

Whittling A Branch Rooster

Turn a twig into a classic carving

By Chris Lubkemann



The forked-branch rooster is a sort of mascot for branch-carvers. While it's not the easiest figure to carve, it is useful for practicing the basic cuts and techniques used in branch carving. Plus, once you have the rooster-carving technique down, you can “branch” out to pheasants, herons, roadrunners, and a whole pile of other critters and projects.

The size and shape of your rooster will depend on the thickness and angle of the forked branch you choose. In addition, the success of the tail depends on the dryness of the wood. Rooster tails need to be carved when the wood has dried a bit. The dryness of the wood is what allows the feathers to curl as they are cut.

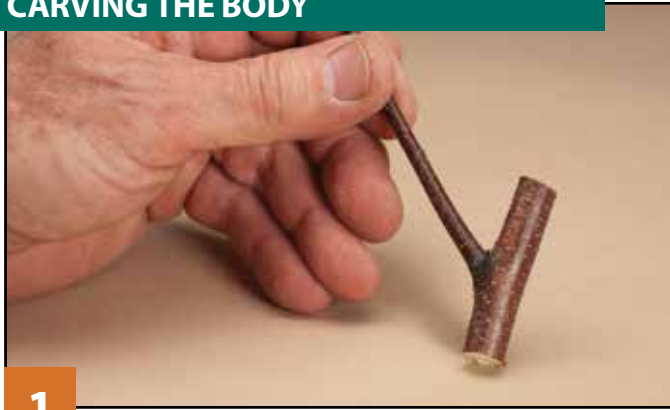
Try the following trick to help you decide when a branch is dry enough to carve a rooster tail: When you take the bark off the tail branch of the fork, also remove the bark

from another straight branch of the same wood and the same thickness. Use the second branch as a practice and test piece. If the thin slices of the second branch do not curl when you make the cuts, you'll know the wood on the first branch is still too wet for the curling feather cuts of a rooster. If the wood on the second branch curls nicely, the wood on the first branch is also just right for curling. Also, it's not a bad idea to try a few practice tails on the test branch before doing the tail on your almost-finished rooster.

Finally, you will do a much better job of carving a rooster and have better control if you use your pocketknife's small blade for the carving, except when slicing the tail feathers in Step 9.

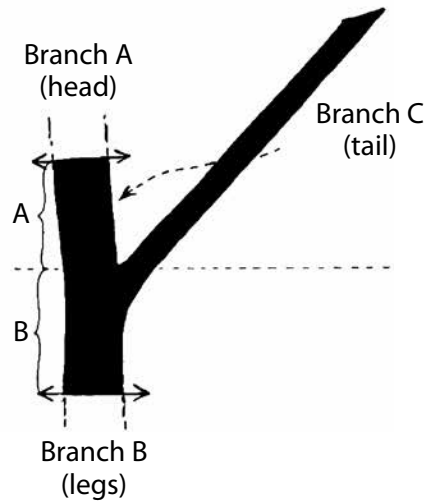
Note: All instructions are for right-handed carvers. Lefties need to reverse the instructions.

CARVING THE BODY



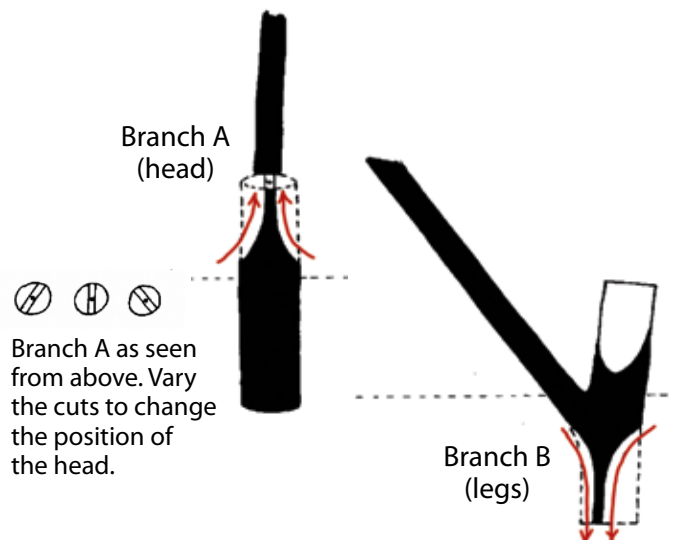
1

Choose a forked branch. Select a fork with a bottom branch (Branch B) diameter of $\frac{3}{8}$ " to $\frac{3}{4}$ " (1cm to 1.9cm). The length of Branch A (the head) should be roughly two times its diameter. Branch B (the feet) should be slightly longer than Branch A. Leave Branch C (the tail) 4" to 5" (10.2 cm to 12.7cm) long.



