

**Knowing The Land –  
Woodlore & Woodsmanship**  
*Compiled by David Wescott, 2015-2025*

Wildwood wisdom – knowledge of nature

*Crafting is an essential part of acquiring philosophies about the land.*  
Kirk Whipper, Canoe Museum of Peterborough

**WHAT IS WOODSLORE?**

**Woodlore**

- lore (for)** - 1. Accumulated fact, tradition, or belief about a particular subject.  
2. Knowledge acquired through education or experience.

The term most frequently appears in print as “woodlore.” I have seen it also as “woodlore,” and prefer that term, although it appears to have a more contemporary derivation. I have yet to locate a concrete citation of historic use, but I know I have seen it. At this point, the genesis belongs to Doug Elliott, who is part of the contemporary renaissance leaders.

For our purposes, **woodlore** is the natural history or science of living in the outdoors. For example: What woods burn best? What woods are best for carving bowls or whittling spoons? What plants are for our good and which will ruin our day if encountered? How do we tell time by the sun or stars? How do we use nature to predict the weather?

**These are the skills that are derived from the land we frequent;** and the more time we spend out and observe or learn from experienced mentors, the better we understand these subtle skills of the land. This is the realm of the real woodsman, and beyond the average outdoor tourist. DW

*One who travels the life of the open air  
And knows not the things that surround him  
Is a sportsman, not an outdoorsman.*  
David Wescott, 2018

*.....a working knowledge of woodcraft, campcraft, and nature will materially increase the enjoyment and worthwhileness of the outing no matter what the variety. ...All outdoors is inviting...Nature meant it to be that way, for she wanted to encourage you to go again and again under as many different circumstances as possible.*  
Frank Cheley, *Woodcraft and Campcraft* 1904

The craft artist must engage the materials with an extraordinary understanding of the science of the materials he or she works with – their physical strength, weaknesses, and capabilities – or the piece is doomed to fail....the probabilities of success in creating an object that is beautiful, functional and, above all, possible,

increase logarithmically with the artist's knowledge and experience in making the right choices.

*"Chance favors the prepared mind"*

Louis Pasteur

*What those people [squirrel hunters] have shown me was their knowledge of the woods and streams, or woods lore. It's something you can't really learn just out of a book, although books will help you along the way, indeed make up for what has been lost living in large urban areas. But when it comes to putting that knowledge to use on the ground, in the field where it counts, the practical knowledge can only come from people who have been there before you. Otherwise, you have to spend a lot of time learning the hard way, or worse, not at all.*

**Don Meredith, Woods Lore, 2002**

**Read *Woodlore and the Sentimental*, 2002 for more quotes from the masters.**

***Woodlore is the art of understanding and living in harmony with the forest.***

The term is often linked to traditional scouts, Indigenous knowledge systems, and outdoor educators.

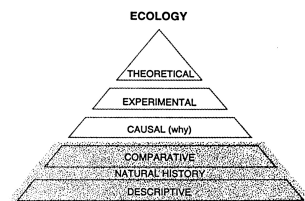
*Woodlore refers to the knowledge, skills, and understanding needed to live, travel, or survive in wooded or wild natural environments. It's closely associated with outdoor living, bushcraft, and traditional wilderness skills.*

**Key aspects of woodlore include:**

- **Tracking & animal awareness** – recognizing footprints, signs, and behavior of wildlife.
- **Plant knowledge** – identifying edible, medicinal, or poisonous plants.
- **Shelter building** – using natural materials to create protection from the elements.
- **Firecraft** – starting and maintaining fires in different conditions.
- **Navigation** – finding direction using natural signs (sun, stars, terrain).
- **Stealth & movement** – moving quietly and efficiently through forests.

