

## Chapter 8

The two SOU men settled down to their evening tasks, once the Badger Group had taken their leave. The first job was to build a fire for the evening's cooking. They'd already thought carefully about how and where to build the fire. Luckily, there was plenty of flat ground within the thicket, with plenty of room left to set up the camp around it. They brushed away all of the dead leaves and twigs – these would come in useful later,



Jason gathered together a small pile of tinder, kindling and larger sticks to act as fuel. The tinder was made up of dried grass, wood shavings and bits of wool, collected from wire fences around the fields. It needed to be the sort of material that would need the least amount of heat to burst into flames.

The kindling they found was plentiful in the wood. They could easily collect small twigs from a few standing dead trees in the woodland. It tended to be drier than the kindling they could collect on the ground. That they placed in a sheltered spot, off the ground, to make sure it was dry for future fires. To help the fire to get hold, they made fire-sticks from some of the kindling. To do that, they made shallow cuts along the length of each stick. When placed on top of the tinder, they would light much more quickly.

Lastly, they needed larger pieces of dry wood to form the 'logs' for the fire. These too, were plentiful from the dead trees. The damper twigs would be useful later, once the fire was going well.

Once prepared, Jason took out his fire-steel – a Swedish Army Fire-steel – and set to work lighting the fire. He also took a small piece of dry fungus and a little birch bark. This would catch the spark and keep smouldering until it could be added to the tinder.

Gripping a flint rock tightly between his forefinger and thumb, making sure some of the fungus/birch was held by his thumb and the rock, he struck the steel against the rock several times. Sparks flew off and fell neatly on the fungus. He gently held the fungus under the tinder and blew gently until it took flame.

"Dinner will soon be served," he mumbled to himself.

**You must NEVER light a fire in the countryside without a responsible adult to supervise. All fires MUST be properly extinguished before you leave them.**

During the previous evening, Will had walked down to the riverbank and had placed a couple of fish traps in the quieter stretches of water. **(Of course, Dan had got permission from the owner of that stretch of river. You must NEVER fish a river without asking permission!)**

The trap was a plastic net bag, with a small mouth leading to a larger interior. The fabric around the mouth tapers into the inside. When fish swim out, as the inside of the mouth is

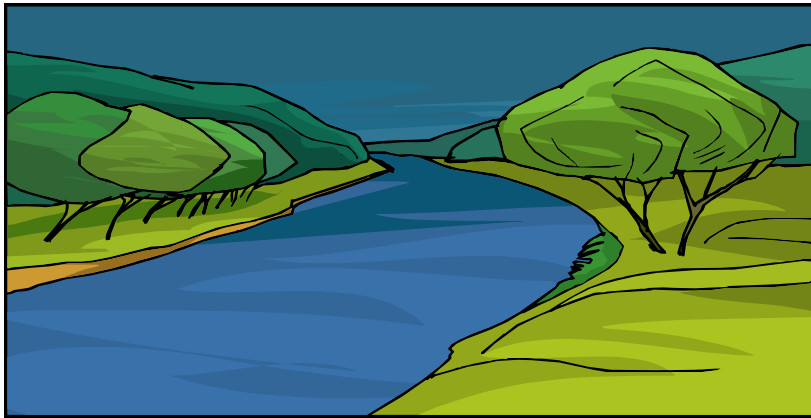


Will had placed the traps carefully, in very effective if he set them from them. The good thing about them hours – even a full day – as the fish could stay alive within them, and would not suffer any harm. It also gives the fisherman the chance to release fish that were too young and too small, and they would come to no harm. Much better for the environment than line traps, he thought to himself.

in through the opening, they cannot get back slightly too small for them to manage.

slow, shallow water. They could, he knew, properly, and he'd had many a good meal is that they could be placed and left for many

As Will neared the river, he slowed his pace until he reached the trees at the bankside. There, he stood still for a while and just took in the scene around him. As far as the locals were concerned, the two 'bird-watchers' had gone home. It wouldn't do to be spotted in the area now! Nothing on the river bank stirred. Even the birds were beginning to look for good roosting for the night.



Will stepped slowly out from between two bushes, and immediately wished he hadn't! He hadn't looked and listened carefully enough. Coming along the opposite bank were 'Chav' and 'Yob', carrying four or five wire snares. Luckily for Will, they were deep in conversation about where to set their snares, and hadn't

noticed his arrival on the bank. Immediately, the agent darted, cat-footed, back into the undergrowth, hoping that the two would not notice the movement.

Sure enough, the two louts had seen and heard nothing as Will melted back into the background. They passed his hiding place, chattering loudly and totally ignoring him. An expression of relief flooded Will's face, though he was annoyed with himself that he could be as careless as to almost give away the whole project!

Once the teenagers had gone, Will once more stepped out onto the riverbank. This time, he was certain that no eyes were watching – except for the eyes of the local wildlife, who certainly knew he was there! He made his way to the first trap and hauled it from the water. Inside was a good sized trout. He licked his lips as he looked at it and imagined the tasty meal that was to come. The second trap gave up another large trout and a small one. Will took out the large fish and gently released the young one back to the river. "You'll live to fight another day," he told it.

Will sat on the bank side for a while, drinking in the cool, fresh air. He stared at the river and pondered. Would there be water voles around here? They used to be found across Britain, on main rivers and moorland ditches. They'll live on reservoirs and fast-flowing streams. They need a steep bank to provide cover, and some deep water for escape routes. They need a good bit of vegetation on the banks too, as they eat grasses and waterside plants. But Will wondered if they lived up there on the dales stream he was fishing.

