

Survival of the Bush-Craftiest

A preeminent manufacturer of no-nonsense survival knives hones its bushcraft blade skills

By Pat Covert

ESEE Knives has always been known for making no-nonsense survival knives. It is in the company's DNA and burned into the minds of a cult-like following who often find enough in the ESEE line that they need no other knives. In a great sense, they're right. From the small Candiru drop-point, integral fixed blades to the Junglas machete/choppers designed for the Latin American jungle, there are plenty of offerings to slake any knife user's cravings, including six other standard models in the line. And that's not counting the new Camp-Lore series of bushcraft knives.

All of ESEE's knives are made in the U.S.A., which no doubt appeals to many of their loyal flock. If a machete is desired, the company offers one manufactured in South America, complete with a Micarta® handle for a firm, durable grip. Plus there are a couple of ESEE branded folders produced offshore.

Jeff Randall is the president and co-founder of TransEquatorial Solutions, Inc., the parent company to ESEE Knives and Randall's Adventure & Training. Randall's Adventure & Training (acronym R.A.T.) offers a host of task specific survival programs to individuals, corporations and government entities around the world. R.A.T. was formed in 1997 as a jungle survival school for individuals, pilots and military personnel seeking terrain and

environment training. Shortly thereafter the company signed a contract with the Peruvian military to run students through a Special Operations jungle survival course.

ESEE Knives was formed as an offshoot of R.A.T., and the ESEE acronym stands for Escuela de Supervivencia (survival school), with the E's representing Escape and Evasion. Using the vast knowledge gained from jungle survival experience, Randall, along with co-founder and business partner Mike Perrin, saw a need for a line of rugged, no-frills survival knives and set out to accomplish that goal. If anything they far exceeded it. ESEE knives are used in harsh environments worldwide.



With its 4.1-inch cutting edge and handle designed for extended periods of use, the ESEE-4 fits the generic parameters of a bushcraft knife nicely. (Pat Covert image)

THE ESEE-4 FACTOR

Ironically, and unbeknownst to Randall and Perrin when introducing one particular knife model to customers, ESEE released a perfectly sound bushcraft knife—the ESEE-4 model—around the same time the bushcraft movement started taking root here on American shores. The ESEE-4, debuted in 2007, sports a 4.5-inch 1095 high-carbon-steel blade, an alloy overwhelmingly preferred by bushcrafters for its ease of sharpening in the wild. And while the early enthusiasts of the genre preferred a Scandinavian, or zero-bevel, blade grind, commonly referred to simply as a “Scandi grind,” the full, flat V-ground blade of the ESEE-4 has since found wide acceptance alongside convex and saber grinds.

The bushcraft knife, dating back to the early written works of Horace Kephart in the 1890s, the writings and broadcasts of Les Hiddins of Australia and Mors Kochanski of Canada in the 1980s, and more recently Ray Mears of England, is primarily a wood crafting knife. A medium-to-light-duty knife, a typical bushcraft blade is geared toward such tasks as shaving bark off tree branches, sharpening tent pegs and carving notches for traps and such. It is not a chopper per se, but can be used for preparing a

meal, dressing game and light shelter building. The ESEE-4 performs all these functions in easy fashion, hence its wide acceptance by bushcrafters.

“It is probably the best all-around camp/bush knife we sell right now,” Perrin states.

And it would also be a part of the impetus for bushcraft knives to come for the ESEE brand. “The ESEE-4, being a favorite among bushcrafters, naturally led us into knives that were more directly associated with the finer techniques of the craft,” Randall informs.

CAMP-LORE IS BORN

While Randall and Perrin are not bushcraft aficionados, several of their instructors at R.A.T. are extremely well versed in the practice, and the company owners turned to them for design expertise. “The guys we collaborated with on designs for the Camp-Lore series worked closely with us for quite a while, and we have a lot of respect for them,” Perrin notes. “They develop their designs the same way Jeff and I do—through hard use, trial and error.”

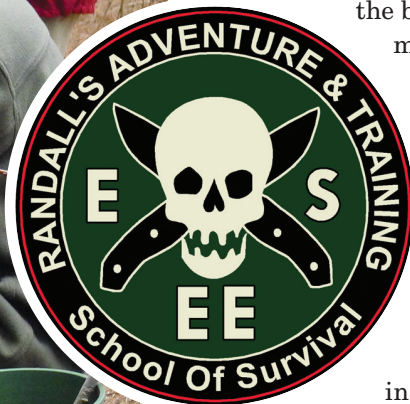
“Reuben Bolieu, designer of the Camp-Lore RB3, is a highly experienced woodsman and world traveler,” says Randall, “and suggested we use the name based on an old book named *Camp-Lore and Woodcraft* by author Daniel C. Beard. We liked the idea and it stuck. As far as Reuben goes, he’s a great instructor and extremely knowledgeable when it comes to woods skills. He’s one of our assistant instructors in our jungle survival class in South America and also helps us teach some of our domestic classes.”

The Camp-Lore RB3 hearkens back to the beginnings of the modern bushcraft movement, including a 3.5-inch,

drop-point 1095 high-carbon-steel blade with a Scandi grind and a stonewashed finish. At 8.2 inches overall, it boasts palpable green canvas Micarta handle scales. Each of the Camp-Lore knives includes a natural cowhide sheath with belt loop.

“James Gibson was simply born in the wrong century,” Perrin states in describing the designer of the Camp-Lore JG3 model. “He would have been hanging around with the likes of [Daniel] Boone and [Davy] Crockett, and flint knapping points with Tecumseh.”

