ROPE

By Oliver Cameron
with Ole Wik

It pays to learn how to use rope. As for knots, there are lots of books about that.

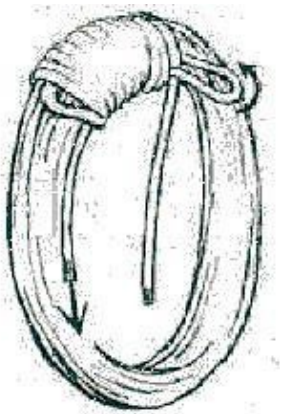
My big complaint about the usual handling of ropes out in the bush is that there will be a whole tangle of it lying in a corner, and you have to spend half a day straightening it out and getting it ready to use.

I can understand how that happens, alright. When you get done and are not used to handling rope, you just wad it up and carry it over there and dump it. But there are ways to prevent that.

I have a wooden peg with lengths of rope on it. Actually, it's a branch with a fork in it. The crotch hangs upside down in my shop, and gives me a convenient place to hang bundles of rope. One length is fairly long, maybe 50 feet.

You've done some sailing and boating. Maybe you can describe how to tie off a coil of rope. There are several ways of doing it.

My favorite way is where the two ends overlap after the coil is all made up. I fold one end back, wrap the other end around the loop, tuck it through the loop, and pull the loop up tight.



Mountaineer's coil.
Image: http://www.traditionalmountaineering.org/FAQ_MiddleMark.htm

Instead of just tucking the end through that loop, you can just pull a bight through. Either way, when you're ready to use it, you just unwind a couple of turns there, and you're ready to go.

There are quicker ways of doing coiling a rope, but they're less secure. The reason I like that method is that you can handle that bundle quite a bit and it stays fastened.

With small rope, 3/8" or 1/2" even, and especially with plastic rope, I find that it's easier just to make a coil around my forearm. I grab one end between my thumb and finger, usually of my left hand. Then I wind the rope down around my elbow, come back up across the forearm, and bring it back in between my thumb and finger. I keep going back down and crossing each layer around my forearm so that each coil is a figure eight.

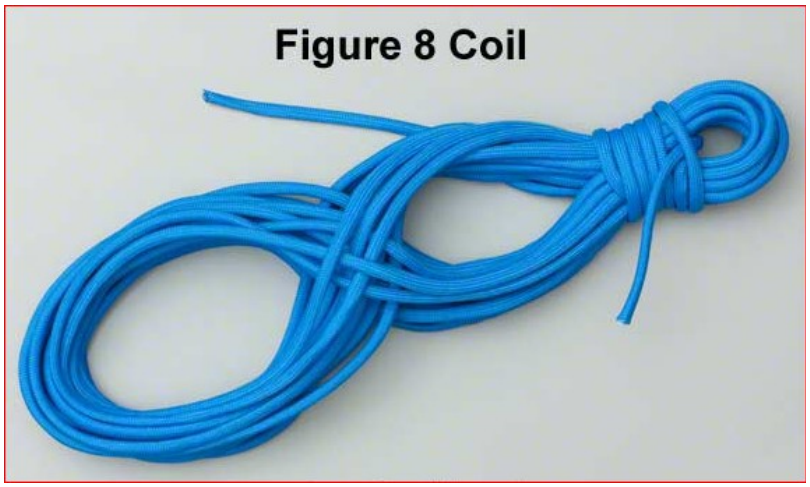
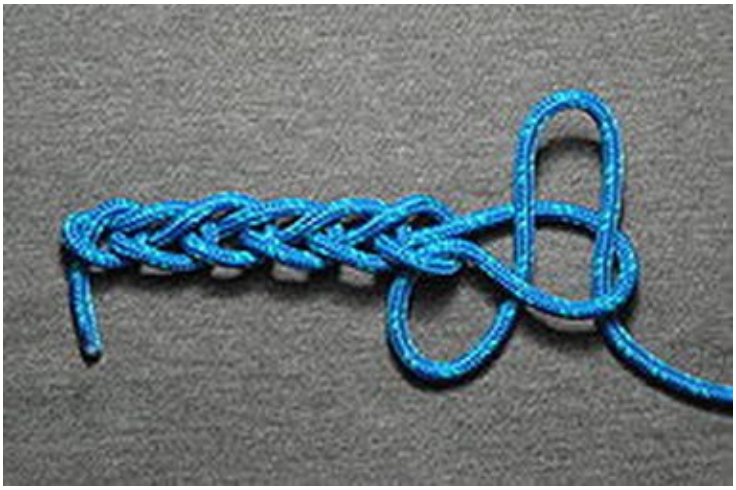


Image: http://www.animatedknots.com/coiling/index.php

If the rope is lying out straight on the ground when you put it up that way, it seems to slide up pretty well without kinking as you bring it in. You can put it up real quick and tie it off around the middle with a couple of half hitches, or a certain kind of a hitch.

