

Poor Man's Tortoise Shell

By Bradley Laird

As most mandolin players know, the importation of genuine tortoise shell is illegal because the sea turtle which is the source of the raw material is an endangered species. Tortoise shell picks are becoming almost impossible to find and when a stash is located it can cost a small fortune just to acquire a few picks. The unlucky Hawksbill sea turtles who are staked to the beach with piles of dry grass burned on their backs rarely, if ever, survive the horrendous ordeal of the shell removal process.

The properties that have made tortoise shell so desirable are: 1) long pick life, 2) even wear with minimal roughness, 3) superior tone, 4) stiffer than plastic picks of the same thickness, and 5) easy to re-polish and restore as wear occurs.

There have been numerous attempts at duplicating the look, feel and performance of genuine shell plectrums. However, all seem to fall short in one aspect or another. Some plastics used in the quest for a suitable alternative include nylon, cellulose nitrate, acetate and various plastics. Some of these tend to soften from the heat which is generated by the friction of picking the strings. Others refuse to stay flat. Others develop rough spots or wear rapidly. On the good side, these alternatives are cheap and do not leave one with a guilt complex over anguished turtles. With plastic picks you may feel guilty over some long-gone dinosaurs if you feel so inclined.

After experimenting with bone, horn, and other natural materials, I found what I believe to be a good alternative to tortoise shell. And the hapless animal donor is going to end up as part of a Happy Meal anyway! The material is cow hoof. Cows are not in danger of extinction and far more humanely dispatched as they march towards the meat locker.

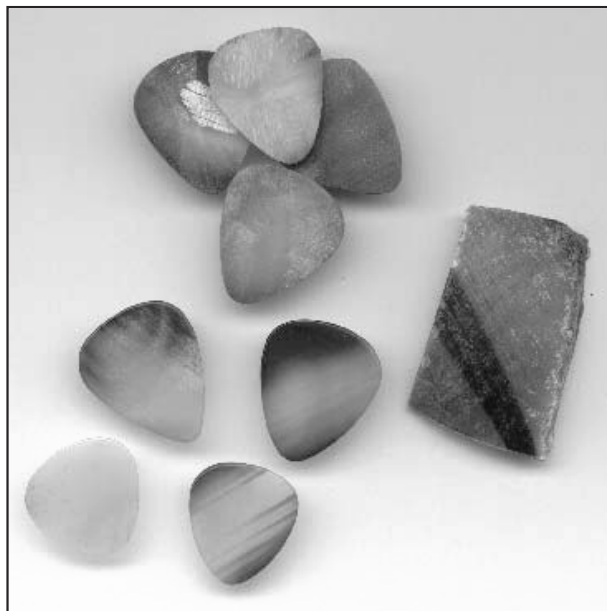
I ran across a bin full of dried cow hooves offered for sale at a pet shop for use as dog chews. I guess the marketing idea is that it is better for Rover to chew on a cow hoof than your new wingtips.

At seventy-nine cents each, I picked up four of the them and decided to give them a try as raw material for picks.

After looking the hoof material over for the best areas, I ground flat spots on the sides using a belt sander. Then I traced the outline of some picks onto the flat sides using a pencil.

The hooves are hollow and rather "pithy" on the inside, but the material is nice and solid for a thickness of about 1/4" on the outer surfaces. A few cuts with a coping saw and I had a flat "blank" about 1" x 1.5" with my pick outline drawn on the side.

By the way, don't breathe the dust when sanding the hoof. I don't know for sure, but my guess is that the finer particles would do your lungs absolutely no good. I know that dust of mother of pearl and bone are known to cause lung problems so take the safe route and do your sanding with a respirator mask on to filter out the dust. I would suggest that your sanding be done outdoors as well.



Carefully, to avoid sanding my fingertips to the bone, I sanded the inside surface of the flat blanks until they were about 1/16" thick. Then, using the same coarse belt on the sander I roughed out the outlines of the pick perimeters.