“One of the nicest, most honest guys I have met in this whole industry,” Randall adds, “James Gibson



Randall's Adventure & Training (R.A.T.) lead instructor Patrick Rollins demonstrates the wood splitting technique of “batoning.”
(Randall Adventure Training image)



The ESEE Camp-Lore knives (the RB3 shown at left and JG3 on right) went through rigorous testing before they were released to the knife buying public. (Reuben Bolieu image)

is probably the most skilled man I have ever met when it comes to being in the woods with a knife. He instructs a few of our classes and brought one of his new designs to a class a couple of years ago. When I saw it, I immediately snapped a picture and sent it to my partner, Mike Perrin, and our manufacturer, Shon Rowen, along with a simple statement: ‘We have to make this knife!’ Gibson agreed and the rest is history. Of everything ESEE makes, the JG3 is my favorite backpacking fixed blade. It just works and fits like it’s suppose to.”

FITS LIKE A GLOVE

The Gibson-designed Camp-Lore JG3 is a departure from mainstream bushcraft Zeitgeist. At 7.625 inches in overall length, the knife is more compact than its RB3 sibling. It also differs from all other ESEE knives in that it has more curves than the brand’s typical fare. The handle, topped with sculpted green Micarta handle scales, is curvaceous and fits the palm like a glove. The flat-ground blade is a 3.5-inch drop point, canted slightly downward in similar fashion to the ESEE Izula II.

While certainly able to perform wood crafting chores, the JG3 is also ideally suited for hunters. The drop point blade is the most ideal style for skinning game, efficiently riding under the surface of flesh

without snagging viscera and puncturing organs. Like the RB3, it comes with a stonewashed blade and a leather belt-loop sheath.

Randall’s Adventure & Training is located in Gallant, Alabama, a semi-mountainous region with plenty of flat terrain and downright steep limestone cliffs to train in. Lead instructor Patrick Rollins describes the facility: “We have approximately 180 acres, a classroom, rappel tower, firing range and plenty of woods. We offer classes in survival, navigation, single rope techniques, rope rescue, firearms, human tracking, search and rescue, bushcraft and wilderness medicine.”

“We also still teach Jungle Survival in the Peruvian Amazon,” Rollins adds. “Students range from military and law enforcement personnel to attorneys, I.T. [information technology] folks, factory workers and everyone in between. We take the training very seriously and strive to provide the best instruction for the students.”

Knives play a key role in all of R.A.T.’s classes, performing a myriad of functions ranging from general camp use to wilderness medicine applications. In his various duties, Rollins teaches a veritable gamut of cutting chores. “I teach knife safety and skills in any class where the students will be using them,” he says. “We discuss sheathing a knife when it’s not in

use, being aware of your follow-through [with the blade tip and sharp edge], keeping others out of your 'blood circle' [360 degrees around anywhere your knife could reach] and so on."

"I teach snap-cutting—bending the sapling or branch until the fibers are stressed, then cutting through them—and V-notching—using a baton with the knife to take down larger saplings," Rollins expounds. "We also teach all the basic notches used for traps and shelter construction. Batoning is taught for processing standing deadwood for fire making. I know some folks are against batoning, or striking the spine of a blade with a baton to force the edge through wood, but without an axe it is the best way to get to the drier inside of the wood, a must for fire making in wet environments. I also teach students how to make feather sticks and shavings in order to light wood using a Ferrocerium rod. The classes where we use knives most are the field survival and bushcraft seminars."

THE TRAIL AHEAD

Having successfully launched the Camp-Lore line, Randall and Perrin see expansion in the future. "Oh, we have a lot of designs lying around on paper napkins," Randall remarks. "Most of this series will see growth from the direction of collaborations, more so than ESEE's ideas. We tend to grow our company carefully and slowly instead of just throwing out an idea every few months to try to gain more sales. That way, whatever we put out is in the production system without too many hiccups. With that said, we have a smaller Camp-Lore knife coming out in 2016 and our lead survival instructor, Patrick, has been working on a Kephart design that we'll be producing."

"Bushcrafters have both general needs and some very specific needs, just like most knife communities," Perrin adds. "Revisiting some inherently traditional designs might be a direction, since bushcraft is heavily dependent on tradition. There are also some cool, smart people thinking outside of the box, and who are decidedly non-traditional, so we look to those folks and see what they have to offer. But ideas in knife design are a 'one works and nine don't' deal. Just putting out a bunch of different designs doesn't work."



Designed by knifemaker and bushcraft/survival instructor James Gibson, the curved handle and arched profile of the Camp-Lore JG3 distinguish it from other ESEE knives. (Pat Covert image)

ESEE designs don't come fast and furious. Rather, a lot of thought, planning and testing go into an ESEE before it ever sees the factory. Jeff notes, "We always build several handmade prototypes and put them out to designers and experienced woodsmen for 'beta testing.' Once we are all satisfied and have the design tweaked to work for its intent, as well as for a manufacturing setup, the final production process starts."

"Most of the time, you will see our designs and ideas years before they come to fruition at the factory—it's just our process and we refuse to build something based on anyone's timeline except our own," Jeff concludes.

In other words, don't look for ESEE to pop out new models like Krispy Kreme donuts. That's never been the company's *modus operandi* and never will be, but their position in the bushcraft community is now well established and ESEE fans can look forward to enticing new additions in the future! ■

ESEE Knives are sold through dealers. For a dealer near you, call 256-613-0372, or visit eseeknives.com. For general inquiries for ESEE Knives and Randall's Adventure & Training, contact the company at P.O. Box 99, Gallant, AL 35972 256-613-0372, info@eseeknives.com.