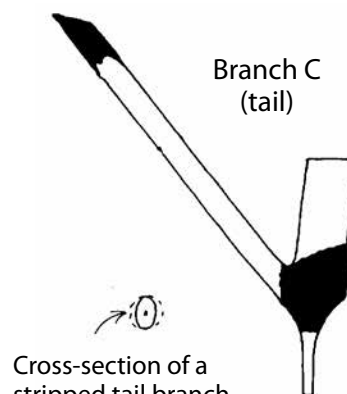
2

Taper the head and feet. Taper Branch A for the rooster's head and neck. Begin the cuts slightly above the bottom of the crotch of the Y. Turn the fork 90° and taper Branch B for the rooster's legs. Curve these cuts and take more wood from the front than from the back to make the chest puff out more. Notice where these cuts begin in relation to the horizontal dotted line and the bottom of the crotch.



3

Carve the vest. Remove the bark from the sides of the tapered Branch B (legs). Then carve away any remaining bark on Branch A. Leave the bark on the rooster's "vest" over the chest. If Branch C is very thick, remove some wood from the sides to create an oval cross-section.





4

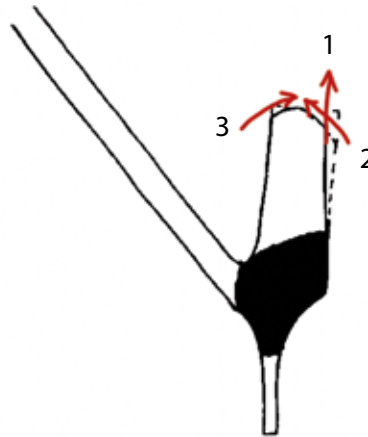
Separate the legs. Draw the pointed-arch-shaped area between the legs marked with an X on the drawing. Insert the point of the knife at the top of the arch and cut toward the bottom. *Note: If you try to cut from the bottom up, you will be cutting against the grain and will run a much greater risk of cutting yourself.* Round and smooth the legs.

SHAPING THE HEAD



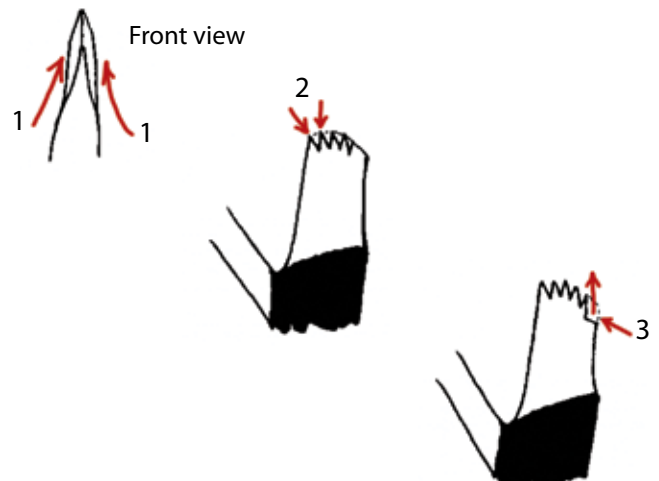
5

Shape the head. This requires three separate cuts. Cut in the directions indicated by the arrows to keep from splitting the wood.
(1) Cut off a small amount of wood from the front of the branch.
(2) Round the head from the front to the crown. (3) Then round the head from the back to the crown. The angle of cut 2 is steeper than cut 3.



6

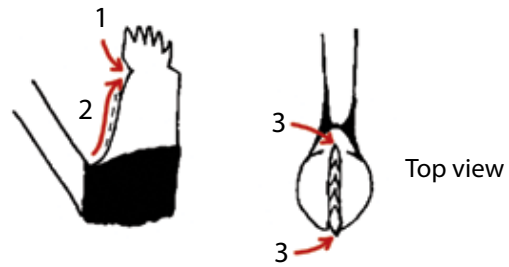
Refine the comb. (1) Taper (sharpen) the top of the branch to separate the comb from the head. (2) Carve a series of V-shaped notches into the top of the comb. Make small cuts to keep from splitting the wood. (3) Carve a notch to form the front of the comb and the top of the beak.