**ChatGPT**

## **NATURAL HISTORY**



*These five levels – descriptive, comparative, casual, experimental, and theoretical – compose the science we recognize as ecology. The bottom two levels are distinctive in that they form the realm of science we know as natural science. **Natural history is perhaps the oldest recognized biological science, but natural history is not ecology. It is only two of the bottom layers of the ecological pyramid. We would, however, argue that natural history is the basis of all ecology. As such, any ecologist worthy of the title cannot, should not, be but a naturalist at heart.***

**Jim Halfpenny**

***Winter: An Ecological Handbook, 1989***

***Bush lore is the combination of nature knowledge and bushcraft...***

*Nature knowledge is an understanding of the natural world, including plants, fungi, lichens, animals, birds, fish, mollusks, insects, amphibians, reptiles, rocks, minerals, soil, water, ice, weather, celestial bodies and ecology, the dynamic interaction of each with the whole. It can be learned but, in most cases, not directly taught. Experienced teachers can aid the learning process by creating study routines and providing resources. Observation and study are the keys and it's a lifetime endeavor.*

**Tim Smith - Jack Mountain Bushcraft, [jackmtn.com](http://jackmtn.com)**

Read John Burroughs – *The Nature Fakers*

*“Animals know what they have to know or perish, and they know very little more.”*

***How to Know the Wild Things***  
**Ernest Thompson Seton**

All young folk want to know the ways and things of Nature. The difficulty is to know where to begin. There are so many kinds of flowers, ferns, birds, trees, grasses, bugs, insects, fish, rocks, etc., that one is confused and hardly knows where to begin his search for knowledge.

The trail is not so hard to find as it was a few years ago, for today there are plenty of blazes on its trees and the footway is well worn and cleared of logs - that is to say, there are plenty of good handbooks, not to speak of fellow travelers, who help by pointing to the blaze that perhaps escaped our eye, and who are wearing the pathway smooth.

But one must make a start, and it is well to get a few general rules in mind. First, take one thing at a time. Second, “Look in the book.” Have a simple but comprehensive guide book (if possible one that you can own) that tells in simple, clear language the main facts. Later, you will want to go into more scientific study. Third, make a record in a notebook of what you see and either make drawings or preserve specimens. Fourth, if you have a friend “who knows” get information from him as to the specimen you have seen or have in your possession.

The best way to begin, supposing you are alone, is with the flowers. They are so easy “to catch” and preserve.

Get a good handbook of flowers, and either a big scrap album or, better, a 12 by 18 inch portfolio with twenty or thirty loose sheets of heavy white or gray paper to fit; also a tin case, any big tin will do; but you can buy a properly made one for about a dollar.

Botanical enthusiasm is always at its height just when you find the first spring flower. If you gather and preserve half a dozen wild flowers each time you go out in the season, you very soon have the fifty that are needed to win you a coup. But you are also getting something else - a lot of pleasant friends that you will remember and be glad to see as long as you live.

The Trees are also very easy because they may be found in town as well as in country. Their flowers are usually up high and come in the spring. They may be difficult to see, but if one studies the leaves, the bark, and the general shape of the tree, it will be readily identified, so that one can see and know an old friend at considerable distance. The leaves and flowers may be preserved in the same way as already described.

The Birds are the true love of every young naturalist, and the only reason for giving them third place is that they are harder to study than flowers and trees.

You cannot walk up to the bird, at once note its every color spot, and so find who he is. You must make hasty notes through an opera glass and then turn to a handbook, unless you have a bird-sharp friend with you or a specimen in your hand.

Therefore, oh, bird-lover, begin with a notebook, a field glass, and a good book. These books give a sketch of the habit and range as well as a description of the plumage, nest, and eggs.

The Quadrupeds, or Animals, as they are commonly called, are the most interesting of all to most people; but are the hardest of all to study because they are so seldom seen. Partly due to man's endless pursuit, the wild four footers are nearly all nocturnal now; but they are there, and far more numerous than you would imagine .... But we seldom see the things, how are we to know that they are there?

By the tracks chiefly. The mud, the dust, or the snow will tell next morning much about the creature that passed in the night, and in time, about all that dwell near by.

The difficulties in the way of the student of mammals are perhaps the largest of all, but the rewards are as great; and every skull, every skin, every good track drawing, is a little victory that will give you pleasure to see as long as you live.

Insects are easily studied and preserved. A collection of butterflies is easily begun; while beetles and other orders of bugs, if less interesting, are yet more easily made. In general, to those who would know the wild things: Keep a journal of your notes, sketches, and photos; get a good handbook; collect specimens – and you have the three basic things. All the rest will be in measure of your perseverance.

