tinder roll a piece of flexible bark to form of a tube, and blow through it
- Blow as softly into your tinder as you can get by with.
- Experiment with using no tinder -- it can be done.

Firemaking is considered a sacred act by many native people. The Gamilaraay Aborigines of Australia have a special word for it: wii-ma-li. A Lakota child is taught not to pass between the fire and an older person or visitor. I find that when I give fire that kind of honor and respect, I am more likely to be blessed with fire's gifts.