

FORM MEETS FUNCTION

AA FORGE CUSTOM KNIVES USES MODERN MATERIALS AND TRADITIONAL DESIGNS FOR SUPERIOR PERFORMANCE

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JOSHUA SWANAGON



Above: The Nomad made short work of this 3-inch round for shelter building.

They really are too good to leave at home. I recently had the opportunity to speak with Adam Gray of AA Forge Custom Knives and discuss his line of bushcrafting knives. I was very impressed with his knowledge on the subject, as well as his process: each knife is handcrafted with a particular focus on quality. Before speaking with him, I had already taken a look through his catalog and thought that his work was as stunning as it was well crafted.

We discussed his Camper and Nomad models, to which I was really drawn the first time I saw them. He agreed to send them to me for testing, and when they arrived at my house, I was very excited to see what they could do.

The Camper

Although there are any number of configurations available for any knife in the AA Forge line, the Camper I

“THE THICK STOCK AND O1 TOOL STEEL COMBINATION ENSURES AN EDGE RETENTION THAT CAN TACKLE TOUGH CHORES IN THE FIELD AND IS EASY TO SHARPEN.”

received for testing had a beautiful two-tone handle made of ironwood with .125-inch white Micarta liners, a Shadetree ruby red burlap Micarta bolster and brass hardware.

I could not stop looking at the three brass pins at the bolster; I was completely drawn by how great they look. The brass-lined lanyard hole at the butt dresses it up nicely and adds extra protection to the wood scales when using a lanyard.

The grip has been hand-shaped for a hand-filling experience, which provides excellent grip during field tasks. The grip's ergonomics provide fatigue-free handling during extended use. Personally, I might have narrowed the grip just a little bit for

my average-sized hands, but it was still comfortable and didn't create hot spots during use. For larger hands, the width of the grip might be perfect.

The 4.215-inch blade has a straight spine with little belly, providing a very dramatic tip, which is excellent for piercing and maximum penetration for drilling tasks. To test the strength of the tip, I stuck it into a maple tree and twisted and pried, with no issues at all (although the tree might not agree).

It features a Scandi grind which, combined with the .125-inch thick stock, provides a very keen edge, while the O1 tool steel offers excellent retention and easy field sharpening.



Left: The Nomad was able to process some fallen seasoned maple into kindling-sized chunks.

The sheath is a heavy-duty leather dangler, made by Badger Claw Leatherworks, with some very subtle tooling along the single stitched edge. The dangler loop is removable if you would prefer to use it as a standard belt sheath, but the ring is not, so it might get in the way a little. But you can request a standard belt sheath or another option when ordering.

The Nomad

As with the Camper, the Nomad can be ordered in any number of configurations. The one that I received for testing features handle scales made of custom dark green, loose weave coffee bag Micarta—from Shadetree Custom Composites—and .125-inch brown Micarta liners, two copper mosaic pins, two brown Micarta pins and a copper lanyard. The coffee bag Micarta



Left: After notching the front of the round and finishing with a back cut, the 3-inch round fell easily.

Your Knife, Your Way

Being a completely custom maker gives Adam the ability to give you the knife you want, every time. You can select the look of your knife all the way down to the pins. He offers two different grind types, flat Scandi and convex, and he also offers two choices for blade finish, polished or hammered. Once you have selected the model, pins, grind and finish, he offers a variety of handle scale options, from beautiful woods to burlap Micarta, and there are multiple colors to choose from. The options are only limited by your budget and imagination.

“THE GRIP HAS BEEN HAND-SHAPED FOR A HAND-FILLING EXPERIENCE, WHICH PROVIDES EXCELLENT GRIP DURING FIELD TASKS.”

Badger Claw Leatherworks

Badger Claw Leatherworks is a full featured leather-working outfitter that has been in business since 2011. Its list of adventure products far surpasses a short list of knife sheaths and includes items such as leather and canvas dump pouches, firesteels, leather field strops, canteen carriers, leather sleeves for UCO candle lanterns, etc.

However, when it comes to its knife sheaths and axe masks, they are built with serious, hardcore field use in mind. You can order anything from a standard belt sheath or dangler to custom-detailed sheaths and full-featured sheaths with all of the bells and whistles.



Above: The Camper was able to get into tight spots to carve the barbs on this field-expedient frog gig.

+ SPECS

Camper Specs
Blade Material: 01 tool steel
Blade Length: 4.125 inches
Handle Length: 4.625 inches
Overall Length: 8.75 inches
Blade Thickness: 0.125 inch
Blade Hardness: RC 60-61
Weight: 6.4 ounces
Handle Material: Ironwood with .125-inch white Micarta liners, Shadetree ruby red burlap Micarta bolster and brass hardware
MSRP: \$245 base price (\$285 as tested)

is one of the cooler Micarta patterns I have seen in a while, and even though you can't feel the texture of the bag itself, the material does make the scales a little more grippy.