When you have a long rope that you don't really want to cut, you can shorten it by making loops in it, sort of like a chain stitch. You pull the end through the last loop so that it won't pull out. The looping makes the rope a little bulky, but when you need a long length again, you just pull that end back through and pull the loops out.



Daisy Chain or Sinnet Knot.
Image: http://troop408.weebly.com/daisy-chain.html

Quite often when I buy rope, I buy long lengths of it, a whole coil. When I want to make a length to use, I wrap a piece of tape around it, go an inch and wrap another inch of tape, and then cut between them.

That's a lazy way of doing things, but when you're in a hurry, it gets the job done. Of course it's easy enough to braid the strands back through, if you have the patience and the time to do it.

There are two ways to make an eye in the end of a rope by splicing. One way is used for cable, and the other is used for rope.

When you double the rope back, you give the end you double back a little extra twist, and start splicing the ends onto the rope. When you've got them pulled in and rolled a little bit, the eye opens out like it should. If you don't give it that little twist to start with, you've got a twist in your eye too. You have to pick it open to use it, especially if the eye is a rather big one.

Eye splice. If you get this part started correctly, the loose ends weave nicely over and under the coils of the standing part of the rope.[1]

Image: http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~pbtyc/B_S_M/Third_Instruction.html

What types of rope do you like to use?

Parachute cord. Most of it is a braided sheath around individual strands of smaller diameter. The more you stretch it, the tighter that sheath pulls on those strands to pull them together. For some reason, that makes a cord that doesn't have too much stretch in it.

If I want a string for carrying around in my pocket, very often I cut off a piece of parachute cord, maybe 3' or 4' long, get ahold of one of those strands in the middle, and start pulling on it and working the outer braided part down on the core. After I try to pull it down so far, it won't go any more, so I have to rake it off until it comes off all the way down. I just work it with my finger and thumb, and work that bunched up material along ahead of my hand till I get to the end of it. Then I work a little more along, and eventually I can pull the individual strands out.

Those strands are very strong, and are very useful for sewing or whatever. They're much coarser than a thread, but for some things, they're just what you need.

Parachute cord with the inner threads partially extracted. The threads on this particular piece of cord were too fine to be useful for sewing. Image: Ole Wik

Then I melt the ends of that sheath and usually tie a loop in the end of it—nothing fancy, usually. Since there's a little bulb where the end of the sheath is melted, I make an overhand knot. Instead of pulling the end through, I pull the bight through. The overhand knot draws up around the sheath just close to where that melted end is, so that it doesn't pull through.

Oliver's loop knot in the flat outer sheath. The little black dot on the right side of the knot is the melted bulb at the end of the sheath. Image: Ole Wik

Why do you want a loop on the end of a string that you carry in your pocket?

The majority of times when I use that string, I want to anchor one end, and the easiest way is to have a noose there so that I can fasten it over something. Or, if I want to bundle something up, I wrap the rope around it a couple of times, put the end through the eye, and draw it up.

The outside sheath part is longer than it was when it was wrapped around the inner strands, but it's braided, and it's not elastic. It's very strong, it's flat, and it doesn't take up a lot of room in your pocket.

I have several of those, and some are fairly long. I have a couple that are about 10' long, actually, but I don't ordinarily carry them in my pants pocket. I might carry them in a coat pocket or something like that.

What about the type of parachute cord that doesn't have that braided outer sheath?

That's a net twine type of cord. If it's nylon, it does have a little stretch to it. It can be useful in drawing things up tight. If it's a fairly large piece of twine, you can splice an eye in the end of it if you want to.

A lariat rope has four strands, laid so that the rope doesn't have much stretch. Ordinary rope only has three strands. It'll have a little more stretch to it than the lariat rope.

What about braided cord, the same size as parachute cord?

I use quite a bit of that too. I buy it in half-pound or sometimes one-pound spools. I have both that braided rope and regular three-strand laid rope about that same diameter.

Sometimes it's easier to use the braided rope where you don't want kinks in it. It seems that you can wad it up in your pocket without it tangling up as much.

