

MAKING AN AXE HOLSTER

By Oliver Cameron
with Ole Wik

I don't use a conventional holster for small axes. I use what I call a drop-in holster that I wear on my regular pants belt. The axe goes into the holster with the blade end down.



One of Oliver's many axe holster designs, this one for a double-bit. Some details differ from those he described during the interviews.¹

Image: Curt Madison

I make my holsters out of stiff leather, like moose rawhide or ugruk² skin. They're wide enough so that the blade will drop right in—a little wider than what you would have if you wound the leather tightly around the blade. They're deep enough so that the handle doesn't flop out and catch on things too much, and they're rather long above the pocket for the head—six inches, or maybe more. If they're too short, it's hard to drop the axe in or get it out. I like to have them down a ways on the side of my hip.

Where the belt goes through the upper part, I usually leave that piece of leather the full width of the holster. There's a slot for the belt, fairly close to each edge. The belt goes through the slot, underneath, and out the other slot. This tends to pull the holster around a little to the shape of your body.

When you're putting that axe in or taking it out, you want yourself and your pants to be protected from the blade when it comes up out of there until you get it clear out. Also, you don't want your clothes bagging out around the edge of things so that it gets tangled and you can't get the axe in and out freely.

I always carry my axe with the sharp edge forward. Depending on how deep that holster is, it's going to be pushed back or forward sometimes, and also I want the handle a little bit farther behind me. When you kneel down, you want that holster so that it will come down alongside your leg. If you wear it on your waist in such a way that the handle is toward the back, it's more out of the way of your arm.

There's always a bit of junk getting down into a holster. You can just tip the holster upside down and dump some of it out, but I like to leave that opening so that some of it can find its own way out.

The leather is not just sewed to itself—there are wooden sticks that are sewn in to keep the pouch open. In the back side of the pocket, that stick is a little deeper and a little higher than the front side, so you can feel for it and know where to drop the axe down in. You don't have to look to see what you're doing or fumble around to find the sides of the holster.



Oliver made this single-bit holster later in his life, in Norway.
Note the small spreader sticks between the front and back sides.
Image: Heidi Dammann.

The leather that makes the main part of the pocket is just a little bit wider than the length of the axe blade. Then there's a strip of leather sewn onto the edge of that, where the

sharp edge of the blade will be. One of the wooden sticks is sewn to that strip to act as a spreader.



Hatchet holster from Oliver's homesite on the lake.
The edge of the blade goes against the shorter wooden stick;
note the small piece of leather scabbed onto the leather there.
Image: Rein or Dyre Dammann

That makes a step where the leather comes around the axe, so that there's no way for the axe bit to cut into the stitching between the two sides. Here's why I make the front and back edges as I'm trying to describe:

When you put a sharp tool in there, you don't want it to be able to come in contact with the stitches that are holding the edges of the holster together. You could use wire to prevent that, but that wouldn't be good for the blade, and if you used rawhide, that wouldn't be good for the lacing.

There are two ways to deal with that. You could use a damp piece of leather, putting your lacing in and out and pulling it up tight enough so that there is a bit of wave in the edge of the leather. You start with six inches or so of leather thong, so that you will have some left over. Then you go down under each stitch.

It's not a sewing machine type stitch—it's just in and out so that you have a gap on each side of what you see as stitches. You tuck that free end under the stitches from the same side each time, all the way down. That helps to put that wave in. As you come up on the opposite side you do the same thing—you tuck your extra material under each stitch until you get to the top, and then tuck it under itself and cut it off.

If you wet your thong a little bit to soften it, it will draw up as it dries and make that wave in the leather a little more pronounced. The wavy shape prevents the edge from coming into contact with the stitches.



Wavy rawhide stitching on an ulu holster, and a tin can blade guard for a hatchet.
Image: Rein or Dyre Dammann

That wavy edge applies to knife holsters and whatever. I used to use it for axe holsters too, but it's better to have a little more room in the holster for the axe, so I started using the method with the sticks.

Where the cutting edge goes, the edge of the main piece of leather butts up against the stick. In order to hold that stick against the edge of that leather, you put a scab on it. You run your lacing through the scab, through holes you've drilled in the stick, and finally through the leather of the main part of the holster.

For a double-bit axe, you do this on both sides. For a single-bit, you don't need a scab on the poll³ end—you just sew through the stick and the leather. You also need a much thicker stick at the poll end of the axe than at the blade end.

Stiff leather doesn't want to bend real short where it's folded back to up make the pocket, so there is a bit of a gap between the end of the stick and where the leather comes around the bottom of it. That leather just touches the inside of the sticks.

The sticks protrude a little bit above the main part of the leather in order to give you something to bump up against with the back of your axe when you're putting it away.

Was this your own original design?³

It was just a matter of “needism”, which is the mother of invention, of problem solving.

1) This essay stems from a series of telephone conversations that Ole Wik had with Oliver between December 2007 and February 2008. Highlighted text indicates remarks made by Ole.

2) Bearded seal (*Erignathus barbatus*)

3) The poll is “the blunt or broad end of a tool such as a hammer or ax.”
(<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/poll>)