7

Separate the comb from the back of the head. (1) Make a cut down and in at a sharp angle. (2) Use the drawing as a guide to carefully cut up to the stop cut to shape the back of the head and neck and separate the comb from the back of the head. (3) Taper the back of the comb and the beak. *Note: Here and below, cut a little bit at a time, repeating the cuts as necessary to get the desired shape.*

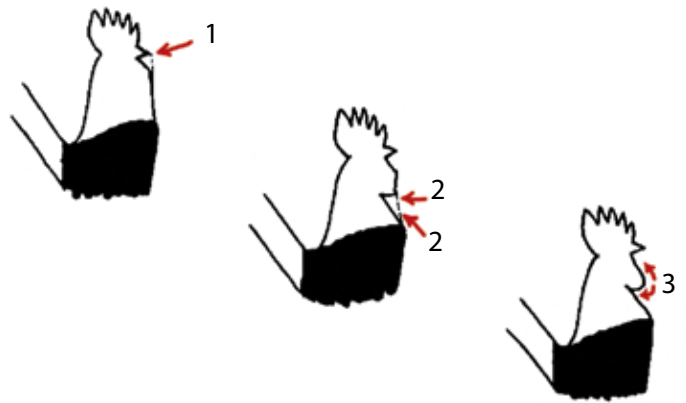


Top view



8

Carve the beak and wattle. (1) Carefully carve a small notch under the beak. (2) Then make a stop cut straight up under the wattle and carve up to it to separate it from the neck. (3) Carefully round the wattle into the neck. Use the tip of the knife to carve a thin V-groove to divide the wattle in two.



materials & tools

MATERIALS

- Forked branch
- Clear finish (optional)
- Oil paints (optional)

TOOLS

- Pocketknife (see page 91 for shaping instructions)
- Belt or shoelace
- Paintbrush (optional)

The author used these products for the project. Substitute your choice of brands, tools, and materials as desired.

WANT MORE PROJECTS?

Big Book of Whittle Fun

By Chris Lubkemann

Enjoy 31 fun and rewarding projects. The detailed, photo-illustrated projects are quick and easy to make. Chris offers clear instructions for creating a wide variety of useful and entertaining objects, and gives tips and techniques that make whittling accessible and enjoyable for both novices and experienced carvers.

Item 5205. Available for \$12.95 + S&H (parcel post) from Fox Chapel Publishing, FoxChapelPublishing.com, 800-457-9112, or your local retailer.



CARVING THE CURLY TAIL



9

Carve the curly tail feathers. Protect your leg with a piece of leather and use a belt or shoelace to secure the rooster face down to your knee. Place the knife blade (shaped to make curling cuts, see page 91) nearly flat on the tail. Make short, repeated, forward-slicing cuts with the knife the whole way to the base of the tail branch. These thin slices should curl naturally.



10

Refine the last feather. Because you started with the bottom feather, the last feather to carve is the top one. Carefully thin the top feather, carving from the bottom up. Using the flat surface of the knife, carefully spread the feathers apart and into their final positions.

Finishing the Rooster

Carefully sand the head and legs. Do not allow the rooster to get wet or apply a water-based finish—If the feathers get wet, they will lose their curl. Paint the rooster as desired; do not paint the tail. Seal the piece with clear oil-based polyurethane; an acrylic sealer will sometimes work as well.



Chris Lubkemann of Lancaster, Pa., has been carving since age 7. He has published four books with Fox Chapel Publishing. Chris's smallest branch rooster was given a Guinness World Record Certificate in 1981. See more of his carvings and find his workshop schedule at whittlingwithchris.com.

Making Perfect Curls

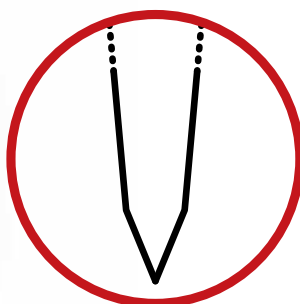
PREPARING YOUR KNIFE



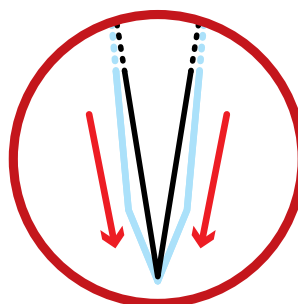
This is the bevel as viewed from the point of the blade, looking toward the handle.