#### **Nemophilist:**

*A haunter of the woods;  
one who loves the forest and  
its beauty and solitude.*

#### **WHAT IS WOODSMANSHIP?**

Going through Kephart's journals in the late 90s, I came across notations he had made regarding the distinctions made between the skill-sets of outdoorsmen based upon the environment in which they roamed. When dealing with the "craft," many of the principles of what make something work might be determined to be universal; whereas the materials and techniques might be regionally specific. DW

**Woodsmen** - one who works or lives in the woods or is versed in woodcraft; a forester.

**Plainsman** - an inhabitant or settler of the prairie regions.

**Frontiersman** - a man who lives on the frontier - region just beyond or at the edge of a settled area.

*One might, perhaps, compress into a vest pocket manual all the expedients of woodcraft that would have to be practiced in one certain locality, say the Adirondacks, but it would be of little use in a different sort of country.*

*Woodcraft properly relates only to the forest wilderness. The literature of outdoor sports is getting us used to such correlative terms as plainscraft, mountaincraft, and even icecraft and snowcraft. This sort of thing can be overdone; but we need a generic term to express the art, in general, of getting on well in wild regions of any and all kinds, whether in forests, deserts, mountains, plains, tropics or arctics...*

**Horace Kephart, *Camping and Woodcraft***

Bushcraft is **the active component of our interaction with nature** [application of knowledge]. Both art and science, bushcraft is doing, making, crafting, traveling, building and living in the natural world using simple, low-tech tools. Static knowledge, such as how to care for tools, etc., is a small percentage of the discipline. The vast majority is active, dynamic and hands-on.

**Tim Smith - Jack Mountain Bushcraft, jackmtn.com**

*“Woodcraft is the ‘knowledge and skill in such things as belong to woodland life and occupations’... But **among woodsmen** it is understood to be particularly the faculty of **‘being at home’ in wilderness**; of living on intimate terms with nature; not only of knowing her innermost secrets but also how to use those secrets for the forest-dweller’s **comfort and safety.**” - Edward Breck, *Way of the Woods*, 1908*

*A man is skillful at woodcraft just in proportion as he approaches this balance. Knowing the wilderness can be comfortable when a less experienced man would endure hardship. Conversely, if a man endures hardships where a woodsman could be comfortable, it argues not his toughness, but his ignorance or foolishness, which is exactly the case with our blatant friend of the drawing-room reputation.*

**SE White - Camp and Trail 1920**

*The problem of camping is not to test the endurance of our bodies, but rather to find how nearly comfortable and safe our wits, backed by a knowledge of woodcraft, can make us, and for comfort we depend mainly upon two things – food and shelter.*

*In proportion as a man approaches skillfulness in supplying these wants does he show his fitness for the woods.*

*Then if the emergency arise, the prospect of staying overnight away from home camp has no terrors. Your woodsman simply proceeds to gather from the material about him the means for making shelter and goes about the building of it in a manner that is calculated to give utmost comfort.... **All Outdoors**, 1919*

*It’s a country that it took **a woodsman’s skills** to explore and bushcraft knowledge to survive....they were only able to achieve all of these things thanks to the skills they learned from the First Nations – people who had lived for centuries in harmony with what can be one of the harshest environments on the planet...living in partnership with the natural world – never trying to subdue it, but living from its bounty in **safety and comfort.*** **Ray Mears, Northern Wilderness 2010**

*One who travels the life of the open air  
And knows not the things that surround him  
Is a sportsman, not an outdoorsman.*

**David Wescott, 2018**

**Woodsmanship** isn’t a skill that you can master. It’s the knowledge and experience accumulated over a lifetime of being in the woods. ...To say someone is a good woodsman is to say they have a good understanding of how the natural world

around them works...In short, a woodsman is ecologist without any diplomas hanging from their walls.

