

Fletching By Hand

by Jon Jeffer

I started to make my own arrows just about the time I finished my first primitive bows. This may conjure up an image of a guy with a new bow, looking at it and scratching his head. That was about how that happened. I had the weapon, but I was missing the ammo! It probably happened just like that back in the Stone Age!

Anyway, I knew something about the way that modern arrows are fletched. A jig is used that holds the arrow shaft and the feather, and then with glue applied to both, the jig will hold them together at the right angle until the glue dries.

This system works great, but it has a few disadvantages. First off, I did not have the jig and I didn't want to buy one. My thought process did not get much further than that, but its worth noting that it is not a process that lends itself to fletching in the field, or under primitive conditions.



So I set out to figure out how to fletch arrows by hand.

There are a lot of traditional fletching styles that were done by hand. Some are clearly easier or harder to accomplish. One option for primitive hand fletching is to just do a really lousy job. That was in fact my first approach. My first primitive bow was light, in the 25 pound range, and the arrows were made out of Phragmite reed shafts, with wooden foreshafts sharpened to points. I used goose feathers left at full height, and wrapped three of them on with cotton thread soaked in glue. The first ones were anything but symmetrical, and the process always seemed like I had one hand too few. And some of those fletch jobs were way over on the ugly side of hideous, but they all more or less flew.

My bows went up in weight and quality, and my aspirations as a fletcher was towards more durable, more accurate arrows, and a way to make them that would let me gin up a mess of arrows within some reasonable amount of time. I tried a number of approaches and variations, but finally arrived at a method that worked. As it turns out, it is more or less the method described by John McPherson in his book, "Naked into the Wilderness".

Shafts: I started with straight shafting material. My shafts were 5/8" hardwood dowels from Home Depot. This is not exactly Abo, but it sure saves time working down shoots to homogenous gauge, and straightening them with fire. When you get lumbeyard dowels to use as arrow shaft material, it pays to pick through the pile. First, pick shafts as straight as you can get them. One way to do this is to hold them up and sight down the length of the shaft and rotate