Also similar to the Camper, the grip has been hand-shaped and ergonomically designed to fill the hand nicely during use. As with the Camper, I might have gone with slightly



Right: The handle contouring on both knives made them really comfortable to use. You can see from this photo that the stock used on the Camper (right) is much thinner than that of the Nomad (left).

+ SPECS

Nomad Specs
Blade Material: 01 tool steel
Blade Length: 4.125 inches
Handle Length: 4.625 inches
Overall Length: 8.75 inches
Blade Thickness: 0.156 inch
Blade Hardness: RC 60-61
Weight: 7.9 ounces
Handle Material: Custom dark green, loose weave coffee bag Micarta from Shadetree Custom Composites with .125-inch brown Micarta liners, two copper mosaic pins, two brown Micarta pins and a copper lanyard
MSRP: \$245 base price (\$275 as tested)



Left: The curls I got from the Camper (on the right side of the stick) were a little lighter than those from the Nomad (on the left side of the stick) due to its keener edge.

thinner scales, but it didn't cause any fatigue or hot-spot issues during use. Larger hands might appreciate the width of these scales as well.

The Nomad has the same 4.125-inch blade length as the Camper, but features a drop point, which is my personal favorite tip style for its robustness and the fact that the tip centers nicely with the handle. The Nomad also features a Scandi grind, but the thicker 0.15625-inch stock adds more meat behind the edge. It is not the fine slicer that the Camper is, but it can tackle heavier duty chores. The thick stock and 01 tool steel combination ensure an edge retention that can tackle tough chores in the field and is easy to sharpen.

For the Nomad I received the standard belt sheath from Badger Claw Leatherworks. I received both knives at the same time and was told that the sheaths are ambidextrous between models—which they were—but I felt that, for me, the belt sheath fit the style of the Nomad better.

Field Testing

I was fortunate enough to receive the Camper and Nomad just before heading to the Michigan Bushcraft Spring Gathering, back in the beginning of May, and was able to use them to carve tent stakes and other implements for camp setup, among other typical camp duties. When passing the knives around to my fellow bushcrafters, the general consensus was that they were great knives. A couple of people even recognized that they were AA Forge as soon as they cleared the sheaths.

Since that time, I have had the opportunity to get them out into the woods for a little more use, as well as during a family camping trip on Memorial Day weekend, and they never let me down.

Although either is capable of any job I've tasked it with, they each excel at certain things.

The stout stock of the Nomad made it better for processing wood for fires or general heavier duty bushcraft tasks. At one point I tested the Nomad by taking down a 3-inch round to see how it would perform for shelter building in an emergency



Left: The spine was completely undamaged and only had some dust from the ferro rod, which wiped off easily.

situation, and it took it down with no issues or dulling to the blade. I also split some seasoned fallen maple into a pile of kindling with no edge degradation whatsoever.

The Camper was a great slicer and did an excellent job processing food, as well as anything that required a finer touch, such as feathersticks and getting into tight spots for adding barbs on a frog gig. The aggressive tip was easy to stick into a seasoned fallen maple tree to make a one-handed featherstick; this was even after all of the tasks I had used it for throughout the past month.

Both performed admirably during the time I used them, and even after everything I put them through, each could still slice through paracord like they had been freshly sharpened. I felt no resistance at any point on the edge. The 90-degree spine on each knife, combined with the O1 tool steel, also helped throw really good sparks from my ferro rod.

Stands up to Hard Use

From the time I first saw the work being done at AA Forge, I really wanted to put its knives to the test. After speaking with Adam, I knew that his knives were going to be able to stand up to the kind of scrutiny I tend to put knives through. Although they are a little on the heavy side, I find their performance makes up for it.

For completely custom knives, with endless personalization options, I am really impressed with the prices Adam is able to offer, which, for me, puts AA Forge directly onto the list of companies I would recommend to anyone looking for a solid bushcraft knife. AA Forge knives not only stand up to hard use, they will definitely turn heads when you pull them from their sheaths. They are amazing companions, and I was very glad I didn't leave home without them. **KI**



Above: The Nomad's drop-point tip is a little more robust than the aggressive tip on the Camper.

Right: The Camper's aggressive tip stuck deeply into this fallen maple tree, which allowed me to fashion a one-handed feather stick.

“THE CAMPER WAS A GREAT SLICER AND DID AN EXCELLENT JOB PROCESSING FOOD, AS WELL AS ANYTHING THAT REQUIRED A FINER TOUCH ...”



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