Blade Cross-Sections

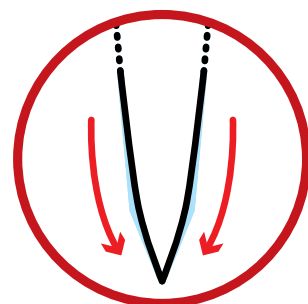
View from the front of the blade's bottom edge (bevel) looking down the blade toward the handle.



Factory-Shaped Bevel



Bevel on Most Fixed-Blade Carving Knives



Curl-Shaped Bevel

The Ideal Knife Blade Bevel

The bevel is the tapered edge of the sharpened blade. Many blades have a wedge-shaped bevel that doesn't really cut well and won't make curls. Fixed-blade carving knives often have a very thin, flat bevel that digs in and won't help the wood roll into a curl. I've found that the ideal bevel for both general carving and for making curls has a slight "shoulder," so it curves slightly going down to the sharp edge (see diagram above). It has just enough curve to naturally roll the wood shaving over into a good curl. When you sharpen your knife, slightly round off the corners and bring the bevel up higher on the blade so it tapers more gradually. As you work with your knife and do that normal sharpening and honing, you will come up with the ideal edge.

Wet vs. Dry Wood

The amount of curl you get when you carve depends on how wet the branch is. For flowers, trees, and rooster tails, you'll want to use drier wood for more curl. It is nearly impossible to get a good natural curl if the wood is damp or wet, no matter how sharp your blade is or how thin you make the individual slices. However, slight curls are perfect for roadrunner tails. Practice on scrap branches to see the difference.



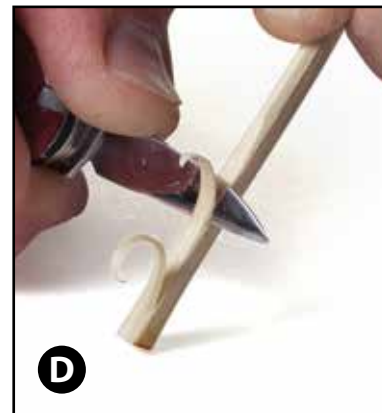
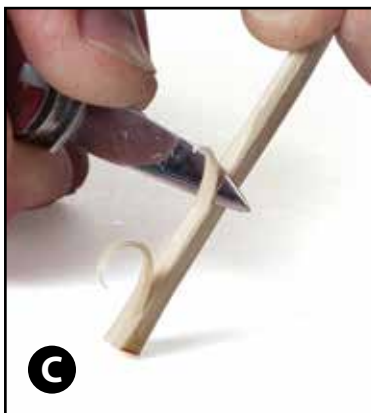
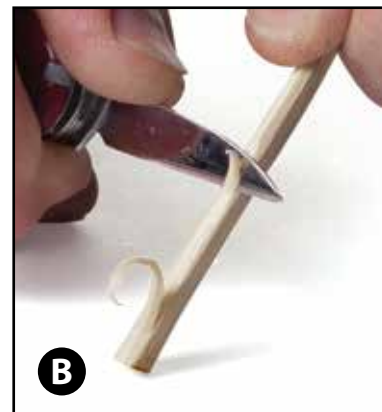
From left to right, the branches from wettest to driest. The wettest branch doesn't curl. The branch on the far right is the driest, so it curls the most.

LEARNING THE CUT

Carving curls isn't hard, once you get the knack. Plan to practice on several small branches before you try a project. You can cut curls with either a small or large blade—use the one you're most comfortable with. Here are a few tips for success:

- A.** Rest the tip of the blade against the twig at a very shallow angle. You don't want to dig into the wood so much as let the edge of the blade lightly catch as you move it.
- B.** Hold the knife firmly and slide the blade forward and slightly down in a short slicing motion. Only cut down $\frac{1}{16}$ " to $\frac{1}{8}$ " (2mm to 3mm). Do not cut straight down; you aren't peeling a carrot!
- C.** Draw the knife back without cutting—you are not sawing. Don't lift the blade, either, because lifting the blade starts a new cut.
- D.** Make another tiny, controlled, forward slice as you push down slightly on the knife. The knife tip should move both right-left and down in this movement.

Pull the blade back and repeat the forward cut. It might take seven or eight tiny cuts to make one curl.



CONTROLLING THE DIRECTION



To make a straight curl, like for a rooster tail, hold the knife straight across the branch and cut down. The wood will curl down in line with the stick.



To make curls that bend to the right, tip the knife blade down as you cut.



For curls that bend to the left, tip the knife blade up.



Combine cutting styles to create a curl explosion!

Note: All instructions are for right-handed carvers. Lefties need to reverse the instructions.