Will couldn't see any of their burrows on the banks, but it didn't mean they weren't there. He couldn't see any of their distinctive star-shaped tracks anywhere. Their nests are often in the steepest parts of the bank. They'll build underwater entrances as an escape route from predators, such as herons, owls, stoats, pike, rats and, of course, the introduced American mink. Life for water voles was less than easy! Their numbers, Will knew, had dropped sharply over the last few years. Over 90% had gone, someone had told him. And this was mostly to do with the introduced mink.

Sometimes people kill voles, thinking they are rats. But you can always tell the difference. Rats' ears stick out – voles don't. Voles have furry tails – rats don't. A vole's muzzle is rounded – rats' noses are pointed. A vole always enters the water with a 'plop' – rats don't.

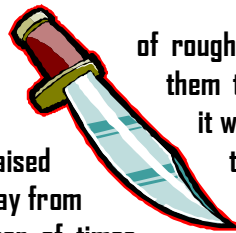
But in the end, it is the mink that has done so much damage, Will reflected. Of course, as is often the case, it is our fault! We introduced American mink to farms, for their fur. Some escaped and some were let free by silly people who thought they were being kind. It wasn't kind to the voles! When voles are attacked, they'll dive

into the water and trying to get to their underwater entrances. But there is no escape from the mink, as they can swim and hunt in and out of the water. The best thing to happen to Britain's waterways recently, has been the arrival of many more otters. They've spread back to rivers where the water has been cleaned well enough to allow them to survive. They are not lovers of mink and will drive them out wherever they can! You never know, thought Will. We might be able to save 'Ratty' from *The Wind in the Willows* yet. He hoped so.

Will pulled his mind back to the here and now, and to the job in hand, He swiftly returned to the camp and presented his catch to Jason. The two set about gutting the fish and placing them on sticks above the flames. Almost immediately, a delicious smell pervaded the campsite.

After a tasty meal of trout and mixed nuts, followed by a bar of fruit and nut chocolate, washed down with a pot of steaming coffee, the two sat down to care for their gear; a task that had to be done if the equipment wasn't to let them down.

Jason took from a plastic pot, a set of rough stones - some coarse and others fine. He'd soaked them in water before using them to sharpen his knives. He looked at his sheath knife and felt the blade. He didn't think it was bad enough to use the coarsest of the stones. He laid the knife on another stone and raised the back until the bevel of the blade lay flat on the stone. Now he pushed the blade away from the top of the stone. He did this a number of times before tuning the blade over and doing the same to the other face of it by pulling it towards him.



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Jason then continued to make more strokes on each side of the blade. He kept the stone wet by splashing it with water regularly. After a while, he changed to a finer stone and started all over again. Once he was satisfied, Jason cleaned the blade, tested it and then stropped it on the inside of his leather belt. This, he knew, would help keep the blade sharp and tough. His eating equipment and all-purpose knife were next for the treatment.



At the same time, Will sat on a tussock and looked over his leather gear. It was a while, the thought, since he'd cared for them. All of his leather had been made from leather tanned with vegetable products. He thought that they looked and felt better. The hides are tanned using leaves and tree bark. They weren't naturally waterproof, but that was easy to fix with simple polish. They'd lasted Will for years and, he felt, improved with age.



Some of Will's leather gear had got damp, so he'd hung them inside the shelter, in an airy spot, but away from the effects sunlight and of the camp fire, near to the doorway. The leather needed to be dry, as feeding wet leather seals in the moisture and can cause it to rot. Will took out a small pot and opened the lid. Inside was a greasy substance. It was a leather conditioner which was Will's favourite for caring for his leather gear. It contained oil to sink into the fibres of the leather and a wax coating for the surface. That would keep out the water.

Will picked up a soft cloth and dipped it into the conditioner. He wiped it gently over the leather and left it for a while. Overnight would have been better, he thought, but he needed the gear to be ready. He sipped on another pot of strong coffee as he waited, and thought about the two teenagers wandering along the riverbank carrying snares. Snares are a real problem, and Will was worried. Where were they going, and what were they catching? They'd need to check it out in the morning.

When the leather conditioner had been on for a while, Will took a soft brush and gently removed the remainder from the stitches and crevices. He then took a second



soft cloth and buffed up the leather until it shone like bronze. Will was always careful with his equipment. It could be a life-saver! [http://www.fiebing.com/Leather\\_Care.aspx](http://www.fiebing.com/Leather_Care.aspx)

As the daylight turned to dusk, and the shadows became long and black, the two men sat on the bankside, downwind of the sett, and waited. They thought for a moment that they heard snuffling from the sett, and at one point, Jason thought he'd seen a striped snout emerge and sniff the air, but, other than that, nothing moved in the woodland. Only a fox bark broke the silence. They guessed that there was just too much human scent from the day's activities, and that it was making the badgers nervous. They'd turn and make their way back to the chambers, to sleep the night away instead of foraging. The two men knew that it wouldn't really affect them. They'd be out tomorrow, when most of the scent was gone.



Dusk turned to dark and the two men crawled into their sleeping bags, within the bivy bags. It seemed to have been a long day, and the two were worried about what they'd find the next day, after the two teenagers' snares had been out all night. They would have to face that in the morning. <http://www.raymears.com/>

<http://www.bushcraftmagazine.com>

