

## Campfire Basics

To many campers, the campfire is a beloved and indispensable outdoor tradition—a kinetic, luminous, dreamlike force of nature that has served as the centerpiece for cozy backwoods gatherings for generations.

Campfires remain an entrenched, cherished institution within contemporary campground culture. Yet today it's rare to find wilderness destinations at higher elevations where wildfires are permitted. Why? The reasons include:

- Repeated wood-gathering has depleted the high country of soil-stabilizing, nutrient-building ground cover.
- Human-built fire rings, with their sooty residue, have tarnished many natural settings with scars of human intrusion.
- Poorly tended fires can quickly escalate into ruinous wildfires.

As a result, campfires are now usually restricted to low-elevation zones (typically below 4,000 feet) or drive-in campgrounds. While many people retain a fond, sentimental attachment to campfires, modern backpacking stoves—cleaner, convenient and efficient—have rendered functional backcountry fires nearly obsolete.

Campfires, though, **can be lifesavers** in emergency situations. If you are wet, cold, without a working stove and unable to find shelter, a fire can help you fight off hypothermia.

If you choose to build a campfire for any reason, follow these guidelines:

### Campfire Tips

- Step 1: Find out if any **fire restrictions** apply to the area you are going to visit. Check with officials of the agency (National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, a state park, et al.) that administers the land you are visiting. During severe dry periods, fires may even be prohibited in campgrounds. It is your responsibility to know the regulations and how to maintain a fire.
- In **campgrounds** and other recreation sites, build fires only in fire rings, grills, stoves or fireplaces.
- In portions of the **backcountry** where fires are permitted, **use an existing fire ring** if available. If you have to build one, dismantle it when you are done. If one already exists, clean it out before you depart. How? See the "Pack Out" entry below.
- An alternative to a fire ring: Build a **mound fire**. Using your sanitation trowel, build a circular, flat platform of mineral soil (sandy, light-colored, nonfertile dirt) about 6" to 8" high. Use this as the base for your fire. Ideally, build this platform on a flat rock. The goal is to avoid searing (thus sterilizing) any plant-supporting soil below. You can easily disperse the mound when you're finished. Some people even haul items like barbecue pans into the backcountry to serve as portable bases for fires.

- **Clear away all flammable material** from your fire "pit." Ideally, the pit (base) of your fire should be nonflammable earth (sand, gravel) or mineral soil (often found in streambeds or on gravel bars).
- **Use only dead wood lying on the ground.** DO NOT cut live trees or break off limbs from standing plants or trees, even if they're dead. Wildlife makes use of such snags.
- **Collect firewood far away from your site.** Otherwise, over time the area will appear unnaturally denuded. In campgrounds, bring your own wood or buy it locally.
- **Start the fire** by building a small, inverted cone of dry sticks, twigs and forest duff and igniting it with a match. (Be sure to carry waterproof matches and firestarter—2 of the [10 Essentials](#).)
- Add larger pieces of wood as the fire's kindling temperature increases, but **burn no pieces thicker than an adult's wrist.** Thick chunks of wood are rarely allowed to burn completely and are typically left behind as blackened, unsightly scraps. Move embers to the fire's center to burn them completely. Ideally, you should reduce them to white ash.
- Burn pieces of **trash ONLY** if they can be fully consumed by fire and turned to ash. Do not attempt to burn plastic, cans or foil. If you do try to burn such things, gather up what's left of them and pack them out.
- If you are building an **emergency fire** to stay warm and survive, it's understandable if conscientious land stewardship is not your primary focus. Still, don't pillage the landscape. At this point, firestarter and waterproof matches will be 2 of your most valued possessions.
- If you need to **dry out clothing**, tie a cord tautly between 2 trees well above the flames; carefully drape a few wet items across the cord and over the fire.
- **Extinguish all fires** by pouring water on them, stirring the ashes, then applying more water. The ashes should be cool to the touch.
- **Pack out** any trash found in your pit. Extract any charcoal pieces left inside your ring, carry them away from your site, crush the chunks, then scatter the remnants and dust throughout a broad area. Dismantle any structure you might have built, and please don't leave behind any stacks of wood. This may sound like a lot of work, but it is the responsible way to disguise a campfire's long-lasting aftereffects.

**Bottom line:** Campfires are 1) Fun in campgrounds, 2) Rarely allowed in high-elevation wilderness settings and 3) Often vital in emergencies. If you build a fire, it is your responsibility to know how to build it, maintain it, extinguish it, then minimize any impact it creates.