

Conservation Corner:

The Boy and the Adze

By Niki Wilson



For the past two weeks I've been listening to my 11-year-old son trying to pound a river stone into a flat blade. It's slow going – the rock he's bashing the stone with is of similar hardness. Still, he's determined to craft an axe-like tool comparable to those first used in the Stone Age. "It's an adze, mom," he says. "A-D-Z-E." Of course, I say, then scurry away to google it.

The adze first originated in Africa, but some version of it came to be used in most places in the world, and modern versions are still used today. A Stone Age adze consists of a sharpened stone lashed with twine onto a wooden base with the blade perpendicular to the handle. Traditionally it's been used to cut, carve and smooth wood, or

any other vegetation that needs to be crafted into something useful.

Making tools from the raw materials of the land are part of the survivor-man spell my son has fallen under. His partner in crime is my 37-year-old brother who takes him adventuring across his 80-acre patch of mostly wilderness alongside the Upper Fraser River in the Robson Valley. Their recent projects include looking for clay seams along streambeds from which they hope to build bricks, and building willow wattle fences that encircle garden beds and the chicken coop. In between visits, they've assigned themselves the homework of reading how-to books, and watching the Primitive Technology YouTube channel.

"Imagine. People HAD to do it this way

before they had iron," my son says as he pounds away. It looks like a lot of work.

My son has always enjoyed building. He has a love affair with LEGO that spans over nine years and is still going strong. But this is different. He's working with the elements. He's doing things that could have serious consequences if he doesn't pay attention. When he cuts willows, he uses a saw. When he wanders through the forest, he could run into a bear or stumble over one of many wasp nests. To get at the streamside clay, he must navigate the broad leaves of devil's club. At the end of days on the acreage he is dirty, tired, happy, and slightly more independent.

A little while ago I realized my son's face had really leaned out over the past few



The braided wood in Dylan's hand is a rope he and his uncle Tag are making to lash parts of their lean-to together. PHOTO: © N. WILSON



Tag, teaching Dylan to make fire. PHOTO: © N. WILSON



Dylan and Tag gathering material for their lean-to.
PHOTO: © N. WILSON

months. Gone are the round, freckled cheeks of his early childhood. Our feet are the same size, and sometimes when I'm doing laundry I have to look really hard to sort his jeans from mine. He still loves hugs, and snuggles at bedtime. We are close. But he is no longer a little boy, and I'm keenly aware that right now he straddles two worlds. As he transitions away from boyhood, he will have less need of me, at least in the way he has up until now.

It's hard to let the little boy go. I can still feel the chubby hand on my face he used to wake me when he'd crawl in to bed each morning years ago. If he must grow up, I'm so glad he has great swaths of wilderness in which to get to know himself – to test his mettle. In the coming weeks, he and his uncle plan to conjure fire from sticks, and build a lean-to shelter deep in the trees. The fragrant pine and deep cedar forests offer themselves to him with all of their magic and danger. He's ready. 🌲

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