**Clay Hayes, *Surviving Alone*, 2022**

### **The Modern Woodsman**

*The myriad jingle-jangle of some of our modern outdoorsmen would make our ancestral buckskin men turn in their graves. Their packs were light and their equipment meager, for these adventurous and picturesque men depended upon their skill and ingenuity in woodcraft rather than upon a lot of "things."*

**Ellsworth Jaeger, 1945**

### **Gilmore has a clear disdain for such nonsense and nostalgia.**

#### **Ross Gilmore and The "Modern Woodsman"**

Ross Gilmore (the author of the Wood Trekker blog) doesn't give a single short, dictionary-style definition of "woodsmanship." Instead, he develops a conceptual definition across multiple posts—especially in his writing about the "Modern Woodsman."

From the *Wood Trekker* blog:

March 7, 2013 - *Skills We Lose Because of Our Close Mindedness*

May 2, 2013 - *The Modern Woodsman – Concepts for Redefining Tradition*

January 31, 2014 - *18th Century Woodsmanship and Its Modern Applications*

March 18, 2014 - *19th Century Woodsmanship and Its Modern Applications*

**Core idea of woodsmanship** - *Woodsmanship may be summarized as the practical ability to travel, live, and operate effectively in the wilderness using a combination of skills, knowledge, and appropriate equipment—drawn from both past and modern developments.*

#### **Key elements in his definition**

**1. Practicality over tradition** - Gilmore emphasizes that woodsmanship is not about reenacting the past or following a specific historical style. Instead, it's about what works in real conditions today—choosing skills and gear based on effectiveness, not nostalgia.

**2. A continuum of knowledge** - He repeatedly argues that woodsmanship is constantly evolving, with each generation building on the last. Rejecting modern techniques just because they're modern is, in his view, poor woodsmanship.

**3. Cross-disciplinary skills** - A woodsman should draw from multiple domains (e.g., backpacking, hunting, mountaineering). The goal is competence in long-term, real wilderness travel, not specialization in a narrow tradition.

**4. Capability for extended wilderness travel** - His "*modern woodsman*" is someone who can undertake long-distance, long-duration trips using what they carry and what they can gather, guided by practical skills and tools.

**5. Focus on function, not identity** - He pushes back against defining woodsmanship by labels (bushcraft, survivalism, etc.). What matters is what you can actually do in the woods.

### In plain terms -

**Woodsmanship is not:** pretending it's the 1800s, collecting traditional skills for their own sake, or following a specific "style"

**Woodsmanship is:** being highly capable in the wilderness, using the best available knowledge (old + new), and prioritizing real-world effectiveness over ideology.

This definition reflects the same trend as seen in the modern 'bushcraft' movement – a clear cross-over between traditional knowledge and emerging technologies. DW