From this point, the handwork becomes a bit more of a chore but it still rises far above watching television as a character building experience. Using a sanding block with 100 grit paper I continued to sand both sides of the blank until the pick approached a thickness I thought suitable. Testing the "flex" of the hoof pick at this point revealed that the material is quite a bit stiffer than plastic picks of the same thickness. So, find a pick that feels the way you

like and sand the blank down until the "flex" is the way you prefer. It will end up being thinner than you expect.

As I approached the correct thickness (which may vary some from hoof to hoof) I used finer and finer grades of paper on the block. I used some 600 grit paper to remove all traces of sanding marks left by the coarser grades. (Continued on Next Page.)

Takin' The Shortcut Home

An Irish Sorta Tune

This little shorty is something I came up with one day fooling around with the mandolin. Maybe it's in my ancestry but these sort of Celtic sounding things pop into my head frequently. I suggest that you sit down, fool around, and write some tunes that pop into your head too!

Coming up with titles for tunes is almost as much fun as writing them. I have some really strange titles like "One Lucky Squirrel" and "Crazy Water Crystals." Often I play a new tune for a few days and begin to picture some scene in my mind. In this case I pictured some fellow leaving a little pub after a round of pints, feeling rather chipper, and whistling this little tune as he walked home. It's like a tune he heard played and couldn't get out of his head. After I play it a while I can't get it out of my head either.

One unusual aspect of the tune is that it does not end on the I (D) chord so it always feels like it wants to go back to the beginning. The notes are pretty easy to execute and the whole thing can be played in first position. I like the tune with a bit of some bouncy swing to it.

I play the triplet in the 2nd measure of the B part by picking the first note with a downstroke, hammer-on at the 4th fret, and then picking the 3rd note with an upstroke. You might find another way to play it but that is how I do it.

Have fun with the tune!

Written and Arranged
by Bradley Laird

Takin' The Shortcut Home

D G D G A D A D A

D 2552 320 5 | A 4524 0 0

0554 20 40 | 2 2 0 0 | 2 2 4024 | 5 0 2 5 0 0 0 0 | 2552 320 5 | 4524 04 | 0 50

If you have any questions or comments be sure to write me:

Bradley Laird
5856 Foxfield Trail
Rex, GA 30273
www.mandouniversity.com

©2005, Bradley Laird

Finger Exercises

Here are a couple of "high powered" finger olympic exercises from my book "Mandolin Training Camp." Try these exercises by choosing a pair of fingers (say 1st & 3rd) and using only those fingers. Then try other fingering choices.

24 24 24 42 42 | 35 35 35 53 53 | 46 35 24 13 31 42 53 64

47 47 47 74 74 | 47 36 25 14 41 52 63 74 | 27 27 27 72 72 72 72

Poor Man's Tortoise Shell continued:

At this point I rounded the edges using 300 grit paper, polished them smooth with 600 grit and then buffed the entire pick using a drill press mounted cloth buffing wheel and jeweler's rouge polishing compound. If buffing reveals scratches, back up and re-sand with 600 grit and buff again.

Start to finish, I spent about two hours to complete three picks. That may seem like a long time but it is far less than spending 10 years in the slammer for messing with tortoise shell!

The hoof material polishes to a nice gloss and is a translucent light brown to dark brown color when completed. Various colors, streaks, and patterns are found as you search through the hoofs and different colorations may alter the performance of the pick as well.

It will require more experimentation to determine this.

In actual use, the picks feel really good both on guitar and mandolin. The tone is darker than a similarly flexible plastic pick. I doubt that cow hoof picks will ever approach the hallowed status of tortoise shell, especially in light of the organic substances the hoof has massaged over the years, and due to the fact that it is so easy to obtain, but given a fair try it may prove to be a good alternative. Make some and see for yourself. Worn edges are easy to repolish with a small square of 600 grit paper and fingertip rubbing with auto polishing compound.

One thing is certain. If you put two hours into making a pick you are going to be far less likely to lose the thing. ♦ ♦ ♦