What you do with three-lay rope?

First of all, it can be made out of nylon, polyethylene, polypropylene, and so on. One of them has quite a bit of stretch to it. I think the polyethylene does not. If you don't want a lot of stretch, you use the appropriate type of poly rope. It's not much affected by rain or wet and doesn't mildew or rot, but it doesn't hold knots.

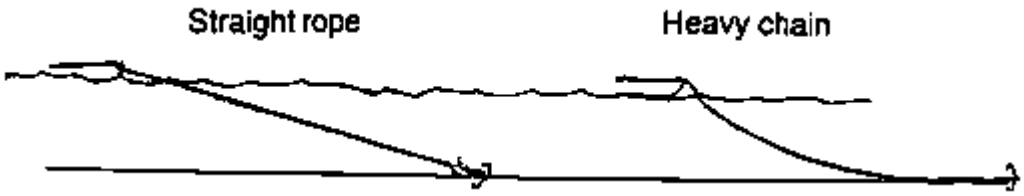
I use the type that doesn't stretch when I lay out dog harnesses for the tug line--not the individual tugs to each dog, but the main line that all the dogs are roped to.

Sunlight is bad for those kinds of ropes.

That's right.

I use a nylon rope as an anchor rope, because it has quite a bit of stretch. When your boat is out at anchor, there are always waves. The rope is working all the time against the anchor, and it's better to have a little give in it.

Did you have a scope chain between the end of the rope and the anchor?



A piece of heavy chain at the anchor will help buffer the rise and fall of the boat in the waves, and will also tend to pull the anchor into the bottom rather than lifting it. Image: http://www.dulhunty.com/dmp3.htm

It depends on the anchor. Sometimes I do, but not always. If you have a short piece of heavy chain, it'll hold the end of the rope that's fastened to your anchor down against the bottom. When the boat surges a little, it'll tend to lift that chain part up, and then it'll

drop back down again. So, the chain acts as a kind of buffer there. It's a much coarser chain than a fellow would need just to hold the boat, because it has a different purpose.

And by the way, I use a black colored rope. It's treated with something like tar, and stands up to the light better.

What diameters of rope do you most often use?

That's a tough one. I have a number of salvaged ropes. The main thing about rope is to have plenty of it.

I buy the 1/4" rope in a big spool and probably use more of that than any other, just for ordinary homestead work. It's plenty strong for guying out antenna poles and for most any use around.

Then I have some 3/8" and 1/2". Sometimes it's not a matter of strength, but just a matter of convenience in handling it, of getting ahold of it better.

It's hard to have too much rope around. When I'm tying up a raft of logs, getting ready to tow it, I like a fairly bulky rope, like 1/2".

There is a kind of hollow poly rope that has a woven sheath only. You can splice it with a fid[2]. Do you use that?

I have used rope spliced with a fid for harnessing dogs. When hooking an individual dog into it, one end of the rope is spliced into the main tow line, and the other end has a toggle on it that goes through a little loop at the end of the dog's harness, behind the tail.

Hollow braided rope has no core.
Image: http://www.wingsandwheels.com/page30.htm

Any further thoughts on rope?

For wrapping or tying things together, you can of course use strips of bark, or especially spruce root. You can make a rope out of grass, actually, if you know how to twist it.

Maude Cleveland had an old hawser that had been discarded by the tug or somebody. She unraveled it and used it to make some rope. She hung a net on it. She also took a gunny sack apart by pulling all the strands out independently. I think she braided those, but she could have laid them just as well.

I recall that one of the early explorers of the Kobuk Valley gave a canvas tent to the Eskimos. They immediately took it apart to get twine to make fish nets.

They used to have to use huge amounts of willow bast. They'd strip the bark as soon as the sap came up. They'd store that, and maybe soak it. The inner part of that bark can be pulled apart to make strings. They would lay or braid those fibers together.

Robert Cleveland once mentioned that his grandfather had seen an actual willow bark net being set. He said that they handled it very carefully when it was dry.

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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) A fid is a useful tool for splicing hollow braided ropes.

http://golfv.com/PRODUCTCART/PC/viewPrd.asp?idcategory=0&idproduct=527

A brummel splice gives you a secure loop in one end of a line. In this image, the free end has yet to be fed inside the remaining rope.

The next image shows the finished splice.

Both images are from a 14-panel animation showing step-by-step instructions. See http://www.animatedknots.com/brummeldemo/index.php?Categ=splicing