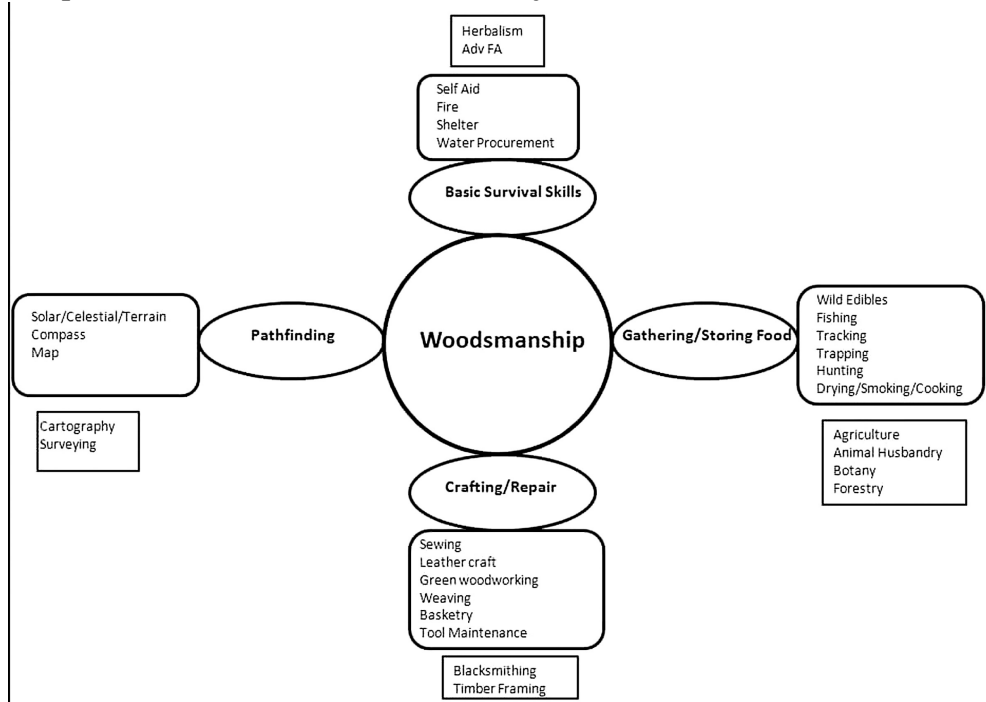
### Contributions from Dave Canterbury

*To me we must truly look well beyond the simplicity of fire and shelter building if we are to mimic [Daniel Boone's] mentality; plant lore and trees, weather prediction, navigation, animal behavior, foraging, fungi, plant medicine, basic camp crafting.....all of these are ultimately important along with others.*

*A person who puts up shelters, starts fires, and does overnights are campers. If they construct objects from the landscape either for camp accessories, shelters, or improvised kit, they are Bush crafters. If they also hunt, trap or fish as a major part of their time outdoors where animal sign, game trailing, wild game processing and cooking are an occurrence to be combined with other food stuffs, if they understand the use of wild plants and fungi for both food and medicine, and if they can path find unknown terrain seldom becoming misguided in direction or position, they are a woodsman.*

**Dave Canterbury**

### Graph attributed to Dave Canterbury

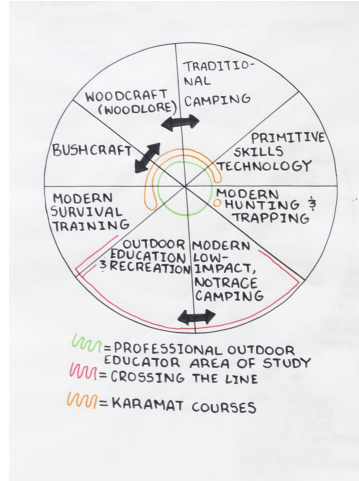


## MODERN HUNTING & TRAPPING

*The harvesting of a wide variety of animals, usually employs modern, high tech equipment.*

*A mix of timeless outdoor knowledge and modern gear, which makes all aspects of hunting and trapping easy and accessible.*

*Very few people need to hunt or trap for subsistence living. Most hunting and trapping today is considered: a hobby, a family activity, a way to supplement food or income, or an opportunity to learn skills and knowledge.* Dale Kiselyk



## WHAT IS FIELDCRAFT?

Fieldcraft has also undergone recent redefinition. It's early use was purely military, but expanded to British woodcraft & bushcraft skills, and eventually for North American use in a more accessible and practical form.

Historical meaning - Fieldcraft refers to the practical skills and techniques used to operate effectively in the field—especially in military, survival, and outdoor contexts. At its core, it's about moving, observing, and surviving in an environment while minimizing risk and detection.

Traditionally, fieldcraft meant: Camouflage and concealment, Navigation and movement through terrain and Observation and reconnaissance skills.

**In modern outdoor culture, fieldcraft has been quietly but significantly redefined**—especially by bushcrafters, wilderness educators, and outdoor leaders. The shift is less about combat effectiveness and more about relationship with the environment, sustainability, and refined practical skill.

The definition of fieldcraft has shifted from basic outdoor soldiering skills to a broader concept that combines: Traditional survival knowledge, Tactical awareness, Modern technology.

Modern bushcraft—popularized by figures like Mors Kochanski and Ray Mears—reframes fieldcraft as: Deep understanding of landscapes, Reading natural patterns (weather, animals, plants) and Moving with the environment, not against it.

The goal isn't to "survive" the land, but to live comfortably within it, using skill, awareness, and the environment to operate effectively in the field while staying safe; the ability to understand, move through, and live responsibly within natural environments using skill, awareness, and judgment.